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OUR COVER ILLUSTRATION

taken from Ray Cummings' thrilling story, "The Mark of the Meteor" we see the gigantic meteor just after it has plunged through the bow of the doomed space ship. Shooting vertically upward in a vain effort to change the course of the ship, the rocket exhausts flame furiously. Mars in the background gleams green and gold.

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The Scarlet Planet

by Don M. Lemon



Illustrated by Paul

Quickly attaching himself by a chain to a torpedo harpoon he had shot himself into celestial space.

IN another moment the great Hersovitch-Chang planet-plane had docked in a shallow bowl between two low wooded hills, and before opening an air port the little crew took an atmospheric test of the strange scarlet world on which they had arrived. To their astonishment and gratification they found the atmosphere very similar to that of the middle lands of the temperate zone of the earth in early spring.

"A land-leave, little corporal!" cried Bailee. "A three hour land-leave! I'm so ship-sour my liver feels like hell's vacuum cleaner."

"Amen to that," growled Hal-Al. "What's three hours when we've nothing to do here but grease a chair with our own fat."

Davidson considered the situation. Hal-Al, Bailee and himself, were all that remained of a crew of ninety. The others, with one exception, had perished on the planet Kopex located about a half x-ometer* distant, where this unit had gone in search of a suitable world to which to send a colony of Arctic Americans from the overflowing earth. Davidson had accompanied this expedition-unit in a minor position as corporal, on condition that he should be allowed the privilege of making certain scientific notes for the Bolivia Geographical Society, that was then engaged at the difficult task of mapping the little known third myriad; but his real purpose for

joining the party was to run down a rumor that the Master Criminal C-X had been seen on the planet Kopex. At the last balloting of the secret Ninety-Nine, Davidson had drawn Circle 27, and as Kopex fell just within this circle it was his great privilege and danger to search on that planet for the Master Criminal of the cosmic universe. The removal of C-X by death or capture would serve to promote Davidson to the front ranks of that noble organization. Here was a prize worthy of his attention.

But the annihilation of the entire expedition-unit, except four of its members, and the imminent danger of death to the latter, had caused Davidson to abandon Kopex and turn back for reinforcements towards Xea. A chance remark by Bailee that the planet on which they had just landed was as scarlet as 4-X-Olite had aroused the corporal's curiosity and he had docked the plane for a brief inspection of the soil of this strange, colossal world floating in the emptiness of cosmic space.

Since the supreme scientific mind of the earth, Thor Maximus, had discovered the salts of 4-X-Olite early in the thirty-second century, the color scarlet had become the predominant color in the minds of all men, for the salts of 4-X-Olite, the proper use of which increases the life of man almost indefinitely,* are of a warm, passionate scarlet.

The fancy had seized Davidson that this scarlet planet might derive its color from some crude form of 4-X-Olite in its soil. This super-precious substance was becoming yearly rarer on all the

*A new method of astronomical measurement equal to ten times the earth-sun distance or 980,000,000 miles.

*They were discovered to counteract the destructive effect of cosmic rays on the human body—which wear out tissues and cause death by old age.

THE SCARLET PLANET

known planets, and its value increasing proportionately. A few ounces of it would make a man financially independent for a decade, and being in but modest pecuniary circumstances, the little corporal was not adverse to any adventure, with honor, which might offer to increase his income.

"Very well," consented Davidson. "Three hours land leave, but a day in the dikes of New Asia for every minute you overstay leave." From an observatory window in the super-planet-plane he saw his companions leap upon the scarlet grass with two radiocycles and make away on their wheels like schoolboys released from school. He envied them their youth, their exuberance of spirit, their very limit of intelligence, though they were not fools by any means.

In mentality they ranked only 12bx and 12cx respectively, Hal-Al shading just above his friend Bailee by reason of his slightly superior concentration. Davidson ranked 37hx, which was greatly superior to that of the younger men, but when he considered such minds as Chang O'Riley and Coli Toro who ranked 107x he felt that he had no sufficient grounds for any self flattery.

THREE hours passed — four — five — but the absent men did not return, nor send a radio message. There seemed nothing for Davidson to do about the situation but wait, and waiting under tension is a hard game to play, particularly when one waits alone. The little corporal found it so, but it was not his fault he was alone.

All the planet-plane's crew, except himself, Hal-Al, Bailee, and one Jaquet, had been taken in a trap set by the inhabitants of the planet Kopex, and had perished. These four had fled back to the plane and proceeded towards Xea for reinforcements. On the way the man Jaquet had choose to release himself of material existence. He had got up from dinner one day

and hurried into the t-h-tube, the other men thinking that he wished merely to satisfy himself about some machinery there which he had shortly before brought under discussion.

But quickly attaching himself by a chain to a torpedo-harpoon he had shot himself into celestial space. They took a thirty second tele-cinema of his flight on the harpoon as evidence of the fact, to turn in with the planet-plane log, and closed the incident of his suicide in their minds.

This man Jaquet had not been accepted for the expeditionary-party to Kopex, but had stowed himself away in a thermo-jacket in an evaporated-food refrigerator, and had not been discovered till the plane was an x-ometer distant from the earth. He had then succeeded in entertaining the crew with a magnificent word-panorama of a seven years journey across the Milky Sahara, that was believed to divide the material world from the semi-material or quasi-spiritual. Possibly the man was only circumnavigating his own hat, but then a first-rate liar is ever more entertaining company than a prosy truth teller.

The greatest book in the world is the Thousand and Two American Nights by Sing Hop Smith which is true only to the universal truth of pure entertainment.

Suddenly Davidson gave a shout, at sight of a little distress-parachute from his absent friends floating towards the planet-plane. He raced up to the foredeck and springing into the small but powerful *Veda* hydro-terra scout plane,* rose like a

hawk after a bird. He seized the parachute and returned to the foredeck of the planet-plane. Here he hastily examined the white silk message tag sewed into the parachute. In Hal-Al's hurried but legible handwriting was the startling communication, *Save yourself, we are lost.*



DON M. LEMON

IN many ways the present story is one of the most unusual we have had the pleasure to publish. Not alone because it is completely realistic and the characters are persons that we can feel and think with; but also because the experiences they pass through and the way they handle them has the stamp of truth.

Men who range into the unknown will find that they must leave their politeness and culture behind them; they will, on other planets, have to deal with the raw, elemental things in life; and have to adjust themselves to a completely new kind of existence.

Some men will crack under the strain of fighting unknown, unseen forces on a strange world. Some will go mad, others will give way to cowardice and still others will show unsuspected heroism and powers for leadership. Besides giving us a world of new knowledge, and changing our conceptions of our Universe therefore, interplanetary travel will certainly keep our race young, strong and versatile.

As a "different" story, we present this for the approval of our readers.

*Operated by atomic disintegration.

Davidson's jaw stiffened and he glanced behind him. There were two supply chests aboard the hydro-terra, which would allow him to remain away from the planet-plane for several weeks, and he need never touch the ground in that time, since he could set the plane to continue automatically in a circle aloft while he slept.

He decided to use the little H-T in scouting for the missing men, as it would be far less conspicuous than the great planet-plane. Rushing below and seeing that Chang and Chow (the cat and dog mascots aboard the planet-plane) had a liberal supply of food and water, he pressed the key that closed every ingress to the plane but the foredeck door, so that no one unfamiliar with the plane could gain an entrance. He then returned to the foredeck, closing the door after him and setting the secret combination from the outside which fastened this door.

Missing!

STEEPING into the *Veda* scout plane he shot up into the bright air, recalling as he did that the days of this colossal planet were each equal to six months of earth time, and he had little cause to be anxious about the coming night, still many weeks distant.

He headed in the direction from which the distress parachute had approached, and flew rather low, straining every nerve to locate the missing men, or some clew to their whereabouts. Shortly he made out two radiocycles* stacked against a tree. The men had probably left them to go on for a ways afoot and reconnoiter, and had been captured. He dropped lower, sized up the situation, considered it worth the chance of attack to regain the radiocycles. Nosing down and avoiding the tree branches, he grappled the machines with the automatic tongs and shot upwards with the two light but powerful wheels clutched safely underneath the plane. He hoisted them aboard. They showed no evidence that the men had been attacked while riding. Evidently they had been caught afoot after heedlessly leaving their machines.

A little further on he came upon evidence that made him groan. His binoculars showed him all the clothing of the two missing men scattered along the ground over an area of not more than fifteen square meters. Had they been stripped naked and taken on from here as prisoners, or had they fought to their death, and until every garment had been torn from their bodies?

Landing, he recovered the clothing, but found no message from the men. He ran the plane slowly along the ground and succeeded in distinguishing some faint footprints, which continued about ten meters. Then these footprints ceased as abruptly as if the two naked prisoners had been lifted up into the air, or carried down into the earth.

He could find no evidence of any entrance into the earth, and he questioned if this planet possessed airplanes, for he had not seen any bird or living thing capable of flying since he had landed

on this great scarlet world. And it had long been postulated by no less an authority than Ramey, that the super-intelligence of any planet of the third myriad could not rise in mechanics above the mechanical suggestion of the animal creatures and vegetable growth, or mineral formation, of that planet. So if the two men had not been carried into the air or underground, they must have been lifted into some form of vehicle propelled along the ground.

He now came on four separate indentations in the ground, which he judged must have been made by four unicycles, or similar conveyances. He found he must take a chance and continue running along the ground, as these tracks were too faint to be distinguished from a height no greater than the low tree-tops.

He had proceeded some distance across a rolling and slightly wooded country, when he sighted four sphere-like objects, three of which were about four meters in diameter, while the fourth was half again as large. These spheres were gliding, not rolling, along at the slow pace of not over fifteen miles an hour. He had all along been distressed with the fear that perhaps he had taken the wrong direction and had followed the tracks coming and not going, but it now appeared luck had favored him.

For a moment he was almost persuaded to retreat, speed back to the planet-plane, and returning in that great super-machine,* swoop down on these spheres and scoop them up like four marbles. But should he let them from his sight five minutes he might not again be able to locate them, as they could disappear into some secret underground passage. Then, too, it might prove a foolish piece of business to take these spheres aboard the planet-plane till he was better informed of their power.

He decided to remain in the little H-T and make an attack from the air. Rising, he ripped the silence with a scream from the siren, then shot away to a distance of about two hundred meters, and, without landing, scanned the spheres through his binoculars to learn the effect of the siren on the ears of the enemy.

He gave a shout. The spheres had come to a sudden stop, no doubt to seek the cause of the noise. Immediately they formed into a square, each about ten meters distant from the other, then Davidson's jaw fell in utter amazement. He could not credit it. He examined his binoculars and looked again. It was true! Out in the open, on the level ground, the four spheres, three of them at least four meters in diameter, and the fourth larger, had totally disappeared.

CHAPTER II

The Struggle Against Darkness

DAVIDSON shot ahead and hung at a height of about thirty meters directly above where he had last seen the four spheres, but they had vanished like bursted bubbles.

"Must have dropped through a trap in the

*A vehicle of two wheels propelled by the disintegration of radiolite—a radium compound.

*The super-planet-plane has this name to distinguish it from ordinary interplanetary ships. It's about 800 feet long and 200 feet across and operated by atomic engines.

ground," was his terse yet uneasy comment to himself.

He mounted to a height of two hundred meters and watched the country about for a sign of their reappearance.

Ten minutes later he saw them through the binoculars, gliding orderly along, evidently having come from some underground passage. He might be mistaken in their identity, but as there were four, and one larger than the others, he was reasonably confident that these were the spheres he was seeking.

He decided on coming again above the enemy to send a koto* bullet ripping down the edge of the smaller sphere bringing up the rear, and watch the effect. Perhaps some sort of porthole would be thrown open and he would know better how to crack these great nuts. He steadied his automatic and fired. The sphere that had been hit slowed up, then stopped, and through his binoculars he could see a slender stream of bluish liquid pouring from its side.

The three other spheres now stopped and, coming back, glided about their injured companion, but no porthole of any kind, so far as he could observe, was thrown open, and no living creature came from the spheres. Yet from the actions of the latter he was positive that there was some living and sympathetic intelligence housed in each one, and these were not merely great metallic balls directed from a distance by wireless or other means.

The larger sphere placed itself about fifteen meters ahead, while the two smaller uninjured spheres ranged themselves close against the sides of their injured companion, as if to guide or bear it along, and they had proceeded scarcely twenty meters in this manner when they vanished completely and instantly in the open, as they had done before, leaving Davidson in amazed despair.

He condemned himself severely for alarming them twice, but what better could he have done under the circumstances? He had not dared drop a j--a-egg** on one of the spheres and blow it apart, for his friends might have been in that particular sphere. Since his bullet had penetrated one sphere and crippled it, he decided, should he locate the enemy again, to put a bullet into the outer edges of the three other spheres and cripple them all alike. Then they might not be able to submerge or escape, and the living intelligences within, would be compelled sooner or later to expose themselves.

It was an hour before he picked them up again, after he had become desperate with the fear that he had lost them entirely. He barely glimpsed them along the border of a distant, scattered wood, and giving instant pursuit quickly had them again directly below the speedy H-T plane. They were still proceeding with the larger sphere ahead, and the injured sphere aided along by its two companions. With three shots he ripped a channel down the edge of each of the uninjured

spheres. This was the last time he proposed to treat the enemy half-way civilly.

A stream of bluish liquid began to spout from each sphere where his bullet had penetrated the side, and now he gave a shout as a porthole was opened in the largest and a human figure sprang to the ground and made off towards the woods. He gave a second shout as this figure was followed by another human form. He was certain these stark-naked figures were Hai-Al and Bailee, making a break for liberty.

He pressed the siren key, ripping the air with a far-reaching and unmistakable half whistle, half screech. The two runners stopped, looked upwards, waved their arms towards the plane, then vanished completely from view in an astonishing cone or funnel of darkness thrown from the larger sphere, exactly like light from a searchlight. Davidson sent the two men the siren call to turn to the left, but something seemed to detain them in the impenetrable shaft of darkness. He again gave the call, but they did not come from the black ray, and acting with more daring than caution, he dropped directly down to the earth where he had last seen them, forgetting to stop the engine in his haste.

HIS heedlessness saved him, for the instant he came into the black ray he crumpled up in his seat, unable to move a muscle, like a man stricken with total paralysis. But the still active engine drove the plane along the ground till it was carried beyond the ray. Here he was himself again.

He got to his feet in rage. This sphere had not only smothered his two helpless friends in pitch darkness but had directed on them a ray capable of temporarily paralyzing the man caught in its vibration. But for the mere chance that he had failed to stop his engine he would not have escaped himself. He rose like a flash, before he should again come into the enemy's range, and turning the nose of his plane on the larger sphere played the cyclo-gun* directly upon it. The sphere rang like a great bell pounded by a hundred hammers and began to spout all over with little jets of blue liquid, but the black ray continued to issue from its side and conceal everything in its path.

He now directed the cyclo-gun on the three other spheres, riddling each one in turn. While he was about it he proposed to make a thorough business of crippling the enemy. This work accomplished with a dispatch almost equal to the narrating, he awaited the next move of the foe. He hesitated to make another move without some regard to the immediate consequence. These spheres possessed power of the most treacherous nature, little to be suspected from their simple appearance.

The next move came. The three smaller spheres glided rather uncertainly apart in a line behind the largest sphere, as if they proposed to proceed in single file, but when they stood about ten meters apart the black ray issuing from the larger sphere dimmed, faded, then ceased, and

*An explosive bullet that generates a terrific heat.

**An intensely explosive shell which by the very vibratory effect of its explosion causes almost a disintegration of its target.

*An automatic gun operated on a rotating pivot which shoots koto bullets.

simultaneously all four spheres vanished as if they had been mere illusions.

No longer could Davidson believe that the spheres had submerged into the ground. He hung scarcely thirty meters overhead and he saw no evidence of the earth receiving them. He looked forward to where he had last seen Hal-Al and Bailee, but he could not locate them, though the belt of darkness had been wholly withdrawn.

There seemed but one means by which this situation could have been achieved. These spheres were playing upon one another, and on the person of their escaped captors just ahead of them, some powerful, mysterious ray of light which caused everything in its path to become *invisible*. He was simply looking through these gliding globes as through a perfectly transparent pane of glass.

He flew just above the spot where he had last seen his friends which he judged would be the direction taken by the invisible ray and removing his cap dropped it from the plane. It turned over, caught the air like a little parachute, then vanished like a light snuffed out. It had fallen into the ray that made everything invisible in its path.

He was puzzled how to act. These damaged spheres could glide slowly forward, pick up the two men lying helpless in their path, by reason of the paralyzant ray still playing upon them, then proceed on their way. He could not follow the enemy concealed by this invisible ray unless he could occasionally glimpse a rock or tree disappear from sight in the path of the ray.

Yet could the spheres proceed at all, riddled as were their whole outer shells, if not their inner, by his bullets? Would they not have to play possum, lay quiet and wait for him to depart, or for help to arrive?

But now he believed he saw the spheres proceeding slowly forward, four faint ghosts of objective matter. He followed, questioning if he was not following his own illusions, and hesitating to drop a j-a-egg amidst the three smaller spheres lest his friends in the larger sphere might be injured by the explosion, or be slain by the enemy for his act.

They Retreat!

HE continued to follow the four phantom spheres, till they came to the shore of a river when they again leaped into perfect visibility. The invisible ray had been withdrawn, or its power exhausted. In another moment the naked figure of Hal-Al sprang from the larger sphere, closely followed by that of Bailee.

Both men dashed for the river, which was scarcely thirty meters away, but before they reached it a ray of darkness came from one of the smaller spheres and smothered them in its obscurity.

Davidson shot down over this sphere and emptied his automatic into the lens from which the black ray proceeded. From within came the squeal as of a frenzied pig, then the engineer within the sphere seemed to go crazy. Like a mad brain in a great round skull and spinning

wildly about, the sphere plunged into the river and disappeared in a swirl of bubbles.

Released from the paralyzant black ray, Hal-Al and Bailee sprang up and plunged into the water. Davidson gave a shout of gratification and flashing above the larger sphere dropped a j-a-egg just behind it and shot away like an arrow, before the force of the explosion could catch him. The egg failed to shatter the sphere which evidently was composed of some ductile material that could be pierced but not shattered but sent it spinning forward into the river, where it immediately sank.

He whirled about and returned to the scene, slipping another clip of cartridges into his automatic as he came. He must now depend on his automatic for instant action as he had emptied the cyclo-gun and had no more shells or j-a-eggs but in one of the locked chests aboard.

Two of the spheres remained, and he might not have any such luck with these as with the others. He maneuvered above them; he dared not charge them from the level or attempt to pick up the men in the water, for should they once succeed in directing the paralyzant ray upon him he would be totally helpless; and with him out of the fight Hal-Al and Bailee would be quickly recaptured.

He waited for the enemy's next move, expecting that they would make use of the black paralyzant ray to trap the two men in the water, but, instead, they turned the invisible ray upon themselves and vanished in that mysterious light. He strained his eyes and picked up their two faint ghosts, gliding slowly away. They had funk'd at last.

He delayed a few moments, then dropped to the surface of the water near where his friends were visible, leaving a little power on so that the hydro-plane would continue to run along the water, should he become helpless. He called for the men to clamber aboard.

"Wow!" yelled Bailee, scrambling to the floor of the plane, with Hal-Al beside him. "Let her out, corporal, and we'll come back with the flowers."

The plane rose to a height of about one hundred meters and the two dripping men sat up and solemnly shook hands. Suddenly Bailee gave a yell and pointed to the rail at his right.

CHAPTER III

The Vision

AS Bailee pointed a huge dripping, naked red form of some half-human animal swung over the rail to the floor of the hydro-terra. Then Davidson saw a mass of naked legs, arms, thighs, knotted in fierce combat, and heard the crackling of sinews, snapping of teeth, and grunt of battle. From amongst the mass he picked a hideous half-hog, half-serpent head and smashed at it with a heavy wrench.

The tangle unknotted itself and Hal-Al and Bailee stood up. Seizing a coil of rope from a pin, they proceeded to tie the human monster to a bar of the plane, but he came to consciousness without any warning and, expanding his hairy

chest and twisting his powerful limbs, snapped his bonds. The two men sat on him and tied him down with heavier cord, then squatting one on each side began to curse him.

Davidson well knew the versatility of his companions in this respect. Their voices rose into a veritable chant of malediction. He let them rave, for they had earned the right, and it would have been cruelty to strong men to have restrained them.

When both men were finally satisfied and sat wiping the blood of conflict from their naked bodies, Davidson spoke. "We will now return to the planet-plane, after first disposing of this native."

"You see him yourself, corporal," said Bailee.

"I do," nodded Davidson.

"He climbed into the plane from the water, of his own free will and sweet accord, like a butterfly into a blossom."

"It seems we didn't drag him aboard."

"You propose to run up about a thousand meters and drop him back into the water? Gentle, like a mother with her first born."

"Hardly," Davidson frowned. "He's alive and half-human."

Hal-Al and Bailee sighed. "But he belongs in the water," said the latter. "The crisp, bright water."

"Scarcely," replied Davidson. "I think rather he escaped from one of those spheres that rolled into the river."

Again the other men sighed.

"Then you propose to keep him for a butler on the planet-plane," said Bailee.

"And give him a blue suit with big gilt buttons," nodded Hal-Al.

"It would be better to land and drop him off here, where he can pick up his companions."

Again Hal-Al and Bailee sighed in unison and looked at one another.

"He'd make a fine corpse," said the latter.

"May I kiss him good-by for you, corporal?" said the other man.

Davidson sensed the dangerous rage of his companions under their banter. "Why this vindictiveness?" he asked. "I never knew you to hold a grudge against an enemy who put up a man-size fight."

"Pah!" spat Hal-Al. "First he made us blind, then he paralyzed us. That's no man's fight, that's a dirty disease!"

"And before that," said Bailee. "he came out with only a breech-cloth on him and ordered the girls back into the big pink machine."

"Girls!" exclaimed Davidson.

THE younger men exchanged glances. "It was this way, corporal," said Bailee, at a nod from Hal-Al. "We hadn't gone far on our radiocycles when we came to the clearest stream we ever saw, with the water so cool and crisp that we looked about for St. Peter and the big admission gate. Then we heard laughter."

"Tell him about that," nodded Hal-Al.

"You couldn't tell of it! You could just fight for it! Sweet, like a bubbling fountain of honey!"

"With rainbows in it," said Hal-Al soberly.

"With rainbows in it," agreed Bailee. "We left our machines leaning against a tree and stole ahead and peeked through some tall, feathery, sweet-smelling fern, and there—"

"Were seven of them," said Hal-Al.

"Just seven," nodded Bailee.

"Seven what?"

"Girls!" replied Bailee. "Seven girls a-splashing in the water and laughing."

"Handsome?" questioned Davidson.

Bailee shaded his eyes with his hand and looked off as if he saw visions. "I'm content to live here, and fight here, and die here!"

"There are better and stronger words for the same idea," said Hal-Al. "But let these pass for my sentiments."

"Seven of them," continued Bailee. "And we couldn't have stood there seven minutes—only a minute to a girl, corporal, when a life-time wouldn't have been long enough for the first good look at one of them!—when up glides a big pink ball as big as a house, and this dirty fish," he nodded towards the captive.

"This filthy hog!" snarled Hal-Al.

"This rotten mackerel," continued Bailee, "came from the pink ball and ordered the girls inside."

Hal-Al groaned. "And they went!"

"They went," resumed Bailee, "like honey back into the comb, like butterflies back into the chrysalis! Then he shut the port door on them and the big pink sphere glided away, and he got into a big gray marble that came along with the pink marble—the one you blew into the river—and followed the pink marble."

"And you followed them both," laughed Davidson.

"So we did, corporal," replied Bailee. "We left our machines and hiked after the spheres on foot a little ways, forgetting everything but the girls and planning to rescue them."

"But did they need rescuing?"

"Pretty girls always need rescuing," grinned Bailee. "Then this deficiency fish here must have seen us following, for he whipped the big gray marble about and blinded and paralyzed us with a black ray, and, while we were helpless, stripped and took us into his marble. Here he put us inside a cage with ropes for bars, and then turned some kind of juice into the ropes that made them white hot, so that we couldn't crawl out."

He displayed his right hand with a nasty burn across the palm, evidently caused by grasping a very hot wire. "Twice the juice went off the ropes and we made a break and got out. The first time he got us back by paralyzing us with that dirty black ray; but the second time—"

"Here we are," growled Hal-Al, shaking his own burnt palm at the prisoner roped to the plane. "And here he is, waiting for the judgment day!"

"And the three of us his judgment day," said Bailee.

After a brief silence Hal-Al inquired,

"You didn't chance to see what became of the big pink marble. We couldn't get a look out of our caboose."

"I didn't see any pink sphere," replied Davidson. "It must have left you before I arrived."

"We might look about a bit and pick it up," grinned Bailee. "And roll it back to the planet-plane and let the girls listen to our phonograph."

"A good idea!" nodded Hal-Al, without looking towards Davidson. "The girls would certainly appreciate the society of three white men, and one of them a handsome corporal."

Davidson overlooked this bribe of flattery. He thought the best way to handle the spirit of mutiny in his two companions was to appear unaware of it.

"We'll return to the planet-plane," he said, "and shift to some other locality, where we can start all over without the handicap of the evil reputation we have acquired in these parts. The

water and soil may be excellent, and this may prove a far more desirable planet than Kopex on which to plant a colony from the earth."

"The water *is* excellent," said Bailee soberly.

"I noticed the soil is excellent, too" nodded Hal-Al.

Davidson now came above the wood where he had left the planet-plane. A half oath, half groan escaped him.

The great plane was gone!

Marooned!

THE little corporal threw back his shoulders. He must not allow any spirit of fear or des-

"He put us inside of a cage with ropes for bars and turned juice into the ropes that made them white hot."

(Illustrated by Paul)



pair to ride his neck because of the loss of the planet-plane.

"Well, men," he said, "the plane is gone!"

"It's a devil of a shame!" sighed Bailee. "We'll never see the old earth again." He licked his burnt palm, perhaps to conceal a smile.

"Nor the moon!" said Hal-Al.

"Its recovery is not beyond hope," Davidson cheered himself. "Meantime we'll keep our prisoner, for we may be compelled before we find the plane to eat grass and roots, and he'll select them for us with more knowledge than we possess."

"It's fine water and fine soil," grinned Bailee. "And where there's fine water and soil there's always fine eating of some sort."

"Fine grass makes fine steaks," nodded Hal-Al cheerfully.

Davidson saw that his companions were not to be fazed by the extreme situation in which they were placed by loss of the planet-plane. Adrift on a strange world among half-human monsters, with only a few weeks' supply of power to keep their little hydro-terra scout-plane in active service, they were likely to end their days as slaves of a strange race. Their intelligence might prove much higher than that of the natives, but there were but three of them to perhaps countless millions of the latter, and physical numbers would master intelligence.

They began searching at once for the planet-plane, proceeding from the supposition that it had been carried away along the ground, for they had seen no evidence of it having been destroyed, and doubted if it had been borne away through the air.

If there were any form of air-going machines on the planet there surely had been means in the spheres to look for danger from overhead, yet there had been none. They were reasonably confident that no eye had looked upwards from any of the spheres, or the enemy had acted differently during the attack from overhead by the H-T plane. The skies were a mere void to this strange race.

The younger men re-dressed themselves, then Bailee went off on one of the radiocycles to reconnoiter the wood from which the planet-plane had been stolen. He returned shortly and expressed his belief that the planet-plane had not been carried away by any means without, since the indentures in the ground at that particular spot where the plane had stood showed that it had arisen and left by its own power impelled from *within*.

"Impossible!" exclaimed Davidson. "Only a man familiar with that type of plane could have got inside, in the first place, and after getting inside he would have required an a-b grade training* at least to have known how to manipulate the keyboard and rise."

"Only Chang and Chow were aboard," considered Hal-Al. "But maybe they got into a fight on the keyboard and hit off the right combination, and the plane rose."

"Some cat and dog combination," smiled Davidson. "But who released the quadrant?"

*This meant five years at a university devoted to spatial navigation.

"The ghost of Jaquet," said Bailee soberly. Jaquet was the singular and mysterious character who had cast himself from the planet-plane some x-ometers distant in celestial space. "I never spoke of his ghost," continued Bailee. "I thought I had merely breathed too much radiogas and was seeing things, but one night I saw the man's face peer around a door at me—this was *after* he shot himself off on the t-harpoon—and when I got up and looked behind the door he wasn't there."

Davidson mulled over this idea a few moments, then rejected it.

"Won't do," he said. "There are too many natural reasons to be considered before we need come to the supernatural. I am almost persuaded that these inhabitants possess airplanes and simply came along in several monster planes and carried ours away intact."

Bailee shook his head. "It mounted from its own power. There was the kick of the heel-ball* in the soft ground."

FOR a moment Davidson suspected that the other was seeking to deceive him, that he should believe the planet-plane had fallen into the power of the supernatural and it would be hopeless to search for it. Yet there was such an honest, steady light in Bailee's gray eyes that the little corporal was quickly satisfied of the former's sincerity.

Accepting his statement as true that the plane had arisen from its own power, there were two conclusions to be drawn. The intelligence of these inhabitants was so great the they had been able within a short time to get inside the plane and manipulate the keyboard, or else—an idea came to him spontaneously, yet it was so plausible and so wholly free of the supernatural, that he was instantly convinced that such indeed had been the case. The man Jaquet had *not* shot himself from the planet-plane on the t-harpoon, but merely a dummy of himself, and hiding about the plane had awaited the opportunity of making himself sole possessor of one of the most perfect and valuable mechanical possessions of the earth.

A gravity-free car of faultless precision and miraculous speed in which he could travel about through all celestial space, and, if he chose, make himself a pirate on the universal sea of ether, gathering together a crew of subtle minds that might threaten the peace and prosperity of entire worlds. Or remain a solitary, wandering dreamer, soaring through the fields of space till death stayed his hands at the master-keyboard of the super-plane, and he plunged with it to wreckage and oblivion against some rock-ribbed world or flaming comet.

"However, we are going to make a stiff search for the planet-plane," affirmed Davidson. "Life has its many little wakings, but this will be the great awakening to us three if we fail to recover the plane."

"Remember there were seven of them, all bath-

*These planes possessed monster shock-absorbing balls for landing on strange worlds.

ing in one river at one time," said Hal-Al. "Why should the heart of a man despair?"

"Seven of them!" grinned Bailee. "And the waist of a pretty girl is home, sweet home to me."

CHAPTER IV.

A Second Shock!

THEY laughed with the joy and freedom of young men attached only to the universal, and so content anywhere. But the little corporal was still possessed with a desire for the old green earth and its honors, and wished to return to it and claim his reward for bringing the planet-plane safely back after the loss of its crew, and move up a degree in the society of the Runners of Navare.* Then there was that secret business that had brought him so far from the earth on the ballot of the Ninety-Nine—that vital matter of tracking the Master Criminal and bringing him to book. The greatest voluntary work at which any man might be engaged and the successful conclusion of which would rank Davidson as the foremost benefactor of the age. Unless he could recover the planet-plane and return to Kopex with a full crew, it was not likely that he would have a second chance to come upon C-X, the Master Criminal.

"We are going to make a stiff search for the planet-plane," he again affirmed. "We are but little more than three naked brutes adrift in this trifling H-T, but with the great planet-plane we shall have something to say that will be respected by these inhabitants. Our word here will carry just as far as our total physical smashing powers."

"From the head of this fellow, it would seem so with him too," nodded Hal-Al, poking a thumb at their prisoner. "He looks like a hog that intermarried with the snakes, and they compromised on the worst parts of both families."

"Where do you suppose they get their handsome girls, if the men all look like this cherub?" demanded Bailee. "They must be looting some other planet of its finest, and we would be doing a favor to virtue to stop their dirty tricks."

They immediately began a search for the missing plane, risking their liberty, perhaps their lives, to a possible enemy, by approaching the spot where Davidson had left the great celestial dreadnought, and seeking for some trace for its removal along the ground. But they found none, and concluded that the plane had been lifted by its own power and vanished across the trackless heavens. To search the skies in the little H-T would be as hopeless as to search the Pacific in a canoe for a lost cork. Besides, they could not ascend in the H-T above the atmosphere of the planet, nor even to its full height.

"We might as well take out citizen-papers and join the strongest union here," grinned Bailee on what would have been the next day by earth time. It was however only twenty hours later in the long sunlit afternoon of many weeks duration.

*A secret order, which by its power and influence virtually controlled the earth, and kept law and order. To be a member meant the opportunity for honor and distinction.

"It looks that way and growing stronger in its resemblance," agreed Hal-Al. "Let's jolt a native out of his big marble and go gliding along till we knock up against something harder than ourselves."

The little corporal disliked to leave the locality where he had last seen the planet-plane; it seemed like severing their only connection with the earth. But if the man Jaquet had stolen the plane he certainly would not return to the neighborhood, while if it had been carried away by the natives, they would more likely hear news of the plane in the cities or villages than in this far frontier, as such it now appeared to be to the three men.

They rose to three hundred meters and, circling about, discovered several spheres below, all moving separately, but in one direction. They decided to take that direction also, and after a two hour flight glimpsed what appeared to be a drove of wild game headed towards a wood, and descended to try their luck at stocking their larder.

THEY found the game to consist of small, fat, pig-like animals somewhat slow of foot, and leaving the H-T they gave chase and bagged three. Carrying their kill over their shoulders they turned back towards the little plane, but the distance proved greater than Davidson had anticipated. He breathed a sigh of relief as he came in sight of the hydro-terra, which was docked on the edge of a long level stretch covered with short, fine scarlet grass, giving the effect of a rich velvet carpet thrown over the soil. Should the little scout-plane have met with any misadventure during their absence Davidson would have bitterly blamed himself for leaving it in the excitement of the chase, with their captive bound helpless to a railing.

In another moment his relief turned to despair, for the plane began to run along the ground as if preparing to ascend!

With a shout the three men threw down their kills and started at top speed towards the moving plane.

"All our smokes!" Davidson heard Bailee breathe, as the latter passed him, with Hal-Al but a few feet behind, and the fear of losing their tobacco must have lent miracle-shoes to his companions' feet for the little corporal had never before witnessed such sprinting by amateurs.

He raced on close behind, realizing that every moment might mean a year added to their lives, for practically all their ammunition was aboard the plane. He had glimpsed a huge pair of shoulders mounted with a queer-shaped head looming from the pilot-chair, and knew that their prisoner had escaped from his bonds and taken possession of the H-T. He recalled the latter's little pig-serpent eyes continually watching him while at the keyboard of the hydro-terra, and as it required but three simple moves to start the plane and hurl it like an arrow into the sky, their late captive might rise before they could cover another fifty meters.

"On!" Davidson cried, having no breath to spare for a longer encouragement, but his companions were running for the love of Lady Nicotine and needed no other spur.

They now came to where they had left their two radiocycles having removed them from the plane to use in chasing the game, but abandoning the machines when the game took to the woods. Hurling himself astride one of the cycles, Bailee shot like a gray bolt after the plane. He was followed by Hal-Al on the other cycle. The little corporal raced on after them afoot, greatly encouraged for a moment, but only for a moment, for the H-T, with its far more powerful engine, immediately speeded up. Would it rise before they could board it?

The two men on the radiocycles closed up the distance, and came almost upon the plane, racing straight towards it, depending on their own skill and the faultless brakes of their cycles to save them from collision, when the plane rose directly over them and Davidson saw one man, now racing frantically throw up his hands and attempt to seize some ropes trailing below the H-T. He soon succeeded and was swept from his radiocycle, but he couldn't tell whether it was Hal-Al or Bailee. He plunged forward, shouting for him to hang on.

For a moment the man hung fast, spinning in the air, then the rope was cut, or broke with his weight, and he was hurled to the earth. The other man was still racing beneath the plane on his radiocycle, and now Davidson saw his arm go up and the next moment a huge bulk plunged from the plane to the ground. The man-monster had been picked off the hydro-terra by a bullet from an automatic in the hands of one of his pursuers.

Davidson's attention was now wholly directed towards the H-T. Would it run low and become entangled in the trees, or rise and be lost to him? It rose slightly and shot away towards the north.

"All's over!" he gasped, coming to a stop. He saw the man on the radiocycle circle about and heard his shout, as he pointed at some object on the ground, then he dashed away on his cycle after the plane, evidently hoping to keep it in sight!

Unafraid!

THE little corporal hurried forward to where the other man had been thrown, knowing now he was Bailee, for he had distinguished Hal-Al on the radiocycle by his voice. Suddenly he drew his automatic and, dropping to his knee to steady himself, fired at a huge form not over thirty meters away that had risen from a cluster of tall grass with a large rock poised above its head, as if to dash it at some object on the ground.

The man-monster plunged forward and began to lash the grass like a struck crocodile, and Davidson rushed upon the scene and dragged the unconscious form of Bailee from the concealing grass, where the man-monster had sought to brain him with a heavy ragged piece of blue quartz. He worked about ten minutes over his friend, wholly disregarding the enemy in the grass, under the impression that he had received his death wound.

Suddenly Bailee opened his eyes and began to assure Davidson that there were seven of them. The latter sought to ease his friend's mind by assuring him in turn that there was only one, and

he was dead. But Bailee maintained with considerable heat that there were seven of them, and it was almost impossible to see any particular one of them because he couldn't keep his eyes off the others at the same time.

Then Davidson got it that Bailee was referring to the seven girls he had seen in bathing and not to the pig-serpent-headed monster. At this he laughed and fell in with Bailee's temporary delusion, due to his fall. The latter now staggered to his feet and begged his friend to join him in an effort to capture the pink sphere and the seven girls. However, a few minutes later, Bailee came from his fuddle and began to swear like himself, demanding what had happened after he had happened after he had grasped the rope.

The little corporal brought his companion's mind up to the moment by explaining he had been thrown and got a jolt in his continuity box. Then he told him he had finished the man-monster and went over to take a look at the body in the tall grass. *The enemy was gone!*

They searched all about, but the native's snake instincts had served him well. Scotched as he was, he had slipped away through the grass to the woods. They wished him luck, but the worst sort, then recovered the radiocycle that Bailee had ridden, mounted tandem and, riding back, gathered up the three animals they had killed. They now must husband all their resources. Without further delay they set forth to trace Hal-Al.

At times this proved easy to do, by the track of the other radiocycle in the clean soft soil, again it was very difficult, and once it seemed impossible. But always they picked up the trail and kept on. At best they and their absent companion were but three sticks of humanity lost on a great planet of unhumanity, yet if these three sticks could but cleave together they might make a bundle difficult to break.

After a couple of hours they heard the blast of a radiocycle horn. Had the pilotless plane descended to the ground and had been located by Hal-Al, or had the dim gray doors of the trackless distance closed on it forever? A little later they were joined by their friend, returning. He had come to a wide stretch of water which he could not cross and given up pursuit of the vanishing plane.

They threw themselves from their cycles under some oak-like trees.

"Well, men, we're up against the real thing," said Davidson.

"We're the real thing ourselves, corporal," replied Hal-Al easily. "Now for a smoke, which will make us feel like some more of the real thing."

Bailee rolled and lighted a cigarette. "It's great to be born of woman," he grinned. "But greater to be born of your own resolution. Fall to, corporal, and metamorphose your cares into smoke."

DAVIDSON fell in with the spirit of the younger men, for courage and physical cheer was now perhaps the highest form of wisdom, since they were practically stripped down to their bare fists in the big arena of this new world.



"It's a cheerful planet we've landed on," mused Hal-Al. "Fat game, and plenty of sunlight and distance."

"I always was too healthy for the earth," said Bailee. "And the doctors said I needed a change of climate just for that, before it became chronic."

The little corporal saw that the two men were oozing with health and good spirits, not merely assuming their mood in bravado. So in spite of his disgust at himself for having left the plane alone with their captive aboard, he felt fairly cheerful too. They had got off with their lives and in the years to come might recover the planet-plane, or get together sufficient intelligence on this scarlet planet to build another plane that would carry them back to the earth, or to some world in communication with the earth.

Before his two companions—cut off from communication with the earth and former associations—should feel so free that they would put him from all authority over them, Davidson hastened to profit by his superior rank to state that thereafter they would walk the radiocycles, riding them only in dire necessity, since there was power remaining in the machines for not over five thousand miles of travel. The younger men accepted this as a sensible proposition, and the little corporal felt greatly relieved that they seemed to have no intention of throwing off his authority. Disunity amongst them could react neither for their good, nor his.

They now agreed to go on until they came to the water that had turned Hal-Al back, and here kill and dry a sufficient stock of game to supply them for some weeks, then press on down the water to human or quasi-human habitation.

When they came in sight of this water a single glance assured Davidson that they had come to

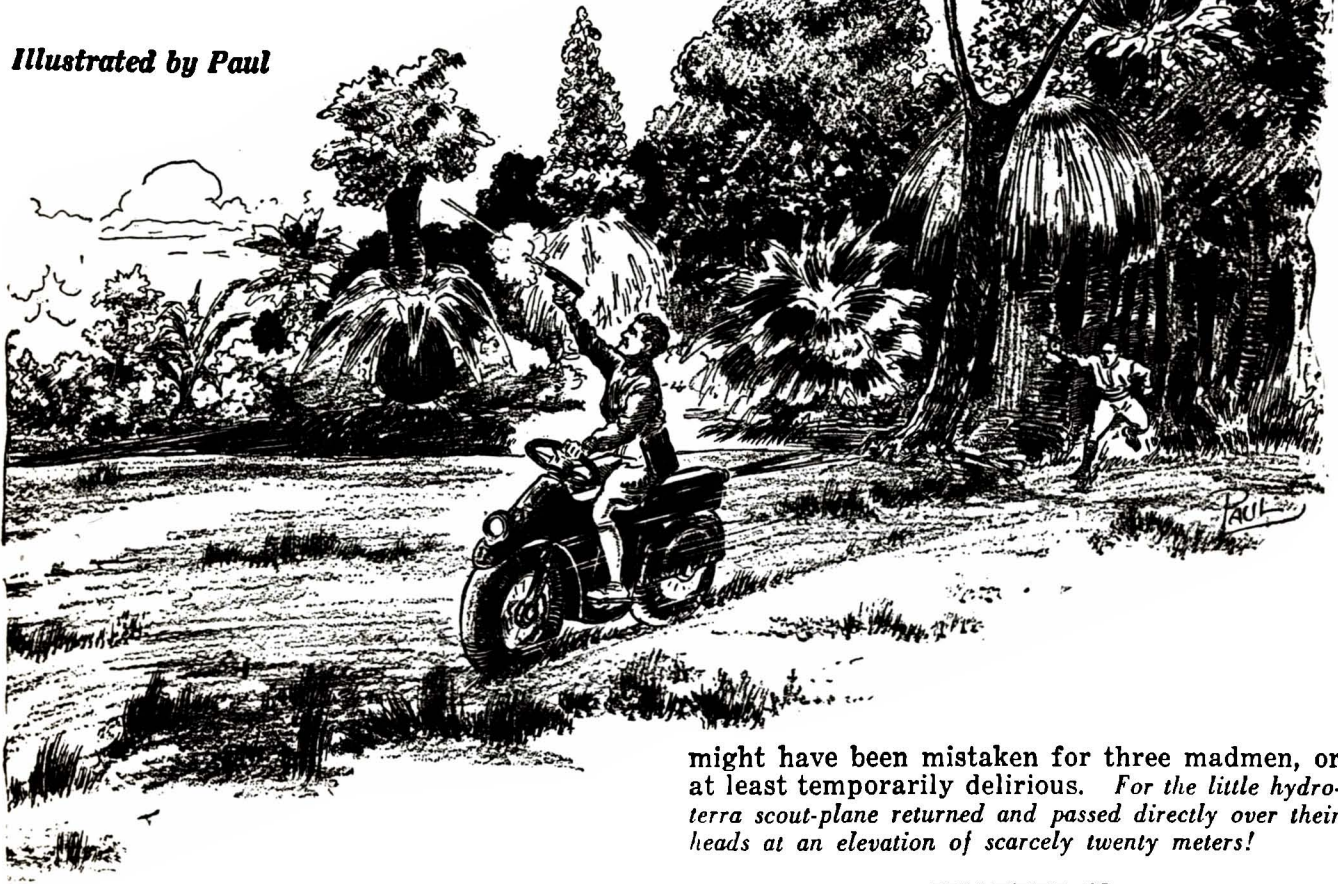
cool and satisfying. The men drank sparingly at first, but, experiencing no ill effect, partook of the water later without reservation.

Animal life was plentiful in the neighborhood, those who were running, jumping, walking, spinning, crawling, tumbling, climbing; but at no time did they come on any flying creature, though they met with one kind of game with a plumage composed of fine feather-like hair. This game could run swiftly, but not fly, having no wings or tail but possessing a soft, curly comb the whole length of its body. It proved to be very fine eating and its eggs, though small, had much of the flavor of mushroom.

From their little stock of supplies on the radiocycles they found sufficient materials to make two sturdy slings, and with these simple but efficient weapons by selecting compact round stones which threw very true they were able to kill all the game they required and so save their koto shells. Twenty hours after pitching camp they

He threw up his hands to seize some ropes hanging below the H-T. For a moment he hung spinning.

Illustrated by Paul



the edge of a continent, for before them evidently was a sea and not a great river or lake. Yet when he tasted the water he found it was not salty, but it possessed a pleasing tang like the juice of a fine grape fruit, and it was very clear,

might have been mistaken for three madmen, or at least temporarily delirious. For the little hydroterra scout-plane returned and passed directly over their heads at an elevation of scarcely twenty meters!

CHAPTER V

A Strange Scene

THE three men raced beneath the little scout plane that had returned above their camp,

gesticulating and shouting for it to stop, as if it were a human intelligence, or such an intelligence was aboard. But they soon realized that the plane was pilotless: the automatic pilot had been set, they judged, for the three hundred mile circle. Traveling at the very slow rate of fifteen miles an hour—which seemed a reasonable estimate—the little H-T would pass over their heads every twenty hours, deviating slightly from a perfect circle in the still air.

In less than three weeks it would fall somewhere along that circle for lack of power-fuel in the reservoir. But perhaps half its course lay over the water, and should it alight on the water and a tide drift it from its circle they could scarcely hope to recover it.

They tentatively decided to wait until the plane should fail to reappear in a reasonable time, then follow its circle around as far as possible and trust to luck to pick up the machine. It was possible that they might obtain some kind of power-fuel which they could adapt to running the engine, if they were fortunate enough to recover the plane itself.

When Bailee next came back to camp from a short excursion after game, Davidson saw him give Hal-Al a signal to join him privately. By their secret manner he suspected that they were up to some adventure with a spice of danger or devilry in it, and when a little later they slipped off together, unconscious that he had suspected them, he hastily covered the two radiocycles with a quantity of branches and followed. He proposed to back them up in any danger, or draw them off from too great a risk. Besides, he was curious to witness this adventure which, to judge by their secrecy, was too choice for his confidence.

He sighted them, without being observed himself, about a quarter mile from camp, just as they had stopped to slap one another on the back in high delight over some matter. They hurried on and shortly brought up on the further side of a narrow wood, where a wide sparkling stream mingled its waters with those of a little inlet of that sea by which they had encamped. He stole forward to where he could better overlook this charming scene and beheld a sight more fit for the old Greek gods than for the eyes of three wandering mortals from the very modern earth.

On the opposite side of the stream—which was about twenty meters wide, quite shallow, and very clear, for he could see the stones lying upon its bed—was a great scarlet sphere fully seven meters high, glowing like a jewel in the clear, warm sunlight. To one side of this sphere stood a giant man-monster, with a serpent-pig-head. He was nearly three meters high and nude but for a girdle of silver-like scales encircling his loins. His arms were folded and he stood as motionless as a column of stone.

Amazing as was this sight, Davidson gave it but brief attention, for it lacked the appeal of that other sight which he beheld along the margin of the stream. Here seven maidens, at first glance exquisitely human in every aspect, were dancing bare-footed along the purple sands of

the stream, every little while skipping into the water, then back to the shore.

The little corporal trained his binoculars on this group, and but for the astonishing largeness of their eyes and the smallness and intense scarlet of their mouths, he could not at first distinguish the seven dancers from as many super-beautiful maidens of the earth. But those amazingly large eyes, which were as clear through his powerful glasses as if their owners were smiling into his face, testified to a different and more animal-like race than humans of the earth, while all the motions of these girls supported this fact. They moved at times with the cat-like grace of panthers and again with the fluttering motions of birds and moths.

WHAT was the nature of this scene? Was this giant the slave-chaperon of these exquisite creatures, or was this type of monster but a kind of great dog trained to watch over his owners, and not regarded as high as a slave? Or could it be possible that this giant was the husband-master of these maidens, and the control of the planet lay with such hands and minds as his? Certainly he made a heroic figure, towering there seemingly as immovable and inflexible as a tawny stone image of some strange deity.

Davidson now turned his binoculars on Bailee and Hal-Al to enjoy their delight at this scene, and just then he noted the latter thrust out his right hand as if pointing towards the giant. Then he smothered his own cry of protest, for it was too late. Hal-Al had pulled the trigger of his little Metzger and sent a slumber pellet* straight for the tawny stone-like image on the opposite shore. The pellet caught the giant in his left leg. He struck at his leg as if some insect had crawled up and stung him, and he sought to brush it away, then again folded his arms and gazed inflexibly before him.

A half minute later the man-monster unfolded his arms, opened his snake-pig mouth in a yawn, then sank down peacefully on the sands in a sleep that would last about six hours, unless broken by a counter-pellet.

The little corporal, crouched behind the trunk of a large tree, watched his two companions as they stole upstream and proceeded to ford the water. Evidently they proposed to capture the scarlet sphere and seven maidens, and, should they succeed, would no doubt bring the whole prize into camp with uproarious delight and offer Davidson a share of the spoils. But the latter resolved to cross their plans.

As a Runner of Navare he could not allow their adventure to succeed. The seven lovely girls were clearly not in distress, but seemed in full enjoyment of life and happiness, if not entire liberty. They might be daughters of high degree and any affront to them would cause the guilty parties to be hunted down like a pestilence.

He felt that it would be entirely useless, and might betray their presence to the girls, to attempt to call the men back, since neither his present small authority, nor the memory of his for-

*A little bullet-capsule containing enough cocaine to put one to sleep.

mer greater authority, would move them in the presence of these beautiful girls. As they came opposite him he shot them both in their legs with his own Metzer. Suspecting the nature of the stinging sensation in their limbs, the men fell flat on the ground and sought to crawl back the way they had come, but sleep speedily overtook them.

It was now up to the little corporal to ford the stream and remove his friends from the danger of any chance observation by the seven girls, or others remaining in the great scarlet sphere. He was about to proceed in this undertaking when the girls became aware that the giant had fallen asleep. Gathering about him they listened a few moments to his breathings, then stole on tiptoe across the sands and entered the sphere. Almost immediately that vehicle began slowly to glide away.

Within the Sphere

DAVIDSON's skin prickled; his chivalry had not been required. Evidently these maidens would have appreciated the help of Bailee and Hal-Al to aid them in escaping the giant. Or at least, if they had not been the latter's prisoners, they were merry madcaps and had seized the first opportunity for adventure. They could not have thought the giant sick or injured, and be going to procure help, or they would scarcely have tiptoed so cautiously back to the sphere.

The little corporal sighed: these girls would roll away across the scarlet carpet of velvet grass like lovely figures in a dream, and he would be left alone with his companions, to be all but mobbed by them for a spoil-sport, when they should awaken from their sleep. For they would know that their sleep had fallen upon them by his hands, and by no other means, and he would not attempt to deceive them, since they were now man to man in the enemy's land, and the word of each must be his bond.

Again the unexpected happened. The sphere glided slowly along till it came to where Hal-Al and Bailee were almost locked in one another's manly arms in slumber, when it stopped, the door was opened and two maidens came out, shortly followed by three others. Amongst them they lifted the two sleepers and bore them separately into the sphere. While they were taking Hal-Al inside, Davidson covered half the distance to the scene, and the remaining distance while they were carrying Bailee within. He had decided to cast his lot with his companions; they could die together or make love together. If it should be neither death nor love, at least they would not be separated on this strange planet.

Though it was bright day to Davidson, the girls seemed unaware of his approach till he was almost upon them, which imperfection of sight he could not account for till later.

When they saw him they fled into the sphere, but the boldest remained standing in the doorway. He made signs to be taken within and drew closer to the open door. Should they refuse him admission he proposed to make a forced attempt,

to join his unconscious friends. As he drew nearer, smiling, they evidently saw that he was not a man-monster but bore features similar to those of the two younger men that they had just taken into the sphere.

To his delight, they now came forward and fluttered about him, conversing amongst themselves in a language like soft music and the cooing of doves, and touching his person with their slender fingers as though better to estimate him.

Step by step he approached nearer to the sphere till he had insinuated himself into that gliding car. They followed and he found himself in a kind of false twilight cast by a glass-like globe overhead, which gave out darkness, as a light on earth gives out brightness. A few feet away he saw Bailee and Hal-Al lying on the floor; then one of the girls took him by the hand and led him to a seat on a wide low couch. Immediately they lifted the two sleeping men and deposited them at full length beside him, placing a cushion under each of their heads.

Two of the girls now ascended a stair close beside him and in a few moments he was aware that the sphere was moving, as a dim cineograph of trees, grass and water was thrown on the wall before him, evidently a reflection of the route they were traversing. He glanced upwards and saw an irregular ceiling about ten feet above, which would allow for another room or upper deck within the sphere, and still permit of a substantial thickness to the walls.

The faint cineograph soon registered by its swifter changes that the sphere was moving faster, and though this reflection was somewhat vague and blurred to Davidson he judged that it was quite clear to the others, since they were accustomed to viewing such an effect. Besides, Davidson had suddenly divined that the twilight cast over the scene was no doubt a clear brilliancy to these girls, who saw by *darkness*, not by *light*, or required a tempered light, like the owls of earth.

HE let his eyes range along the circular wall, at a height about level with the chins of the girls, who were of very similar stature, and suddenly saw a penciling of light. He arose and going to this light put back a delicate but opaque curtain of some unfamiliar fabric and discovered a transparent, circular window of a substance similar to glass, but with a velvety touch. Through this he could see the outside world practically as clearly as if he stood without the sphere, and observed that they were moving over a stretch of rough ground but without noticeable vibration.

Looking closer he was assured that the crystal before him was double and between was a clear liquid. He concluded that the sphere was a ball within a ball, separated by a jacket of some limpid liquid which served the purpose of taking up all vibration; and no doubt this was the stuff turning bluish as it reached the outer air which had squirted from those spheres that he had pierced with projectiles from his automatic and cyclo-gun.

He let the curtain drop and turned to the five

girls who were gathered close about him conversing with one another in their soft, cooing, musical language, and no doubt discussing him. He now pointed upwards and crossed to the stairs that he had seen the two absent girls ascend. It was evident that these were piloting the sphere and it was vitally important that he should learn as quickly as possible the rudiments of that art. They treated him as a guest rather than a prisoner and freely allowed him to ascend the stairs into the false twilight above, accompanying him and cooing about him like beautiful doves.

On the upper floor a girl was seated at a little table, the top of which was composed of sixteen differently colored squares, each about an inch in diameter. These squares were individually depressible like piano keys, but all on the same level. This was evidently the switch or pilot-board. A second girl was looking over the shoulder of the first, perhaps taking lessons of her. Directly above and before this pilot board was an observatory window, through which Davidson could clearly see the country without which the sphere was traversing.

He now noted that the pilot lightly touched the fourth key on the first row on the pilotboard and the sphere veered to the right, avoiding a group of trees ahead. Caressing her cheek, as he might the wing of a bird to soothe its alarm, he touched the same key himself. Again the sphere turned slightly to the right and continued ahead.

He now touched the last key on the bottom row, whereupon the sphere came to an almost instant stop without perceptible vibration. At this he was highly gratified and throwing out his arms sought by this action to make the pilot understand that he wished the sphere to proceed. She evidently caught his meaning for she touched the first key on the last row and the sphere went ahead.

The flint had struck and lighted intelligence between the little corporal and the pilot, and though the other girls cooed and fluttered about him, shaking his resolution to its foundation with their great violet eyes and scarlet rose-bud mouths, he remained at his post and got the rudiments of the pilot-board. The latter proved to be both simple and complex. Each key had its single purpose, as to start, stop, turn to left, right, etc., but by pressing two or more keys at once a combination was formed by which the sphere was capable of doing certain things which could not be achieved by the pressing of a single key.

Once they came to a wide gorge with very steep banks, and the pilot made a combination that carried the sphere into the gorge, through the rushing water, and safely up on the opposite shore.

It became evident to Davidson that the sphere did not proceed by any power of revolving wheel, fan or ball, within or about itself, but glided along, lightly touching the ground, driven by some form of repulsion or attraction arising from a distant object or field such as a power plant or magnetic or repulsion pole, or two neighboring planets, one attracting and one repelling.

Besides their amazing large eyes and very small scarlet mouths, he now discovered another distinction between these lovely girls and the maidens of the earth. Their attire, delicate and sheer as it was, had concealed this particular difference till one of the girls innocently slipped her dress from her shoulders and bosom and he noted that beneath her arms, slightly connecting the under part of the arms to the torso, was a tenuous fleshy membrane or web, as if in some remote antiquity this race had been winged. But the wings had evolved into human arms, leaving a slight membrane hinting of their airy origin, yet in no way discounting the charms or hindering the free, graceful motion of those arms.

But shortly followed a discovery which for a time Davidson hesitated to accept, it placed the whole situation in such a different and alarming light. Yet accept it he must, for the evidence was too plain to be dismissed as a wild fancy of his own, caused by drinking water of that clear sea, or partaking of some wild game whose flesh had heated his blood with fever. These lovely, voluptuous maidens with their great violet eyes, rose-bud mouths, and the seraphic hint of wings on their fragrant persons, were more perilous than any danger he had faced since landing on the scarlet planet. He and his two helpless, sleeping companions were shut fast in the great gliding sphere with seven harpies *lusting for warm blood to drink!*

CHAPTER VI

Vampires!

THE little corporal passed two hours standing beside the girl at the pilot-board, memorizing the keys and fitting himself to guide the sphere under ordinary conditions, but he did not succeed in learning the principle by which the sphere was propelled. However he was still of the opinion that the whole scheme was a matter of magnetism or repulsion, or both, and the sphere glided and turned and veered between magnetic or repulsive fields.

Then the maidens grew impatient for some reason and drew him down to the lower floor, where they seated him on a couch and brought him food and drink. He ate heartily, for the viands and drink were delicious, for as yet no suspicion of the true nature of these lovely creatures had entered his mind.

As he ate they fluttered about him, playing on softly-tuned musical instruments accompanied by their own sweeter, softer voices. Finally he closed his eyes from the sheer physical pleasure of the luxurious couch, delicious food, soothing sounds, and warm arms about him, and, unaware, slid into slumber. All this time the sphere was gliding without vibration across a rolling land carpeted with warm scarlet grass.

Suddenly he awoke in great uneasiness, though the cause of his uneasiness he could not for a time ascertain. He had been conscious in his sleep of a dragging as at his heart, and had a vague recollection of having dreamed that he was a faun-

faced fountain in a dim park, with water flowing from his heart as scarlet as blood, and a troop of lovely maidens with wide violet eyes came and fluttered about him, and, putting up her rosebud mouth, each maiden drank in turn of the scarlet water as it flowed from his heart.

The room was now lighted with a mellow but clear light from a globe overhead and, as he stirred and sat up, he was aware of something warm and soft untwining from about his person and slipping away behind him. He fancied it was but some dream-idea melting into nothingness, and turned heavily, when he saw one of the girls stealing from his couch. Still sleep-sodden he turned towards Hal-Al and Bailee who were lying on another couch but a few feet away and on either side of each of them he saw two girls lying with their faces buried against the right and left arms of his companions.

He arose and yawned and stretched, with the uneasiness still oppressing him, when immediately there was a murmur as of alarm, and the girls lying beside his still unconscious friends arose and slipped away from them. Then the clear mellow light overhead was dimmed into the twilight in which he had fallen asleep, and shortly five of the maidens gathered about him and began to sing and play softly in his heavy ears.

The twilight in the sphere was not so obscure but that he noted the bright scarlet of their mouths for they were almost in his arms, they pressed so near and he was now aware that each licked her lips in the pauses of singing. The pulse of his left wrist stung him and he rubbed it a few times, then gave it no further attention, as he had accustomed himself to disobey the small dictates of the flesh lest they should become magnified with attention and tyrannize too much over his spirit.

He returned to the pilot-board above stairs and refreshed his memory of the keys, and ran the sphere for some distance. The light here being much stronger, coming through the observatory window before him, he noted a singular marking on his left wrist. It looked like the indenture of the teeth of some little animal. A mouse had bit him, or a weasel, or—he suddenly sickened at the thought—a woman!

A soft pink arm fluttered over his shoulder and touched one of the keys of the pilot-board, and the sphere veered off just in time to save its crashing into a noble tree. He got the reins of his reason and saved himself from plunging like a frightened horse. He had grasped the truth! The mark on his wrist was the indentation of one of these rosebud mouths!

THERE had been two of the harpies clinging to the wrists of each of his unconscious companions, and that clear mellow light in the room when he had awakened had been artificial darkness to their great violet eyes. They saw by darkness or dimness and not light, and of course the harpies had believed it was darkness also to his eyes and he could not see them in that dark, sucking his blood and the blood of his companions.

He decided his next duty was to learn how to

open the door of the sphere, so that he could escape at the first opportunity, after his friends had awakened. But it would be quite awhile before Hal-Al and Bailee could recover from the effects of the sleeping-pellets that he had shot into their legs, and meantime he must not sleep again nor leave the two men alone.

Naturally a reaction followed and for a while Davidson almost persuaded himself that he was feverish to credit this odious suspicion of the lovely creatures about him. But after an examination of the wrists of both Hal-Al and Bailee carried on covertly under the guise that he was trying to arouse them, he was satisfied that the situation was not a phantasy due to fever in his blood.

What a planet he was lost upon! Men with pig-serpent-heads—for surely these fighting mammals he had met with could not have been of the female sex—and women of utter loveliness who luxuriated on warm human blood! The muddy Amazon of animalism had carried far into this sea of humanity.

It was not long before he suspected that the girls knew he was aware of their bat nature, whereupon he began to wonder if they were not consciously holding him their prisoner. He examined his little cocaine Metzger, as well as those of his friends, and found all the shells empty. He would not be able to shoot the girls to sleep. His automatic was fully loaded, but it was out of the question to turn a deadly weapon on these lovely images of the human form. He could not slay them, he could not strike them; he could but turn and run from them when the opportunity should offer. Or make them his prisoners without violence, then escape.

If Hal-Al and Bailee had been awake, he was confident that the three of them could quickly subdue the seven girls but, alone, he hesitated to act for fear that at a touch of a secret key they would turn some ray upon him that would paralyze him, even destroy him.

He began a tour of the sphere, smilingly examining every object and endeavouring to make them understand that he wished to know its purpose. They fluttered about him, conversing in their soft, melodious language, but very rarely did intelligence strike fire between them. Finally he came to the door, or what he took to be the door, by which he had entered the sphere, but with many murmurs they drew him away from the spot and would not permit him to return. Did they fear that he might fall from the moving sphere and be injured, or was he being kept a prisoner?

An hour later the sphere approached a bright stream of water, where it was brought to a stop, and watching covertly he observed one of the girls turn a kind of lever half around which threw the door wide open. Five of them now led him from the sphere and danced about him on the banks of the stream, and threw handfuls of sparkling water over him.

He was greatly refreshed by this diversion and the feeling that he was not their prisoner, till the unpleasant thought came that they were but doing this to revive him and cool his blood, that his

pulses would be sweeter to their mouths the next time he slept.

He now decided to test the length of his tether, so began running about along the shore, as if sporting like the others, when suddenly he turned and ran a little ways towards a group of trees down stream. He had gone scarcely thirty meters when all the strength went from his knees and he fell on the purple sands. But almost immediately his strength returned as mysteriously as it had left him, and he arose and went back.

Evidently the two girls remaining within the sphere had played the invisible paralyzant ray on his limbs, and he now fully realized that he was a prisoner, with a leash no longer than these harpies choose to allow him. He was but a two-legged animal kept to be drained alive of his blood.

Escape!

HE assumed innocence of their cunning and began to sport with them again, and freely accompanied them back into the sphere when they took his hand to lead him within. Caution advised him to delay until his two friends had recovered from their forced sleep, when, amongst them, they should be able to put the pilot-board of the sphere out of commission, then make a dash for liberty, with some assurance of success.

Sometime later both sleeping men stirred and shortly came to consciousness within a few minutes of one another. Davidson sat beside them and in a few choice words explained the situation. They had the evidence of the marks of teeth on their own wrists and a certain weakness of body due to the loss of blood.

Bailee stared at the five lovely harpies gathered about the couch where he was seated with Hal-Al, then his eyes rolled with disgust towards his companions.

"The opera is all over before it's begun!" he said.

"The same!" nodded Hal-Al.

"The same!" repeated Davidson.

Bailee put out his hand. "Shake, corporal! You didn't chuck us over while we were asleep and run off with the girls, and you haven't deserted us since you found them out."

"I had no chance," replied Davidson curtly.

"You wouldn't have deserted us, if you'd had a chance and a half!" sighed Hal-Al.

"No, you wouldn't have," sighed Bailee. "You're a gentleman! But say, corporal, we'll help you desert us."

"We will," nodded Hal-Al.

Davidson laughed sardonically at them.

"Seven beautiful bats in a big ball!" groaned Hal-Al.

"Seven lovely leeches in a big bottle!" groaned Bailee.

"We'll have to uncork the bottle and run for it," said the little corporal. "We can't be rough with ladies."

"It's awful!" groaned Bailee.

"It's hell!" groaned Hal-Al.

"It's up to you," said Davidson.

"Two more above deck?" demanded Bailee.

"Two more!"

"As handsome as these?"

"Handsome!"

"You're plain spoken, corporal!" said Bailee.

"Damn plain!" growled Hal-Al.

"You're men, and in some ways better men than myself," replied the little corporal. "You know what you want better than I know what you want, and you know what price you are willing to pay for it, and after all it's all in the price, with men. If you hang around this cage and make love to these harpies, you'll last about a week, or maybe two.

"For myself I don't propose to use any violence towards these beauties, for they look too much like humanity, but at the first good chance I intend to make a break for the big clean outdoors. I'll be glad to have you join me in the break, but that's up to you. What's the verdict?"

The two younger men regarded one another a moment and Davidson thought he saw the ghost of a wink pass between them.

Bailee reached out his hand. "Shake on it, corporal! We'll join you in the break for liberty."

Hal-Al reached out his hand. "That we will! The ladies will keep."

THE little corporal was not wholly convinced. He suspected that they would help him get clear of the sphere, so that he would not have the blood sucked from his veins every time he fell asleep, then they would return to these girls and take a chance together, without involving him.

"After we are clear of them we had better keep going," he advised. "We may run into a country where the girls are girls and not bats."

"It's a big planet," nodded Hal-Al, non-committingly.

"It is," nodded Bailee.

Davidson wished to act at once, before the discretion of his friends should be dissipated by the glowing beauty of the seven maidens. "I'll stop the sphere, then we'll hustle all the girls down here where they can't get at the pilot-board, and then we'll open the door, take them a little ways with us, leave them and run for it. Before they can get back to the sphere and turn a ray on us we should be out of sight. Of course we can't throw them out of the sphere and take it for ourselves, as they might perish if left without it."

"But can you stop the sphere?" demanded Hal-Al.

"I can do that much—and open the door."

Hal-Al set his jaw and arose a bit unsteadily. "Commence, corporal. And hurry!"

The latter sprang upstairs, for his eye had become somewhat accustomed to the false twilight in the sphere, and he was able to move quickly. Going to the pilot-board he pressed the last square on the last row and the sphere came to an almost instant stop. Then he swept the two girls at the board into his arms and bore them downstairs.

"Quick!" he cried, blocking the stairs, so that none of the girls below could get by him. "Grab all of them and hold on!"

This proved an easy task, for the two younger

men were already engaged at embracing the five girls.

"Ready!" said Hal-Al.

"Ready!" grinned Bailee.

Their plan had been so quickly executed that Davidson got to the door and succeeded in throwing it open before the seven girls seemed actually to realize the full intentions of the men. Then they fought.

The little corporal heard a howl from Bailee, followed by a grunt from Hal-Al, then he gasped with sudden pain as two rosebud mouths sank their teeth into his wrists. In another moment Hal-Al was outside on the scarlet grass with three of the girls in his arms, each with her teeth sunk into his flesh. Bailee quickly followed with two of the girls, while Davidson struggled behind with the remaining two.

Not a sound had come from any of the harpies, for each had sunk her teeth into the flesh of a man and was sucking his blood, either in rage or while the opportunity offered.

"Run—straight ahead!" directed Davidson. Not a hundred meters away was the margin of a wood, and the trees seemed to offer the best means of concealment.

Bailee preceded, his exclamations of pain mingling with his grunts of delight at the situation. Hal-Al followed silently, struggling with his greater burden. The little corporal brought up the rear, frequently gasping with pain, for the two vampires that he held had got the tenderest portion of his wrists between their teeth. But he would not let either of them go, for though they were women and lovely beyond belief, they were dangerous as fanged serpents. If but one of them should escape and get back to the sphere and swing the paralyzant ray in their direction he and his companions were lost.

Davidson feared his two friends even more than their captives. When they should come to the wood and be safe from the treachery of the sphere and its dangerous rays, would they not decide to dally with these lovely girls till the latter had betrayed them to recapture, or worse?

But they never reached the wood. They were about thirty meters distant, struggling forward with their painful, detaining burdens, when from among the trees came a hundred or more of just such lovely creatures as their captives, and swept towards them like a wave from an unholy flood of women.

CHAPTER VII

Pursuit

THE three men gasped and halted at sight of the flood of women bearing down upon them.

"Shake the girls off and get back to the sphere!" commanded Davidson. "If the crowd gets us we'll become bloodless skeletons!"

"Wow!" roared Hal-Al, shaking the three clinging girls from his giant form and turning and running for the sphere, like a big white horse pursued by a smother of bats.

Bailee shook himself free and followed, and

tearing himself from the two rosebud mouths at his wrists, Davidson brought up the unchivalrous but discreet rear. They reached the sphere almost abreast and plunged in. The little corporal pulled down the lever that locked the door, then fairly hurling himself upstairs to the pilot-board pressed the key that set the sphere into motion.

Hal-Al and Bailee stumbled upstairs and stared through the forward observatory window. "Hold on!" cried the former. "We're safe enough now—let's apologize!"

Davidson swung the sphere to the right to avoid crashing into a score of girls close in pursuit.

"Besides, we might let two or three in—to do the washing," suggested Bailee.

The little corporal disregarded their suggestions, knowing their ulterior motives. Feeling about as much of a man as a rat in a trap beset by a hundred Persian kittens, he headed the sphere for the open country.

"This isn't the earth," he rasped. "And these aren't women. They're a swarm of bats! Get that into your heads before you get all the blood sucked out of you."

Hal-Al groaned. "Right you are! We'd last about three minutes out there!"

Bailee wiped away the blood oozing from both of his wrists. "It isn't worth it, Hal! Besides, you don't believe we could last three whole minutes, do you?"

"Do you see any other spheres?" demanded Davidson.

"Not a one."

"Then we're safe for the time being, but if they come after us in one of these machines they may recapture us yet, for I don't know how to get any more speed than we are making and that can't be thirty miles an hour. They may be able to make a hundred!"

"It's the first time I ever run from girls," grinned Bailee, apologetically. "But I was thinking of you, corporal, and not of myself. I'd hate to see you drunk alive, like a bottle of reffeshment."

"I'll swallow that bitter pill, if it will do your pride any good," nodded Davidson. "There's a window at the rear, and one at each side: suppose you look about a bit and apologize less for not making an ass of yourself by staying outside."

"They've all gone back into the woods," informed Hal-Al shortly, from his post at the rear.

"Not a soul in sight," said Bailee, from his post at the right. "What a world! what a world! Oh, to see one of their women, if their bats are handsome as angels!"

A few moments later a growl came from Hal-Al. "They're coming from the woods—a dozen big pink spheres, and some little dirty ones!" He drew his automatic and regarded it. "But how the devil am I to shoot at a lady!"

B AILEE joined his friend and stared at the oncoming spheres. "They're running about even with us," he informed. "Jam all the keys and see what happens."

"This is no time to experiment," replied the little corporal. "We'll abandon the sphere and

take to the trees till these vampires pass by. They'll hardly see us up a tree, but perhaps they can see this sphere a mile in their dark."

"Let's hope there are some of those pig-headed fellows with them," sighed Bailee. "I can't strike a lady and retain my poise and enthusiasm!"

"Same here!" growled Hal-Al.

"We'll probably get our bellyful this time!" Davidson ran the sphere around a noble group of great, flaming scarlet trees, where he brought it to a stop. "Now, men, pile out and make for the thickest timber where they can't bring their machines. They mayn't have any portable weapons but their hands and teeth."

They abandoned the sphere, which at best might prove but a gliding trap, and raced into the woods. Suddenly Bailee stopped and lying down began to yell with laughter.

"Chased by a hundred beautiful girls, and running for our lives!" he gasped.

"Get up!" commanded the little corporal in alarm. "They are probably close behind and will drink you like a cup of water."

Bailee arose and hurried on, shaking with laughter at the humor of the situation. Faint sounds reached them, that grew more distinct, like many light feet running over the leaves. Then these sounds turned off and died away, and the older man drew a breath of relief. There had been something harrowing to him in these sounds, like the running of a pack of weasels, hurrying to strip the flesh from his bones.

They came at last to a kind of wood within the woods, where the trees were different from any they had before noticed. Tall and exceedingly graceful, with leaves as varied and delicate as the frost crystals of the earth. Here they sat down and rested and smoked, and talked the situation over in subdued voices, for the exquisite beauty of the trees modulated them to a quieter if not a finer mood.

They decided to make an attempt to return to the season and follow it along in the hope that they might come again on the camp where they had left their radiocycles, meantime keeping a watch for the little hydro-terra plane circling through the skies. If they could recover either the radiocycles or the plane they would be immeasurably better off than they then were.

They allowed for the fact that they had been traveling a good part of the time since they had left camp, but the sphere had moved rather slowly, and, if it had proceeded in the right direction—and there was a very reasonable chance it had—they would still be within the three hundred-mile circle that was being swung by the H-T plane. Davidson had his binoculars with him, which could cover this distance for sighting an object as large as the plane, and which would greatly aid them in locating the pilotless machine.

Each man had his automatic and a small supply of shells, his clothing and shoes, but no cap, as these had been lost sometime before. They had not the simplest remedy for a fever or chill, or illness of any nature; and since the excitement was past both of the younger men showed a bit to the weather from having been drained of consider-

able blood by the harpies. The little corporal had got off easier, perhaps because he had not been drugged and so had alarmed the vampires with restlessness during his sleep.

THEY proceeded leisurely but steadily and shortly coming to a stream continued to follow its course downward, as no doubt it emptied into the sea, or was a tributary of a larger stream that did. At Davidson's advice his companions used reasonable caution about exposing themselves on the open stretches, and he noted that they did not seem particularly eager to meet with more of the harpies. For it had sunk into their minds that though they were fighting men they were no match for a swarm of these beautiful bats.

On the third shift that the little corporal was awake (they took turns, two of them sleeping eight hours with the third watching, then the latter sleeping and one of the former watching and the other hunting, then the three of them marching) Davidson was overjoyed to discover the little H-T plane flying low to his right, scarcely, he judged, five miles distant. He climbed a tree and got the best line he could on the plane's flight, and on their next march they suddenly came on the shore of the sea and, following it northward, came on their late camp.

All of their game, which they had hung up for the sun to dry, was gone, but the two radiocycles remained as they had been left. They concluded that the camp had been visited by marauding animals but scarcely by humans or super-intellectual mammals.

As a measure of caution they removed their camp some miles down the water, and here divided their time between getting a supply of game to dry—while they waited for the H-T plane to drop somewhere along its circuit from exhaustion of fuel—and in building a fair-sized raft of branches lashed with reeds and tough vines. They might yet be compelled to take to the water, to escape some enemy, or to recover the plane.

The hours passed, they could not say days, for it was always light, and they soon were in perfect physical condition. The air and water were very invigorating, and they had plenty of fresh game and fruit. They had found that the innumerable pods hanging on many of the trees about their camp were not only safe eating, but also as tasty as the finer fruits of the earth.

When active work failed, the two younger men quickly drew restless, as all robust men not trained to creative thought are apt to become when physically idle. Thereupon Davidson proposed that they move on, keeping within and along the circle swung by the pilotless plane. They could not anticipate just where the machine would eventually fall and so considered that they might as well be at one point of that circle as another. Hal-Al and Bailee readily fell in with the little corporal's proposal, and after lashing the raft as securely as possible, for they might yet have need to return and make use of it, they set out with the two radiocycles and a supply of dried game.

Holding their course true by the plane which

passed over their heads every twenty hours, they kept on till, coming from the obscurity of a wood, they saw rising before them in the near distance a plateau, which, though somewhat narrow, was sufficiently high for the hydro-terra plane to touch, or almost touch, if the flight of the plane was across this table-land.

"If the plane crosses yonder hill, perhaps we can board it!" exclaimed Davidson.

"Our luck's turning," said Hal-Al. "Like a tide coming in again."

"It's all tides!" nodded Bailee. "And men are but fishes in the tides of chance."

In another moment the three men gave a shout of surprise and delight. The little H-T scout-plane shot into view, coming from the plateau, which it must have grazed in its flight, or perhaps it had run for some distance on the surface of the ground. Then again they shouted for now, plainly visible, leaning over the left side of the plane, was seen one of those lovely human-like vampire girls!

CHAPTER VIII

Dead or Alive?

BAILEE was the first to speak. "She'll be back in twenty hours! Now watch me use my head instead of my heels."

"You'll have to use both head and heels," commented Davidson. "You'll need to do some tall running to board the plane without getting killed, even if it does graze the ground."

"I can board it from one of the radiocycles," said Hal-Al. "As easy as kissing Bailee's sweet-heart!"

"Good!" exclaimed Davidson. "I had forgotten the radiocycles."

"We'll toss for it," proposed Bailee. He picked up a stone, flat on one side and round on the other. "What will you have—flat or round?"

"Wait till I try out the principle!" Hal-Al took the stone and proceeded to toss it several times to learn the principle of its fall.

Bailee grinned. "We'll take a stone flat on both sides. When it comes to but one girl between two of us—I beg your pardon, corporal, I should have said three of us!—we'll trust to no principle, but just to luck."

"Hold on!" protested Davidson. "The plane is more important than the girl. We should be able to swing aboard it the first time it comes around again, for it appears that this girl had got aboard, and the three of us surely should be able to accomplish as much as a mere girl. Yet it is possible that the pig-serpent chap that we captured never got himself free of his bonds, but this girl chanced along while we were off hunting and found him tied to the plane and freed him, and she has been aboard the plane ever since he was shot and fell off."

"My God! She'll be dead of thirst!" cried Bailee.

Hal-Al fairly roared. "We've got to stop that plane the next time it comes around and get the girl off, if it kills all of us!"

Bailee groaned and sat down. "She's dead by now! She's dead of thirst and tumbled over against the rail. It won't be a man she wants, but a few shovels of sod on her sweet face!"

"Hell!" groaned Hal-Al.

"I think she's alive and just boarded the plane up on the plateau," said Davidson. "I'm positive she's alive, for if she had been on the plane long enough to perish from thirst she would have tried the key-board before this and swung the plane off its circuit."

The two younger men were cheered at these words. "I've got my own opinion," said Hal-Al. "Only I don't know just what it is yet. Anyway, we've got to stop that plane the next time it comes around, if it staves in the ribs of all three of us. Remember, she's a girl if she is a vampire!"

The little corporal now thought of the binoculars, which had wholly escaped the minds of all three men in their excitement, and whipping them out directed them towards the plane. But Hal-Al seized them from his hands and studied the H-T. Then, without a word, he passed the glasses to Bailee and turned away to one of the radiocycles.

The latter studied the plane a few moments, then returned the binoculars to Davidson. "See what you can see, corporal. She may be but sleeping!"

The older man studied the motionless human form, partly visible on the left side of the H-T, slightly forward from the center. There seemed more of death than sleep about the girlish figure. He reflected now that this was the first time that he had been able to see the plane from its left, as always before he had been within the circle swung by the hydro-terra and consequently had viewed it from its right.

HE returned the glasses to his pocket. "We'll stop the plane the next time it makes the circuit. While there's doubt there's hope."

Bailee sighed. "If she's alive I'll kiss her! If she's dead I'll bury her!"

"I'll bury her myself!" growled Hal-Al. "She's mine: I killed her!" The others thought the situation had momentarily upset his reason, but he continued. "She was in the plane with that pig-headed fellow who escaped us, and I didn't know it, and my shot clipped him and got her. Else she would have fooled with the key-board before this."

"You're a fool!" said Bailee softly. "She just jumped the plane up there on the level a few minutes ago, where it hit the grass and brush and slowed up a bit. She's resting after her jump."

"You lie!" retorted Hal-Al. "And I don't need your lie! I can lie better myself! Remember I killed her and she's mine!"

"You can have her," replied Bailee. "If she's dead."

"She's mine!" repeated Hal-Al solemnly. "I'll call her Nina and bury her under the bright grass."

They pressed on and once the others heard Hal-Al groan to himself: "God Almighty, I've killed a girl!"

Davidson feared he had, and her dead body had been borne aloft through the heavens for many, many hours, with no winged creatures to attack or destroy it. But if Hal-Al had killed this girl at the time of shooting at the pig-serpent headed fellow he had done so wholly unintentionally and perhaps she had died instantly. There had been neither suffering nor guilt.

Davidson considered the uniqueness of the situation. This dead girl of a race that perhaps had never learned to ascend even a moment into the air—that perhaps had never seen a flying creature—now circling about through the heavens hour after hour in the bright sunlight!

They recalled where they had first seen the plane appear and, reaching the plateau, continued in that direction. The little corporal advised his companions to advance cautiously as the presence

middle, and you, corporal, will be the tight little knot at the end of this long string of hope."

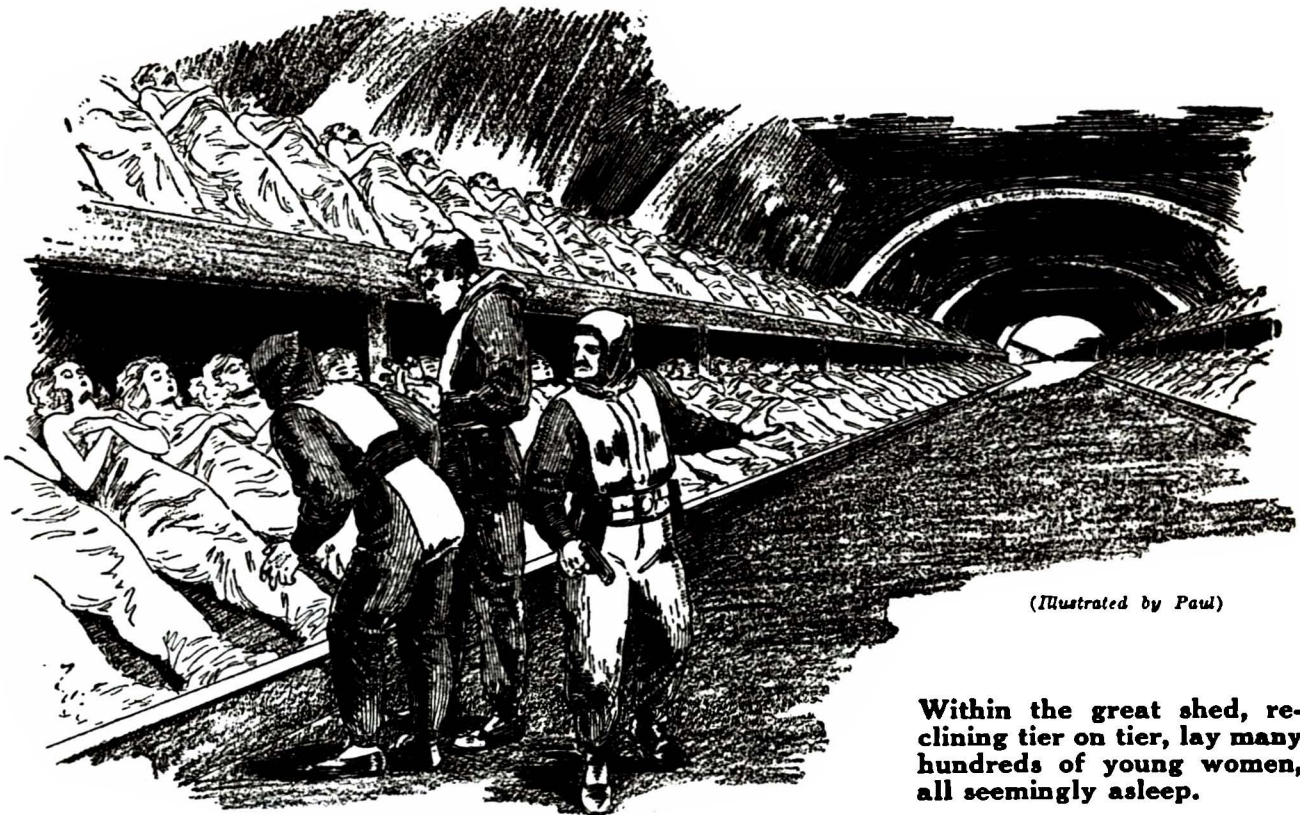
"You will—last Thursday!" retorted Hal-Al. "I'm the one who will go ahead! Didn't I shoot the girl, and shouldn't I see her first, to apologize?"

"You won't make love to her till she has a look at me?" demanded Bailee.

Hal-Al agreed and they shook hands on the agreement, when Bailee grinned. "Maybe the corporal wants to be first."

Davidson smiled and consented to give way to the others and be the last man to attempt to board the plane, on condition that he should retain the binoculars, and that they wouldn't fight over the girl, if she was alive, nor make love to her until she had seen him also.

"That's fair enough!" nodded Hal-Al. "We'll



(Illustrated by Paul)

Within the great shed, reclining tier on tier, lay many hundreds of young women, all seemingly asleep.

of the girl on the plane might signify that there were other such girls on the plateau seeking to accomplish the same daring act of boarding the H-T, if such had been the case with the girl aboard.

"Look here, corporal," suggested Hal-Al, turning to the latter. "We'd better string out in a line, one about two or three miles ahead, one half way between, and one here. In this way we'll have three chances of boarding the plane, to only one chance if we stay together. For she mayn't take the ground where we happen to be bunched, but some distance ahead or behind. The two men ahead can each have a radiocycle and speed back to the end man and join him, if there's nothing doing ahead."

Bailee grinned. "That suggestion is better than the suggestor. I'll go on ahead, with Hal in the

leave it to the girl."

"It's all luck with women, anyway," said Bailee. "But I'm a damn lucky fellow!"

A Dangerous Chance

AS it would be about twenty hours before the plane could reappear, they decided to look the plateau over. They found it to be about five miles square, with few trees, and those rather low and of such fragile texture that they scarcely bore climbing. The whole surface of the plateau was covered with a high scarlet grass, as soft and smooth as fine fur, and for the first time they were positive that the vegetation of the planet, or at least that hemisphere, was kept alive and fresh not by rain but by a slight and continual dew.

"No clouds, no birds, no airships!" considered Davidson. "Nothing to look upwards to but the sun, and that perhaps almost invisible to this strange race because it sheds darkness to them instead of light or is too bright for them to look upward at. If we can but recover the plane we probably will be able to pass over the most populous centers and no eye be lifted to observe us."

Hal-Al carefully put out his pipe to save the unconsumed tobacco, then after setting the alarm on his wrist watch so that the alarm needles would jab his wrist in three hours and awake him, he stretched himself on the grass beside his radiocycle. "I'll snooze a bit," he said. "Then take my position at the further end of the plateau."

"I'll beat you to snooze junction," grinned Bailee, making himself ready for a nap. "Sleep is a waste of time, but what do I care for time where there is no girl to make love to, or music to hear!"

Davidson privately slipped Hal-Al the binoculars before the latter fell asleep, advising him to say nothing of the matter to Bailee as it might lead to friction. Since Hal-Al would have the first hazard at boarding the plane it was Davidson's opinion that he should have every aid to make that hazard a success.

The little corporal remained awake while the others slept, and passed the time in looking over the radiocycles to be assured that they were in perfect order. On them they were chiefly dependent for pursuit of the plane, and on the plane dependent for their greater liberty and perhaps their lives, as only in the air would they be reasonably free of the gliding spheres with their dangerous rays.

Hal-Al awoke from the jab of the alarm needles of his wristwatch and rode away while Bailee was still snoring, but the latter awoke shortly with a grunt as the alarm needles jabbed his own wrist, and rode off on the other radiocycle to position himself half across the plateau. Davidson remained where they had stocked their small supply of dried game. Though he had good eyesight he would not be able to see the plane approaching at any considerable distance, unless it approached well above the grass, in which case it would be very difficult to board. He had one trick up his sleeve which he had not discovered to his companions, and he believed it might yet prove the winning ace.

For several years he had worn a Whing belt, which consisted of ten meters of specially braided and treated silk cable one-eighth inch thick, the whole coiled within a pliable silk envelope or tubing and worn as a belt to support the trousers. This cord was of extraordinary strength and, being extremely flexible and little inclined to snarling, had got many a man out of a tight situation. He had retained the cord—being lighter than his companions and more agile in mounting such a medium—and now drawing it from its tubing he selected a suitable stone, and, tying it to one end of the cord, made a loop at the other end for his hand. Then he practiced at swinging the cord over his head and casting it about the trunk of a small tree.

Should the plane pass within seven meters over-

head he would have three meters of the silken cable to wrap around some stay or rail on the machine, and seven meters to reach him below and supply the medium by which to ascend to the moving plane. By placing himself in the path of the approaching hydra-terra, with the cord swinging over his head, with a little good fortune he believed he should be able to wind the weighted end of the cable about some part of the plane, and haul himself aboard.

THIS attempt might prove hazardous on his part, but not excessively so, as for a long time the plane had been maintaining the moderate speed of fifteen miles an hour, and could reasonably be depended upon not to exceed that rate. While if he found his task beyond him, he could slide to the end of the cord and drop off.

Suddenly he saw the H-T approaching at quite a distance. He judged it was flying at a height of not over five meters, and shortly he made out Bailee and Hal-Al racing beneath it on their radiocycles. He could see that neither would be able to clamber aboard, even by one standing on the other's shoulders on a moving radiocycle. Then the shrill of their horns reached his ears, followed by their own yells of excitement, or rage, at their helplessness.

The little corporal observed the plane pass just over a small tree, then above another tree some distance forward, and getting the line of its approach by these two objects, he took his position and began to swing the weighted cord about his head.

He wanted to shout to the others to keep clear of him, but he found his lungs fully engaged with his effort to keep the ten meters of cable swinging taut and high. He had knotted the lower end of the cord through the upper buttonhole of his coat, which he believed would be a sufficient grip to hold the cord momentarily when he should let go and while the weighted end wound itself about some portion of the plane. Then, should he not be able to sprint forward quickly enough to escape the sudden tightening of the silken cable, only the buttonhole of his coat would be torn away and he would not be dragged forward too violently, or his limbs or neck be endangered, as would be the case if the cord was attached to his arm or body. Besides, this would avoid the risk of the cable being broken from the burden of his whole weight being suddenly thrown upon it.

The two men on the radiocycles approached directly ahead of the plane and did not swerve, but Davidson was waiting a little to one side and tilting the cable at the point of their approach, so avoided collision with them. The plane ran its nose straight across the upper four meters of the cord, as the latter came around its swing almost at right angles to the hydro-terra.

Instantly the little corporal spurted forward beneath the plane and seized hold of the cord that for a moment he had let go of, just as the pull came on the buttonhole of his coat. Almost consecutively, it seemed, he was hanging to the cable beneath the plane, borne along with his feet

scarcely clearing the grass. *His attempt to snare the hydro-terra had proved successful!*

Hal-Al now swept Davidson up on the handle bars of his radiocycle and bore him along while the latter got a secure hold on the cord by taking a turn around his arm. Directing the other to ride free of him and keep free, unless he should slide back again, the little corporal threw all his spirit into the instant business and fairly hurled himself up the length of silken cable overhead, seized the rail and swung aboard the plane.

A shout of delight rose from the two men beneath, and Davidson was about to join in their jubilation, when he gasped and half threw up his hands. He was aware for the first time that the aft deck of the plane was alive with girl vampires.

CHAPTER IX

A Struggle Against Women

THE little corporal counted seven harpies aboard the pilotless H-T.

"Throw out a couple!" he heard Bailee shout. "Have a heart!"

Then he heard Hal-Al's roar. "Slide one down on a rope! I'll ride under her!"

He sprang to the pilot keys and sought to control the power and make a landing, but there was no response. The plane kept steadily on as if running in a fixed groove, and as he struggled with the keys to persuade their obedience to the mechanical discipline which was expected of them, he was suddenly borne to the deck by the whole assembly of girls leaping upon him.

He shouldered and elbowed his way from the embraces of the harpies, and, getting to the rail, shouted the situation to his comrades. But the plane had already passed beyond the plateau and above a wood, and Hal-Al and Bailee had been compelled to turn aside on their radiocycles and were too distant to overhear him.

Hopping up and down and swinging his arms about to protect himself from another attack by the girls, cutting such a figure as a man seeking to avoid a chill on a very cold day, he again sought to control the plane. But evidently something was jammed in its mechanical solar plexus, for he was unsuccessful.

Again the seven harpies attacked him in a body and sought to sink their dainty teeth into his veins, and he was tempted to blow the engine cold with his automatic and let the plane drop where it would. But he fought himself free and decided to consider the situation further before he should act too decisively.

When he should fail to return, even after several hours, he was confident that the others would not believe he had deserted them. They would conclude that he couldn't get the plane under control and so they would be waiting for its return on its accustomed circuit.

During the next five hours he divided his attention between the girls and the pilot keys. He succeeded in keeping the harpies off by dancing about and swinging his arms, and yelling at them,

and by every method short of striking them. For it was a masculine impossibility for the little corporal to strike these lovely images of the human form.

He studied the pilot keys without again touching them during these five hours, for he wished to learn the trouble without deviating the plane from its fixed circle of flight, which would bring it again above the plateau and the waiting men. The hydro-terra was flying over that sea by which he had first encamped when he at last found the difficulty. When Hal-Al had fired his automatic at their pig-serpent headed prisoner aboard the plane, the bullet had grazed a screw at the central point of contact beneath the pilot keys and the contact was broken.

He waited until the plane had come again over land, then got his contact by forcing back the screw. Keeping the same level and arc of flight, he speeded up. He shortly approached a plateau stretching before him on a level with the flight of the plane and thinking it likely that the girls had boarded the machine at this point, he slowed down and soon ran into a stretch of high, heavy grass that retarded the plane sufficiently to allow an active person to spring aboard with perfect safety.

IMMEDIATELY the girls began to jump from the plane, that was now running along the ground. Bringing it to a full stop he waited till all had abandoned him, then he decamped in haste. No doubt one of their gliding spheres was waiting them in the neighborhood—which was the reason they had quit him—and, if given the opportunity they would turn a paralyzant ray on his person.

Keeping the same arc of flight, but a higher level, he raced swiftly through the air and was soon over the plateau where he had boarded the plane some hours before. He turned the siren loose and shortly got an answering call of a radiocycle horn, and landing, was joined by his two companions.

He acquainted them with his adventure exactly as it had transpired. They searched the plane, even looking into the bolted supply chests, hoping that one girl had remained behind. But the harpies had come like a flock of birds and gone like a flock of birds, and the only consolation to be had by the two younger men was there were more of such girls not far away.

"I attempted to kiss one of them for both of you," smiled Davidson. "But she nearly bit a piece out of my neck."

Bailee grinned. "We'll have trouble robbing these bees of their honey! Yet there are as stinging women on the earth, if you but be too hasty about grabbing a kiss."

"And some that will drain you emptier of hope than these drain you of blood!" growled Hal-Al. "But I'm glad that girl we first saw was only playing possum or had fainted and was not dead! I'd hate to think to have it on my memory I'd killed a girl, even if she wasn't quite human!"

They put the two radiocycles and their small stock of dried game aboard the plane, then re-

crossed the valley over which they had lately come afoot, and after gathering a quantity of fruits and filling their drinking water tank, rose to about two hundred meters, and continued their flight. They proposed to come into a more populous region—if such was to be found—then conceal the plane to save fuel and as a powerful weapon to fall back upon. From here they would reconnoiter on foot and endeavor to get into some mental contact with the inhabitants, to learn news of the lost planet-plane. Or else satisfy themselves that they were permanently up against an entirely hopeless situation as far as returning to the earth was concerned.

"If we can't get back to Omaha, we'll build another Omaha here!" grinned Bailee.

"Another Chicago!" growled Hal-Al.

"We'll do what we can do," nodded Davidson. "Being but three men against an entire race we will more likely be crushed completely than run these myriads through our stamp and put our values on them. However, it will be a glorious enterprise to match our wits against these inhabitants and endeavor not only to obtain a secure living here but to fill this great scarlet planet with the language and laws of the old green earth."

"We are three Columbuses," said Hal-Al. "We discovered this planet, and to the discoverer belongs the natives discovered, if he can discover some way to make them believe it."

The younger men began to banter one another and the little corporal sped up the plane. He thought it best to get well away from that locality where both of his companions had been sorely tempted by the lovely harpies, and where their party might already be under general evil repute for having attacked three spheres. Besides, they would more likely hear rumors of the planet-plane many thousands of miles away than at this point, for if the man Jaquet had stolen the great planet-plane, no doubt he had removed it to some distant region in fear of pursuit.

At the Center!

AFTER several hours of continued flight they came all of a sudden into sharp cold. This cold grew so intense as they proceeded that soon they were compelled to resort to the store-chests aboard and each don a thermo-suit, to keep from actually freezing. Beneath them lay a desert—vast, level, without verdure of any sort, and no visible moving object, or even a stationary one. It was as near to nothingness as they had ever met without outside of celestial spaces.

"I feel like a gimlet boring a hole through a vacuum!" growled Hal-Al, after an hour of this monotonous flight.

"Oh for a land of girlization again!" groaned Bailee. "Even a country of bald-headed girls would be welcomer than this blankety blank."

Davidson gave a grunt of relief as he now distinguished a faint break on the horizon. "We'll head that way: it may prove more interesting than our own society."

They had proceeded about fifteen minutes when

they came on an infinity of buildings stretching before them. There is perhaps nothing that beggars words or passes description, though such expressions are often used for the sake of emphasis, for a good imagination with a fluency of words can leave the most marvelous facts far behind, and often does. But the little corporal felt that he did not possess the craft of words to sum up in a few clean strokes the motionless sea of level-roofed buildings over which they had come. Below were millions of long high sheds, all of some stone-like and evidently imperishable substance, ranged side by side and end to end, as if a population far exceeding the earth's population had erected, through long centuries, habitations or storehouses, or both.

"I'll wager a horse-chestnut to a chestnut horse," said Bailee, "that here's where this foxy race has laid up supplies to live on and never work any more at all. This cold desert is just one great ice box, and here's where they come for their supplies when they're all eaten out in their pink and purple marbles, not to mention their dirty little drab ones."

Below them were innumerable spheres, gliding in and out the massive sheds, and lending a certain support to Bailee's suggestion.

"Perhaps!" nodded Hal-Al. "Or perhaps they come here to sleep for a month or two at a time during their long night, and some are just turning it and some turning out, for it's night to them now."

"We had better keep on," advised Davidson. "The chances are we will have as far to go as we have come, to get out of this desert."

"Let's take a vote on landing," grinned Bailee. "Perhaps we can wake some sleeping beauty."

"I vote to land immediately," said Hal-Al.

"Is there any word more of the immediate than immediately?" demanded Bailee.

"Instantaneously," suggested Hal-Al. "Instantaneously is picking his teeth while immediately is only saying grace."

"Then I instantaneously vote to land instantaneously," said Bailee.

"Two to one carries," yielded Davidson. "Yet I vote against landing, as we may be captured and stripped, and we would perish very quickly in this intense cold without our thermo-suits."

"That's reasonable enough," granted Bailee. "But I'm not reasonable just now. Watch for a landing where there are no big marbles about and I'll drop off alone, and if I get stripped and frozen it will be the best and the worst left."

"I'll trust you to freeze among a bunch of girls," growled Hal-Al.

They made a landing in short order where there were no spheres visible within a radius of a mile, and Davidson joined his two companions on the ground. He had decided they would be stronger together than divided, and, besides, he was possessed with a great curiosity as to the nature of the countless buildings. Had they come upon the habitations of this entire race, confined to one vast district, with the remainder of the planet barren of dwellings? Or were these build-

ings the storehouses of the inhabitants, who had put aside sufficient food and materials of all kind to supply their needs for ages, and were now engaged wholly in gliding about in their spheres and enjoying themselves without labor, like the wealthy in the old times on the earth? The little corporal considered his last guess as the most reasonable of the two, since this pleasure-loving race would scarcely have built its universal city in a wilderness of cold. Yet such was just the place for storehouses for the preservation of food and staples.

They stole along to the end walls of one of the great sheds, and came to a high, wide entrance through which the largest sphere they had yet seen could have freely passed, and which allowed a full view within. Then the three men clutched at one another in astonishment.

CHAPTER X

The Eternal Tomb

WITHIN the great shed, reclining tier on tier—each tier sloping towards the broad center aisle, lay many hundreds of young women, all facing outwardly and all seemingly asleep.

"Oh the beauties!" panted Hal-Al. "I'll take that little one yonder by the bigger one, one—two—three—four, down the line on the second balcony. No, I'll take the third beyond her! No, I'll—"

"I'll take the rest!" panted Bailee. He tore his eyes from the scene and glanced over his shoulder for a clear right of way. "Let's grab two apiece and make for the plane. We can come back for more later."

Then Davidson knew that something was wrong. This perfect silence was not sleep. He laid a firm hand on a shoulder of each of his companions. "Come away!" he commanded. "This is a vast tomb!"

But he could not get the two younger men back to the plane until they had wandered an hour through the scores of tombs and found no living girl. Then they got aboard and rose.

"Oh, you sweet, dead girls!" groaned Bailee. "You are no use any more but for tears!"

"All petrified to pure crystal," mused Davidson. "And they may have lain in this still, clear cold for ten thousand years. This is the universal cemetery of this planet, perhaps for ages."

"Forget 'em!" snarled Hal-Al. "There are no kisses in a petrified girl!"

They sped on over the unbelievable vast city of the dead, where perhaps was every inhabitant that had died on the planet in centuries. Tiered millions on millions, all imperishably petrified by some natural waters or alchemy of science, and changed to crystal in the glowing colors and beauty of life and youth.

"And all girls!" said Hal-Al. "Where are their dead women and dead men?"

"That question came to me," observed Davidson. "But we entered only a few of their tombs among all this endless number, and we may have chanced on a section given over to young women

exclusively. Yet I fear this strange scarlet planet! None may be allowed to grow old here, but all are destroyed in the glow of youth, or destroy themselves."

"They're a strange, mad people!" exclaimed Bailee. "But I forgive them for their handsome girls."

"Handsome girls and pig-serpent headed men—I wonder which have the brains that run the government," considered Hal-Al.

"None of these," declared the little corporal. "Unless they have become as insects and do not require superior mentalities, but carry out a certain level routine of conduct and government from which none have the courage of originality to deviate. However, we have seen so little of the planet this is like judging a man by a half hour's acquaintance, or a lifetime by a few minutes."

"The best way to judge a race is by its girls," grinned Bailee. "You can't make a silk race out of sow girls, but give me silk girls and I'll gamble on the race."

"Give me nothing!" growled Hal-Al. "I'll go get them, if there are any silk girls around."

"Help yourself," replied Bailee. "There are millions of silken girls below yonder, but you'll never hear the rustle of any of that fine silk again. It's all rolled back on the cold, hard bolt of death and no man's hand will ever unroll five feet four of the precious stuff."

"Shut your mouth!" growled Hal-Al. "You make my liver sour."

"**I**T'S the same on the old earth," continued Bailee. "Only the dead girls there are all bolted under the green sod. 'Tis a cleaner burial they have on this scarlet planet, but a sadder one, for it lingers, it lingers. They are carrying too much tail light here and shining backwards over the way they have come. Give me a big bright head-light, without any dimmer, shining up the future, and the past all smothered in the blue smother of forgetfulness; without a single tail light for sorrow, walking among her memories, to see what is no more!"

In time they left the final tomb behind them and seemed again to hang for hours in a void, for below them were no visible objects to break the level floor of the wilderness and mark their progress. But at last they came over a rough, broken land, where they found it sufficiently warm to remove their thermo-suits, then above scanty grasses, that thickened slowly but steadily. Then rising, they passed over a high range of mountains that sparkled with innumerable pools, clear as dew. Suddenly a shout burst from their throats, for they had come above what seemed a veritable paradise.

"We've broke through the big, pearly gates!" exclaimed Bailee. "Hide yourself, Hal, or St. Peter will see you and call out the fumigation brigade."

The two younger men began a tussle which lasted while Davidson docked the plane at the margin of the lake that sparkled like a great jewel set in the wonderful panorama before them.

"We'll have to use caution here," advised the little corporal. "This is no fortuitous combination

of charming natural landscapes, but evidently a great park planned by minds perhaps superior to our own. There must be guards everywhere to protect the locality from intruders and vandals, unless this race has reached that high artistic level where beauty is its own security."

"I feel like I was treading on a painting of heaven in a golden frame," grinned Bailee. "Now if we can but come on a troupe of handsome girls laughing beside the sparkling waters, what a masterpiece it will be."

"I feel like a torch procession about to begin!" nodded Hal-Al. "Let's have a swim first and soak all the alkali out of our livers."

The younger men stripped like two schoolboys racing to be first into a pool, and Davidson dumped their clothing into the plane and waited about with his automatic handy.

"Throw off your shirt!" tempted Bailee, on coming to the surface and blowing the water from his mouth. "If any girls arrive, you can duck while I fetch your clothes."

Davidson laughed, and now throwing off discretion with his clothing sprang into the water, and soon was in a royal fight with the other men. He found the water very clear but a trifle heavy and with a slightly mineral-bitter though not unpleasing taste. They had passed about ten minutes buffeting one another about and testing their wind by remaining for sometime under the surface of the lake, when Hal-Al suddenly checked his companions and pointed down the shore.

An Unhuman Custom

THEY ducked to their chins and stared. Approaching the water's edge was a slender handsome girl, attired in a sheer floating gossamer veil of faint heliotrope. Hal-Al reached forth two strong hands and dragged Bailee's and Davidson's heads under the surface of the water, and the men had some difficulty in releasing themselves.

"You'll pay for that fraction of a second that I lost!" threatened Bailee. "Shut up now like a man: would you frighten her away?"

The girl advanced to the edge of the water, and folding her hands before her eyes hesitated a moment, then stepped into the lake and kept on as along a path till she disappeared from view beneath the water.

"Like a mermaid," considered Hal-Al. "Watch where she comes up and we'll surround and take her. And you, corporal, shall be the minister and Bailee the best man."

They waited but the girl did not reappear in sight. "Look lively there!" exclaimed Hal-Al. "She'll give us the slip yet."

Bailee pawed the water with impatience. "Let's swim out! She may be in a dream and be drowned before she knows it."

"She evidently knows what she's about," said Davidson, but he was as uneasy as the others, and when they suddenly broke the thin tense leash of hesitation and clove forwards through the water he followed, and soon led, being the faster swimmer. But they did not come on the girl,

though they circled about the locality for fully fifteen minutes.

Bailee groaned. "It's like hunting for a lost pearl in the ocean!"

"I'm going out again," said Hal-Al, when the men had rested a few minutes ashore and thrashed the chill off one another, for the water had taken on a peculiar coldness after they had been in it a little while. "If I get the cramps, pick me up with the plane."

"Let me drown if I don't find her!" sighed Bailee. "Maybe my ghost will walk under the waters with her pretty shape. Oh, man, they're sweet while they're here, and sweeter when they're gone!"

"Get in the plane," directed Davidson. "We'll go out further and hunt. We should have used the plane before, but who would have thought she could vanish like a bubble."

They sprang aboard the H-T and, going out a little under the water, while Davidson rose and scanned the neighboring surface of the lake. But there was no sign of the girl anywhere visible to him.

"Scarcely a suicide," he considered. "She did not appear sufficiently distracted. Yet she seemed to hesitate."

He saw Hal-Al rise and wave one arm towards him, then he caught his hello and dropped the hydro-terra to his side.

"Throw me a rope!"

Davidson obeyed, whereupon Hal-Al dived, fastened the rope to some object below and came up with the rope's end between his teeth. He clambered aboard and began to pull in the rope. Davidson glimpsed the object attached to the rope before it came to the surface of the water.

"A girl!"

Together they lifted the slender form into the plane, then Hal-Al stood up, six feet-two of dripping, naked manhood, and cursed the scarlet planet. Water of it, land of it, law of it, and god of it. Then Bailee came aboard and joined him, and in his heart the little corporal cursed the custom of the land which had brought this girl to her death, and vowed he would smash the head of that custom, if he could find it, to smash. But more likely, he reflected, he would not even find the tail of it to scotch.

"I counted seven of them in one dive to the bottom!" raged Bailee. "But the smallest of them was too heavy on my heart to bring up. Oh, the sweet dead girls!"

"Let her back into the water," commanded Davidson. "Some day they will come for her and take her to her place in one of those cold tombs in the desert."

Hal-Al slipped the rope from the lovely petrified crystal form that lay on the deck. "She's mine!" he said soberly. Then he bent over and kissed the cold rosebud mouth, and, arising, knocked Bailee from his feet before the latter could kiss the same red mouth. In another moment he had slid the imperishable form of loveliness back into the concealing waters.

THE two younger men faced one another with heaving chests, then Bailee put out his hand and Hal-Al shook it and the matter was closed.

"There will be little use searching further to recover this girl we saw enter the lake," said Davidson. "She came here to die, and by now is drowned. Perhaps the whole race religiously dies after this manner at a certain age, in health and youth and beauty."

"What a waste of perfectly good girls!" groaned Bailee. "I'll hang around the shore and shoo them away from the water, and keep five or six for my pains, like pretty kittens."

"I'll do the same," growled Hal-Al. "And I'll do it now."

"I doubt if it will do any good," said Davidson. "They are probably as deeply ingrained in this belief as we are in the opposite, and time and custom adjusts us to all persuasions. Perhaps they would be as deeply shamed not to drown themselves at an appointed time and be petrified by the water as we would be to outrage our highest principles of honor. We would but save them from drowning to make them miserable old women, outcasts among their race and apostates to their faith."

"It mayn't do them any good," said Bailee. "But it will do me a lot of good to take a whack at this fool custom. Why, man, there was ten years of youth and beauty and laughter left in that young girl who just drowned herself. This is a personal matter with me and not philosophy, and personality is the only philosophy worth a dinker's ham!"

"Let me get one shot at the high priest of this faith, and there won't be any such animal!" growled Hal-Al.

"I'll help you salt his skin," nodded the little corporal. "However we have no more evidence than our own supposition that the inhabitants of this planet destroy themselves in their youth, except the fact that so far we have seen no old people, or people of middle age. Let us be assured that we are right in the facts, and that we have some happier system to offer them than we would destroy; then, if we can recover the planet plane, we'll look into this matter at once, and reach the head of it, if it has any head other than old custom handed down from generation to generation."

Bailee grinned. "The quickest way to change old brute customs is to knock their old brute customers on the head that encourage those customs. And I'm a P. O. E., or Professor of Expediousness!"

"We'll go ashore and save a girl or two while we discuss the impossibility of recovering the planet-plane," said Hal-Al.

They began hastily to dress, Davidson's blood boiling, in spite of his somewhat philosophical structure of mind, at his suspicions of the inhumanity of the laws or customs of the scarlet planet. Yet, as he admired the beauties of the great park, on the border of which he stood, he could not deny that though the ways of this race were terrible, as compared with the ways of the kindly earth, there was yet a clean brightness

about those ways as about fire itself. Here were waters changing youth into crystal, incorruptible death, before age deformed it with ugliness, weariness and pain.

Here life was a short chain of perfect pearls and not a long, thinning chain of dull glass with a few imperfect jewels to relieve its dragging length. Here the play was all poetry and soon over, but what a play! Wherein the lovely chorus drank warm blood instead of cold wine. Here beauty was first and safety perhaps not at all. Here they glided about in their spherical coaches and sported by the crystal streams, taking no thought of the morrow, whose true name is care, and paying for all with an early, self-inflicted death. Exquisitely bright but dreadfully swift passing!

The little corporal heartily wished himself many x-meters distant from this mysterious scarlet planet, for he and his companions were but as three moles who had tunneled upwards into fire, and would likely be consumed.

"We had best retreat from this lake," he advised. "We may save some girl from drowning herself, but we probably will pay for our gallantry with our lives, and she will drown herself later."

"Me retreat!" growled Hal-Al. "There's no such me!"

"But we can't remain here forever," protested Davidson. "No matter how many we turn back, there will be more follow. They are but moths flying into the flame, and will not thank us for snuffing out their flame."

Bailee grinned. "I'm something of a flame myself. Let them singe their wings in me. I propose we stick around here and mark off a space and save all the girls that approach in that space, and let the others go, for a man has to draw the line somewhere even with honor and girls."

"That's a good idea," nodded Hal-Al. "Sometimes you do strike fire with that punk brain of yours."

DAVIDSON saw that he could not move them to depart and continue their search for the planet-plane. With the great plane again in his possession, he might return to the earth and fetch back a company of daring spirits, and stand some chance of reforming the scarlet planet. But without the plane, and with only two companions, he felt that he could accomplish but little, and that little would soon perish because of its very littleness. "We'll make the best of the situation," he yielded. "My heart is with you, but my head is with the planet-plane."

Bailee grinned. "Then that's settled—till somebody starts a fight. Now we'll draw straws to decide who'll make love to the first girl we save."

Hal-Al arranged three pieces of scarlet grass. "The longest straw wins."

Bailee drew without hesitation, then Davidson drew; then each exposed his hand. The little corporal had drawn the longest blade of grass. The others groaned, but immediately congratulated him.

They prepared a substantial meal and ate it,

then, lighting their pipes, sat about and waited for the first girl to appear. Bailee offered to introduce Davidson to three of the finest girls in Omaha, and give him a small submarine fishing boat which he owned, for all the latter's rights and claims to the first girl who should approach the lake to drown herself. Hal-Al met this offer with certain inducements of his own. The little corporal laughed and told them that the girl could choose for herself, if she chose at all, and if either of them took any unfair advantage of her he would shoot him on the spot.

"That's all right," nodded Hal-Al. "I would do the same favor for you. But all I want is to start even with you two, and no handicap, and if she's a girl I'll win her fair in three days, and if she's a woman I'll win her in one day."

"We'll save the girl first," replied Davidson. "Then, recollect, the days here are several months long."

"And the nights as long," grinned Bailee. "Oh, man, what a night to make love in, if they but have a moon and music on the waters!"

Davidson laughed. "That may prove more prophecy than jest!" Then simultaneously their hands leapt to their automatics, but they did not draw them.

CHAPTER XI.

Mutiny

TOWARDS the tree men glided a large serpent with a woman's head, the whole body scaled with opalescent gold and purple. The face had the large eyes and rosebud mouth of the girl harpies, but the hair about it was not long and wavy but short and curling, and shone like a silken aurora about the head.

"Oh the beauty!" panted Hal-Al.

She coiled and rose to the height of a woman and expanded with light like a jewel, and they saw that she had the full white bosoms of a woman. Then the air about them became fragrant as if a bowl of exquisite perfume had been spilled beneath their nostrils.

"Quick!" commanded Davidson. "Get into the plane!" But he had to force his companions back under the rail where they were seated. Then Bailee broke away and sought to clamber beneath the rail, but the little corporal sent him reeling with a blow across the chest, and leaping to the pilot-keys shot the plane off like a rocket.

"Hell!" snarled Hal-Al. "Can't you let a man look?"

"No, that's not for a man to look at twice!"

Hal-Al became ugly and Davidson shot low over the lake, in case he should be attacked and knocked from the plane, for there was a dangerous light in the deep-set eyes of the younger man. It may have been the lovely tempting face that had got the latter, or it may have been the exquisite, maddening perfume. But whichever it was that had momentarily crazed his friend, the little corporal had no wish to consider. He proposed to get away with the two fine young fellows, alive and undamned.

Then Bailee arose and passed his opinion on the older man in words of one syllable but seven dimensions, but the little corporal laughed at them both and called them yellow, and demanded what they were going to do about it, for he had drawn the long blade of grass and the serpent girl was his to pursue or leave alone.

Hal-Al was the first to see white again and apologize, then Bailee apologized. But both maintained that Davidson had no right to take them away from the shore of the lake, and demanded he return immediately to the locality they had left.

"Besides," said Bailee, recalling more particularly the terms of their agreement, "our bargain was about some girl we should save from drowning, and this serpent was scarcely a girl, and we didn't save her either. You've stepped over your contract and are standing on pure gall!"

"I retract my apology," growled Hal-Al. "Bailee is right about this not being in our bargain."

The little corporal promptly swiveled the cyclo-gun on them and replied that he would be damned if he would land the plane till they had passed over the dangerous park below them, and at the first move on their part to capture the plane he would blow them to hell, and a cleaner hell than they were just leaving.

Bailee grinned. "Well, have it your own way, corporal, but don't mistake force for right, unless you wish to establish a precedent and have us later apply that precedent to you."

"To the devil with precedent!" roared Hal-Al. "It isn't the gun that makes me hesitate to take the plane. It's because I don't want a man to have my blood on his hands, when he comes to his senses again!"

BUT Davidson had the courage of his convictions and held the younger men at bay while he let the plane out to its full limit of speed. It was a half hour before Hal-Al and Bailee recalled that there wasn't a single shot left in the gun, whereupon they called Davidson's bluff. He laughed at them and told them to go ahead and take the plane and land and he would drop off with his share of baggage and go one alone, while they could return in the plane, and no doubt the serpent woman would be waiting for them, to sting them to death, or worse.

"I'll be damned if I will!" grumbled Hal-Al. "You've been a good scout and I'll see you safe back to the planet-plane, and headed for the earth before I leave you. Then I'll leave you damn sweet and quick!"

The little corporal merely smiled, for they had passed over the great park, which was about two hundred miles across, and come above a less attractive and, so he believed, a less dangerous country. Here he landed the plane beside a stream and, procuring some ammunition from one of the supply chests aboard, loaded the cyclo gun, which he had neglected to reload after their fight with the three spheres. The two younger men leaped from the plane to finish a good-natured bout they had started aboard, and having given one another bloody noses drew off to the stream to wash away

the blood. They had no sooner done so than both began to dance and throw themselves about and yell, as if they were crazed. Their antics were so ridiculous that Davidson, thinking them in jest, could not restrain a laugh. But he quickly realized that it was no laughing matter, and believing their strange actions due to the water they had drank, called to them to thrust their fingers down their throats and try to eject the water from their stomachs. Then he advanced towards them, when suddenly his whole body was filled with a million stinging, hair-like pains, that caused him also to leap about and yell with anguish and anger.

"Get back to the plane!" he called to the others, with a contortion of his body between every word, with great effort they succeeded, and tumbling aboard. Pirouetting with pain to the pilot keys, Davidson managed to get his fingers down on the board and start the plane. The distress left them as quickly and mysteriously as it had come, and they searched for insects on their persons, or some visible cause of their pains.

They found no vermin and no rash on the skin, and concluded they had come into the field of a ray thrown by some concealed sphere, which possessed the power of transforming any living creature into the genus of stinging itch. Turning the plane about they returned directly above the spot where they had been so unpleasantly afflicted.

"I felt just like I was shot full of hot chopped hair!" growled Hal-Al. "These inhabitants are damned original, but damn their originality!"

"I've nothing to say!" commented Bailee. "I'm one of the great, sweet silences. But just let me get a pot shot at 'em!"

"There it is!" exclaimed Davidson, pointing to a sphere below not three hundred meters to the right. "We got stung with a ray from that!"

"Bow it up!" growled Hal-Al.

"Scrap it!" scowled Bailee, making a move towards the cyclo-gun.

But Davidson protested. "Hold on, it may be full of pretty girls!"

Bailee hesitated. "That's different! But how's a man going to make love to a girl inside a live porcupine?"

"This is a sting-ray of a planet!" exclaimed Hal-Al. "First, those bat girls, that bit a piece out of our wrists. Then those dead, crystalized girls, about as good as a stick of glass candy to a hungry man. Then a fancy snake girl that quits friendship at the neck. And now a bunch of girls inside a ball of red hot needles. This must be hell!"

Bailee grinned. "Fairer words were never spoken by falsier face! Let's keep going till we run into a new belt of girls, or run out of power."

"While there's distance there's hope!" said Davidson, turning the plane partly about and making away while the others were in the mod to proceed. "Who knows but we may run into a belt of easier girls within a few hours, for it is an old belief that hell is the gate of heaven and maybe we're about through the gate."

"That's right, corporal!" nodded Bailee. "Light

up that old cracked lantern of hope and we'll follow you on through the dark to the devil knows where. You're good at swinging that cracked old lantern of hope and crying, 'All aboard for a brighter land!' But I notice the further we go on your route the closer the tunnels run together and the bumpier the roadbed gets to be!"

"Shut up!" growled Hal-Al. "You ought to see what is at the end of the tunnels."

"What?"

"It's too bright to be seen."

"Is it a bonfire of discarded hopes?"

"No, its a girl! An insulated girl that won't shock your hopes every time you touch her."

"I'll bet she's all insulation and no voltage. Like an Egyptian mummy girl."

"Hang it!" protested the little corporal. "I didn't make this planet, and I'm trying to recover the planet-plane so that you can get back as quickly as possible to the soft, sweet girls of the earth."

A Strange Sight

BOTH younger men groaned in unison. "Soft and sweet!" sighed Bailee. "Listen to him! He knows how to juggle the old lantern of hope to keep a man moving through the bog. Well, we'll follow it a little longer, corporal, but if there isn't an insulated girl at the end of the next thousand miles, I'm going to slap spit on my palm and follow the spit instead of you."

"You'd better follow me," said Hal-Al. "I've got more than spit in my head."

"It won't get you any further," grinned Bailee. "And its not as visible and therefore not as subject to the evidence and the proof."

"Very well," agreed Davidson. "We'll make it a thousand miles, and then land and talk it over."

"We'll talk it over, provided you don't do any of the talking," said Bailee. "I mistake too much of your talking for my thinking."

They made a thousand miles by the speedometer and at that precise distance came on a rather astonishing sight. Within a walled inclosure of over two hundred meters square were forty-two spheres, each about four meters in diameter, and one immense sphere fully twelve meters through. The lesser spheres seemed to be engaged at an attempt to surround the larger sphere and bear it to the wall, while the latter sought to shoulder itself back to the center of the field and hold that position.

Again and again the lesser spheres would mass and hurl themselves against the great sphere, but the latter would evade them with extreme adroitness, or meet their mass and hurl them back like so many giant footballs. They could hear the ring of sphere meeting sphere, like great clapperless bells, but no sphere appeared to be cracked or injured by the clashings, and from their experience inside the sphere of the seven harpies the three men were reasonably confident that the passengers below scarcely felt the shock of contact.

"They're trying to scrap the big marble," suggested Bailee.

"More like a friendly joust," affirmed David-

son. "Or perhaps some try-out with a new invention."

"If we could get hold of the big marble," meditated Hal-Al, "we could go gliding through the land like a trillionaire, and kiss all the pretty girls from here to sunset."

"And sunset weeks away!" grinned Bailee. "Let's capture it!"

Hal-Al shook his head. "There are two good reasons against it. First, it's against the law, and, second, it's not possible."

The giant sphere had shouldered its way to the center of the walled field and now held that center for some minutes, in spite of the combined attack of the forty-two lesser spheres. This seemed to decide or conclude the game or battle, for the lesser spheres ceased their attack and ranged themselves six deep before the giant sphere. Immediately the door of the latter was thrown open and a magnificent pig-serpent headed giant nearly four meters in height strode forth and began what evidently was an oration of some sort for the benefit of the audience assembled before him.

Throwing on the multiplex vibrator the three men hung silently in the air above this scene, impressed by the splendid figure of the giant, his dignified deportment, and the roll of his mighty voice that plainly reached them. Davidson would have given all his Greek to have understood a few words of what was being said.

"He's an inventor and these others are the board of directors to some sphere trust," suggested Bailee. "He's explaining a new patent push-ball mechanism."

"Be quiet!" commanded Hal-Al. "Shall the jackal yelp while the lion is roaring?"

"Then why do you yelp when I speak?" grinned Bailee.

They Attack!

THE giant now ceased his oration, if such it was, and folding his arms seemed to await either the result of his eloquence or a challenge from the spheres before him. In another moment the two younger men were raging with envy, and even the little corporal felt a touch of that consuming fever, for the doors to several of the lesser spheres were thrown open, and from each sphere came one or two, and in a single instance, three, of those lovely great-eyed girls that they had previously met, and these girls now made their way across the open space before the giant and entered his huge sphere.

"Sweethearts!" raged Bailee. "Nine of them! The son of a Chautauqua!"

"Ten!" snarled Hal-Al, as a tenth girl hurried forward and entered the great sphere.

"Eleven!" groaned Bailee, as the giant's eloquence was rewarded by one more proselyte.

"Twelve!" roared Hal-Al. "Here's where I get out and get in!"

"Hold on!" advised Davidson. "He may be a religious disciple, persuading these girls to some higher life."

"And him the higher life!" exclaimed Bailee. "I've run across a lot of those self-appointed higher lifes!"

"I'm a little of the higher life myself!" rumbled Hal-Al.

Bailee's hand slipped to his automatic.

"Twelve for that big talk!" he muttered. "I ought to get three at least for the small, sweet talk I can put up."

"I've ten tongues on my hands!" raged Hal-Al. "And I'd talk business with every one of them, if I could get that big lad alone about ten minutes."

"He could crack our three heads together with one hand," smiled Davidson. "Beside, we know nothing of his purpose. These may be runaway girls that he is seeking to persuade to return home."

"He's an old mormon!" growled Hal-Al. "And I'll not throw any purple, poetic mantle over his bloated shoulders, but I'll strip him of his yellow goat's hide! Here's where I land and get me a pass to the big show."

"Counting twelve for him, should allow eight for me and four for Hal," said Bailee. "Drop us by the gate, corporal, and we'll go inside and make a little speech ourselves on the higher life. It's evident that these are free, roaming girls looking for husbands, and this is the corral where the males round them up and put their brand on their sweet red lips."

"Not while I have charge of this plane," replied the little corporal. "You'd never come from that field alive."

"You won't?" demanded Bailee.

"You won't?" demanded Hal-Al.

"I won't!" affirmed Davidson.

The two younger men advanced upon the little corporal, whereupon he drew his Metzger and fired. For a moment he believed that he had fixed them both so that they would almost immediately fall asleep, but they merely laughed and rushed him. Then Hal-Al held Davidson while Bailee landed the plane just outside the walled field.

In another minute the two young fellows had abandoned the plane and were hurrying away towards the gate of the field. The little corporal had been no physical match for Hal-Al, and he now examined the Metzger and found it had been tampered with and the cocaine charges withdrawn from the shells.

"Both madmen!" grunted Davidson. "I'll follow and drop them a ladder when they get enough of their own folly." He shot over the field, and from here he saw his companions approach the gate, kneel, and fire their Metzgers at the giant, who evidently was not satisfied with his success, for he had resumed his oration to the audience concealed in the forty-two spheres before him.

The giant started, hesitated a moment by reason of the slight stinging pain of the cocaine pellets entering his skin, then calmly resumed his oration. But drowsiness got him before he had proceeded far, then sleep overcame the big fellow and he sank down on the earth like a colossus gently lowered from its pedestal. Immediately Bailee

and Hal-Al raced across the intervening distance and dashed into the great sphere.

DAVIDSON had sought to reload his own Metzger from the store chests, that he might put his friends to sleep before they should be captured, but he had failed of success, as the two younger men had made a thorough job of the matter and concealed the entire supply of cocaine shells. Then the little corporal lay across the rail of the plane and roared with laughter, as the giant sphere began to rush about like a crazed thing, and pound itself against the wall of the field, and slam into the lesser spheres, and spin like a top. Evidently one or both men were at the pilot keys, attempting unsuccessfully to get the sphere out of the field.

Finally they pressed the right key and escaped from the walled inclosure, gliding across the country followed by the forty-two lesser spheres, like a great engine by a train of cars. Davidson immediately swooped down and bound the sleeping giant with all the rope he could spare, till the latter resembled a kind of human cocoon, then hoisted him aboard the scout-plane and followed the spheres.

The little corporal proposed to get his two friends back to the plane and return the great sphere to the sleeping giant beside him, who evidently was the rightful owner of that sphere. Perhaps he had come from some distant country with a fair offer to the girls, seeking to persuade them to accompany him back to his own land. Or had come as a missionary of that which considered itself a higher race, to win these marvelously lovely creatures from their too-animal trait of drinking blood, as in the old days, on the earth, the Spanish missionaries journeyed to the distant West to win the Indian from barbarism to Christianity.

If he had come purely as a male seeking his females, these females had gone to him freely, and the two young fellows had no right to cast the shadow of their violence across that free path. Besides, they were no match for so many, and it is folly to light a fire greater than one can extinguish.

Suddenly the giant sphere came to a stop, whereupon Davidson descended as low and near as he dared, for he had great respect for the paralyzant ray of these gliding balls. Then the door of the sphere was opened and out shot two figures, like two scarecrows suddenly animated with life. They ran, staggered, fell, rose again and half ran, half staggered on.

CHAPTER XII.

The Planet-Plane Again!

THE little corporal recognized Hal-Al and Bailee in these two sorry figures staggering below him, and giving them the siren signal to halt, dropped down beside them, intending to drag them aboard the plane like two spent swimmers. He counted on the swiftness and unexpectedness of his rescue to get him clear before the enemy had the wit to act. He left the plane engine running to carry him automatically from danger.

A black ray clipped half the plane and plunged it into total obscurity, just as he dragged Hal-Al aboard. But now, before he could reach Bailee, the latter was cut off from view. Davidson shouted for him to come closer, and fairly hanging to the plane by his toes, he swept the blackness before him and came into contact with the person of his friend.

He dragged himself back, and Bailee with him. He heard the man sink with a groan to the plane floor, then groping his way to the pilot-keys Davidson shot the plane into the air, just as all power went out of his lower limbs, where a paralyzant ray had clipped them.

But almost instantly he was himself again—having been carried clear of the rays—and arising from where he had keeled over he got to a supply chest and brought each man a sleeping capsule for they had lost so much blood he feared they might become crazed and attempt to spring overboard.

Before Bailee passed under the influence of the drug Davidson heard him rave: "There were forty of them, drinking me alive!"

Davidson continued to circle about the scene till the spheres below gave over search for the plane, and glided away in various directions. Then he followed the larger sphere, with a view of returning its owner. He didn't want the giant on the plane for girls, gold or glory. He wanted only those amenable to his reason or right hand, and he suspected the giant possessed more intelligence than himself, and was positive the fellow possessed far more physical strength. He measured him. He was eleven feet, two inches, and he estimated his weight to be around seven hundred pounds.

Evidently some one responsible, or attached to his prisoner, had taken over the larger sphere, for it was now directed towards the walled inclosure it had recently left, no doubt for the purpose of recovering the person of the giant.

Davidson saw his opportunity and, making a landing in the field well ahead of the sphere, unbound the giant, heaved him from the plane and arose before he could be attacked by a ray. The sphere came to where the giant lay and a troupe of lovely girl harpies came forth and bore him within. Then the great ball left the field and glided away, with the little corporal following overhead, hoping it would lead to some city, town or village.

Yet he doubted if there were any such, persuaded that the situation on the scarlet planet was somewhat similar to that which history recorded as prevailing on the earth about the year two thousand four hundred A.D., when the inhabitants of the earth had all become motor-minded and, abandoning their cities and homes, had taken to living a kind of super-nomadic life in their electro-motor cars.

Both Bailee and Hal-Al had been so heavily drained of blood by the forty harpies in the giant's sphere that they awakened from their drugged sleep with wandering minds, so Davidson abandoned his project of following the giant sphere and, landing by a little stream near a wood, let

the two men lay around on the grass in the sunshine. Here he procured fresh fruits and game and managed to get Hal-Al back to a condition in which he could be trusted to watch camp before Davidson fell asleep on his feet.

WHEN the little corporal awoke, Bailee too was rational again, but both of the younger men were very indifferent and slothful. He gave them a cursing that did him, if not his companions a world of good.

Hal-Al and Bailee slept most of the time for a week of bright, sunlight hours, then they began to swear and jest again, and Davidson gave them thirty-six hours to buck up and resume their journey.

Bailee acknowledged that he had been a little careless in rushing so many harpies in a body, but the next time he proposed to smear himself from head to heel with some bitter herb and they would attack Hal-Al and not him.

"I must have been talking aloud in my sleep," said Hal-Al. "For I thought of the same plan myself."

What could he do with a pair of merry dare-devils like these young fellows—plotting another attack on a honey-hive while they were yet pulling from their skins the stings received in a previous attack!

The little corporal laughed and let that part of his heart go which held any anger towards them. At least they had daring, if they had not any caution, and he must make the best of that daring and adroitly supply the caution himself. And perhaps, after all, daring is more noble than caution in youth.

"I believe I like you better for the damn fools you are by nature," he said, "that I could like you for the sensible fellows I would make you by example."

Bailee grinned. "A wise man never expects an Irish stew to be a *pate de foie gras*, but he eats the Irish stew and thanks his bilikin that it isn't a grass goulash. Let's put the clock ahead and eat again."

While the two other ate again, Davidson stripped and took a bath. He had just got back into his clothes when that occurred which set his heart pounding as if it would knock every rivet loose in his frame. He beheld the great Hersovitch-Chang planet-plane drifting towards him, in the bright still air.

The little corporal shouted for the others to get into the scout plane, and the moment they had clambered aboard in safety, he sprang over the rail and pressed the ascension key. The hydro-terra sped towards the planet-plane like a sparrow hawk after a great eagle, and shortly docked on the landing-deck of the super-plane.

Davidson felt like a wandering unbodied soul suddenly born again in a perfect body, with all its marvelous machinery to execute the desires of the heart.

"We are a trained army again, instead of three wandering space hoboos!" he congratulated his companions.

He now sought to open the door that led below, but it proved to be fastened from within.

"We must get inside quickly!" he exclaimed in alarm. "If Jaquet is inside and starts off without knowing we are up here, he may carry us beyond the atmosphere, and we will perish before we can fly the H-T."

"If he knows we're here he'll start off all the sooner," growled Hal-Al. "He's probably asleep and didn't see us dock. We had better take him by surprise. Give me a rope ladder and I'll try the torpedo door, and both of you get back into the H-T. There's no use of the three of us being killed by this crafty snake."

There was no time for argument, for the men realized they were in a very precarious situation. Davidson fetched a rope ladder from the H-T, and Hal-Al hurried off towards the stern of the planet-plane, proposing to swing the ladder from some bolt or bar and attempt to gain entrance by the torpedo door. The main door of the planet-plane was beyond their reach from the landing-deck.

The little corporal seized a second short rope ladder and made towards the mouth of the hurricane-hose, a powerful apparatus for hurling compressed air or gas from the planet-plane, for utility or defense. Bailee took the ladder from his hands. "No you don't, corporal!" he protested. "The pressure might get turned on and blow you home to hell! Let me try it first."

But Bailee's bulk was a little too great to allow him to crawl through the mouth of the hurricane-hose, and he gave over the attempt. Davidson refused to delay till Hal-Al should return and report his success at the torpedo-door, since every moment was precious as life, which was very precious to the little corporal just at that moment, with the great planet-plane again beneath his feet.

He swung down and crawled into the mouth of the hose and stuck half way in, a ghastly situation. But Bailee swung over and pulled him free and hoisted him back to the deck. Here Davidson stripped off all his clothing and made the attempt again. The situation was that of a naked man in a loaded cannon, for at any moment the pressure might be turned on the hurricane-hose by the man Jaquet, who no doubt had been guilty of stealing the super-plane and abandoning his companions, having previously faked suicide.

A Dangerous Chance

PUSHING his automatic before him, Davidson squirmed forward in the hose till he came to the widening at its base. Could he unscrew the coupling sleeve from his position within the hose, then push the hose sufficiently to one side of the upper coupling-joint to give him room to squeeze out?

The coupling consisted of a simple form of threaded sleeve overlapping the threaded base-joint of the hose and a similar threaded joint extending from the closed pressure chamber beyond. These two joints did not abut against one another by several inches, which would allow a man within the hose sufficient room to press his palms against the inner side of the coupling-

sleeve and twist it about until it screwed off one of the connecting joints, it being immaterial which, since it was the sole coupling.

It was a dangerous feat for Davidson to undertake in view of the fact that either by accident or purposely, he might be blown from the hose at terrific speed. But he was confident that the torpedo-door, where Hal-Al hoped to gain entrance to the planet-plane, would be bolted from the inside—as the landing-deck trap had been—and in such a manner that the bolt could not be shot free with an automatic. The hurricane-hose seemed to offer the only possibility of gaining an entrance to the plane, and the little corporal proposed to stake his life on the attempt. He felt in his heart that life would be intolerable to him on the great scarlet planet, his one interest being to get away on the heels of the first opportunity.

success and hurried forward towards the fore of the plane, to take command of the pilot-keys.

Suddenly Chow, the cat, came racing playfully around a corridor, followed by Chang, the dog. Chow's tail bristled at the unexpected sight of Davidson, and Chang braced his forelegs and started to raise a rumpus, when he called them by name and they recognized him. Choking the dog's too enthusiastic greeting, and followed by the cat, he proceeded forward.

He reached the master key-board of the plane without being challenged or stopped, then pressed the key that released the door of the landing deck. Immediately he docked the plane in a wide field of scarlet grass.

He had just queered the switch-board by a secret combination, so that if he should be overcome by an enemy the plane could not be manipulated, when Bailee and Hal-Al came hurrying



(Illustrated by Paul)

They found that they could not proceed further without extreme effort. The bubbles had become rigid as thick spheres of glass.

The coupling-sleeve yielded and turned as he pressed it about with his palms, and he succeeded in working it from the threads of the upper joint. Then he hurled himself against the sides of the great rubber hose and jolted the hose sufficiently aside to get his hand through to the floor without. With this leverage he pushed the heavy stiff hose to one side till he was enabled to squeeze his body free of the hose and stand upright within the planet-plane.

Stark naked, with his automatic in his hand, he stole forward in the obscurity of the dynamo room. He must capture Jaquet, dock the plane and let his companions enter. Perhaps the cleanest joy in life, to an active, robust man, is the overcoming of physical difficulties, with an attendant spice of danger. He felt jubilant at his

from above, having found he had released the bolt of the door of the landing-deck. Hal-Al had failed to gain an entrance by way of the torpedo-door, as Davidson had anticipated, and now the two younger men credited the little corporal with more courage and genius than he believed he deserved for having successfully crawled through the hurricane hose.

But he let their praise stand as they would be less inclined to rebel or desert him in the future, holding him their superior in sagacity at least, and so worth standing by through thick and thin.

THEY immediately began a search for the man Jaquet, or whoever had charge of the planet-plane. By the sleek condition of the cat and dog they were certain the animals had been

fed daily, but they could not come on their former companion, nor any one else. Had Jaquet fallen from the plane, as it had drifted lazily through the quiet air, and perhaps even then lay bruised or dying not many miles behind?

The directometer of the planet-plane showed that it had been traveling a slight arc to the left for a thousand miles, and had proceeded along a direct line previous to that for about two thousand miles.

"We must find this man," said Davidson. "To desert him would put us in his class, and while I'll associate with him, I'll not imitate him."

"His wheels were too involved for me," admitted Bailee. "He could turn all ways at once and strike any hour by any system of time. I'd like to take his wheels apart and leave out some of them. I'd leave out the wheel that made him run off with this big boat, and leave me with no better company than you two and myself."

"He's hid about the plane," considered Hal-Al. "He couldn't make himself invisible, but he could make himself almost as scarce as common decency in you."

They continued their search and shortly came on a sight that almost broke the hearts of the two younger men. The strange fellow Jaquet had filled one of the smaller storerooms with crystallized girls, without a living girl amongst them. Perhaps in his singularly involved brain he had hoped to bring these girls back to life by means not yet perfected. Or he may have entertained some thought of cutting them up into jewels, or vases.

"All dead!" groaned Bailee. "I'd lose the rest of his wheels and his pendulum besides, if I had the adjusting of his works."

They resumed their search, but could not come on the man himself, yet the plane was very large and there was a chance of his hiding for days from their most thorough quest.

"We'll go back slowly over his late course," said Davidson. "He may have fallen from the plane and we owe him this much consideration in common humanity. Besides, we'll see more of the country."

"It will be a tedious job looking for this snake in the grass," growled Hal-Al. "Leave him to marry a snake girl, while we go on and take in the sights."

"To oblivion with him!" exclaimed Bailee.

The little corporal pleaded with the two younger men not to abandon Jaquet, as he may have regretted taking the planet-plane and returned to pick them up. It would even appear that he had returned for them, since he had reappeared across their path. He could easily have betaken himself to some distant planet without fear of any punishment other than inflicted by his own conscience. And being of such an involved and flexible spirit, he could easily have shaped his conscience to his own comfort.

"Well, we'll give the fellow the benefit of the doubt, though there isn't going to be any doubt," assented Bailee. "But be reasonable, corporal, about the time you waste in searching for him, for you shouldn't string your pearls of charity into a necklace for a snake."

"Very well," agreed Davidson. "I'll let the plane drift low and take watch myself. Meantime you two would do well to look about a bit more for him, for he may be in hiding aboard with some handsome live bat-girl."

The little corporal said this more in jest than earnest but it proved to be a good stroke, as his two companions immediately set about to find the girl, which search would no doubt locate Jaquet, if he was aboard.

Time passed but they could not locate the man, either a-ship or a-land. Davidson pictured him as wandering through the scarlet grass, suffering the torment of the lost, and continually searching the heavens for some sign of the planet-plane, his body perhaps cruelly shaken from having fallen from the plane. Finally the two younger men broke into open rebellion and said the search was not worth the candle, since Davidson was using them for two of the candles.

The little corporal agreed to let them take the H-T and go on about their pleasure, while he remained in possession of the planet-plane and continued his search for Jaquet. He did not condemn them for their point of view, neither would he surrender his own point, and holding himself more responsible than they for the return of the planet-plane to the earth, he refused to surrender the great machine to them.

Bailee grinned. "Wait till we ask for the planet-plane, and you'll know when we ask for it by noticing it's gone."

"We'll bring you back the third handsomest girl on the horizon," said Hal-Al.

THEY stocked the little hydro-terra with several weeks' supply and left, promising to return within seven days, locating Davidson by radio.

When they were gone the little corporal resumed his search for Jaquet. During the first twelve hours he received five messages from the two absent men, stating that they were all right. In the next twelve hours he received but one message, stating the same fact. Then he received no more, and hoped that they had not been captured and for that reason were unable to communicate with him, but merely that they were too busy with their own enjoyments to trouble to call him up.

Since they had gone off in open rebellion against his policies, he was positive they would be captured and skinned alive before they would weaken sufficiently as to appeal to him for help; and for a little while he was ill-natured enough to wish them a taste of ill-fortune. Then he laughed at himself for wishing these merry young fellows ill because they were not made in a likeness of his own more cautious temperament.

He now observed beneath the plane a quantity of ragged, quartz-like deposit lying upon the ground, where the face of an abrupt ledge had been mined or broken away. The scarlet color of this deposit attracted him and, landing the plane nearby, he examined the quartz. In the next five hours he had carried aboard the plane sufficient of this quartz to make him the richest

earth-man of all time, should the stuff prove to be genuine 4-X-olite, which he was almost positive it would prove to be.

Two hours after loading aboard the quartz which was capable of increasing the life of a man almost indefinitely—he chanced on sight of the man Jaquet. He saw him through the binoculars at a considerable distance, walking across a level field of scarlet grass, and he was confident the other was not aware of the approaching planet-plane since he did not once look back.

Davidson immediately docked the plane behind a wood and made after Jaquet on a radiocycle. He wished to spy on the man and learn whether he was armed, before he approached too closely. He proposed to have it out with the fellow, either to take him back to the earth under guard or leave him for good on the scarlet planet, just as the other should choose.

Concealing his radiocycle amidst some handsome, tall, feather-like growth, he followed Jaquet on foot into a compact little wood, and had soon approached so closely on the latter's heels that he could overhear the man conversing with himself, a habit that many acquire who are much alone, or of a passionate nature.

Jaquet seemed to be reminiscent of some lady, and rather fervid in his praise for one of his years and mental weight. But Davidson reflected that he himself had not seen the lady and this might not be fervor but the honest due of the lovely subject. They came shortly to the opposite side of the wood and here the little corporal concealed himself behind a tree while the other man paced up and down but a few feet away along the margin of a miniature lake of sparkling clearness. Suddenly Davidson caught his breath with surprise.

CHAPTER XIII.

Jaquet and Davidson

FROM the water glided one of those amazing serpent-women, scaled in opalescent purple and gold, with a human face as lovely as the fancy could desire. From her white, woman breasts—the only mark of her human descent or affinity below her slender neck—the water, issuing from her ringlets of silken hair, dripped like a string of crystals.

Jaquet embraced her and kissed her rosebud mouth, and led her to a little knoll along the bank. Seating himself beside her, he broke into a hundred ejaculations of admiration, love and delight. He would attempt as if to seize her hands to kiss, but she had no arms, nor hands, nor even the rudiments of these, and this was the only thing that seemed to annoy him in his illusion of love, like a slight vexation that threatened to wake a happy sleeper from a pleasant dream.

"Never mind!" he cried. "You are more adorable without arms, for I can take you to myself without the protest of hands. Venus of the green old earth has no arms, and Venus with arms

were not Venus, for she were not so wholly yielding."

The serpent-woman seemed willing enough to yield wholly to her lover's admiration, but Davidson did not fancy either her willingness, nor the situation. Yet he knew that Jaquet was mentally half snake himself—gliding, subtle and treacherous, and there was a certain consistency in his unhallowed love.

The little corporal decided to delay until Jaquet had taken his leave of the uncertain lady before he should accost him, when the air became fragrant, as if a bowl of exquisite perfume had been spilled beneath his nostrils. He held his breath so that his reason would not surrender to this seductive odor and slipped back through the wood and came out into the open beyond. Flinging himself down behind the tall feather-like growth where he had left his radiocycle, he waited for Jaquet to reappear from his amour. The latter could not come from the wood, or go far in the opposite direction, but Davidson could observe him from where he was concealed, and if necessary quickly overtake him on the speedy radiocycle.

He would give the man one chance to return to the earth on the planet-plane, unaccompanied by the snake-woman. If Jaquet refused, he would scarcely have another chance to return within a lifetime, unless Davidson was mistaken in his belief that the inhabitants of the scarlet planet had no means of traversing celestial space.

An hour later he rose up before Jaquet, as suddenly as an apparition, as the latter approached Davidson's place of concealment. Jaquet regarded the little corporal calmly.

"Well, we meet again!"

"We do!" replied Davidson. "Was it you who took the planet-plane?"

"Not a hazard but a suspicion, I see," smiled Jaquet. "Yes, I proclaimed a new mental state within myself, and commandeered the plane. Recently, however, I turned it adrift to the buffets of chance," he continued coolly. "I hoped that if you and your companions were still alive you would find it. It is no doubt drifting lazily somewhere between here and there."

Davidson realized that it would be a waste of passion for him to get angry at this man for appropriating the planet-plane, and later abandoning it, leaving him and his companions wholly without means to return to the earth. The very fact that he had renounced the earth showed that he had renounced every moral standard of the earth.

"YOU might have taken the pains to return it to us," said the little corporal. "We certainly would have appreciated the favor."

"I did the act in a moment of recreative enthusiasm," replied the other. "I was, as it were, carried away from myself into a new self, born again of the persuasive thought that if I got rid of the planet-plane I would get rid at once of the earth and its myriad vexations. Why should a brave man be vexed with that which he himself can put aside?"

"It was mental suicide of you!" exclaimed Da-

vidson. "You are not in adjustment to the ways of this strange planet, and must begin all over, like a babe in the cradle."

"There is the gist of it!" smiled Jaquet. "To begin all over, a grown man on an unstaled world—that is rebirth without the pangs of death or the weakness of infancy." He swept his arms about him. "And here all is novel, all is strange. Life opens to me again like a book unread: I feel like Jack at the top of the Beanstalk!"

"I wish you better luck than I anticipate you," replied the little corporal. "But beware of some of the inhabitants here! We have met with girls that drink blood, and women with the bodies of serpents."

"The more novel, the more interesting, not the more evil," said Jaquet. "Have you met with many women with the bodies of serpents?"

"Only twice, and then I fled them."

"You did best for a self-fearing man," nodded Jaquet. "When these serpent women shed tears of delight and love, their tears have a fragrance that enslaves you. Beware of their tears, little corporal! You are not brave enough yet for the unholy joys."

"You speak more in madness than in courage," replied Davidson. "However, I will be advised, and hope you also will shun these ladies, should you meet with any of them."

"Have no fears for me," said Jaquet. "Fear is but the lack of *I am* in a man, and I am every inch *I am*."

The little corporal smiled at the other's vigorous conceit and pride. "I often feel that way just after a good lunch, but I weary toward dinner time. Come now, if I should locate the planet-plane, do you mean to say that you wish to be left here, without any reasonable hopes of ever again seeing the earth? Or is it just a matter of bravado, since you believe the plane cannot be recovered?"

"It is a fine little earth we hail from," replied Jaquet. "But it has long lost its freshness and romance to me, and when romance dies the spirit is dead. Here every succeeding hour spring as unstaled as a new day to a youth in love, or a new verse to a poet! Here I still retain my identity, but life is all made anew!"

"If you feel that way about this planet, I shan't reason with you to leave it," said Davidson. "For your reason to remain is more persuasive to you than mine to leave. But if you should change your mind, or your mind should be changed by unfortunate circumstances, I will agree to take you back to the earth, should I be in possession of the planet-plane at the time, and in touch with you."

"I thank you," bowed Jaquet. "For to begin from the beginning, without which truth were incomplete, and that beginning is myself, since without myself the beginning were incomplete, I see that you are a reasonable man in not pressing me to change my opinion. For I hold my own conclusions as always best, and hold you as a reasonable man since you conform to my opinion of reasonableness. Not as another thinks and believes, but as *I* think and believe—that is my will and faith. For what can another do more

than think and believe, and cannot I do the same?"

"Very well," nodded Davidson. "I see that I have no argument that will reach you till you are a better or a humbler man. I shall leave you now, and, after taking in a little of this planet, return to the earth and make my report to my superiors, and thank God I still have superiors, to help sustain my own imperfect being."

Treachery!

JAQUET shrugged his shoulders almost indifferently. "Then you have recovered the planet-plane."

"I'm in touch with it," admitted Davidson. "Would you like anything from it before I pass out of your call?"

"Nothing whatever. I choose to have no ravel of the earth to weave into my new garment. Besides, since they banished the devil from the earth, or he left it in sheer weariness of its mediocrity, it has become merely an old aunties' paradise. I would not array my flaming spirit in the shreds and patches of a dear old lady's gown!"

"May I ask why you stocked the plane with those crystallized girls?" inquired Davidson.

"You may ask," replied Jaquet. "But the best answer to one's own question is one's own answer, for a wise man will accept no answer but his own, and a fool doesn't matter."

Davidson saw that Jaquet was too independent to deal with. Or perhaps the latter suspected an intrusion on his love tryst and was angered at that breach of privacy. Or, it may be, Jaquet feared Davidson as a possible rival to the affections of the serpent-woman.

The little corporal extended his hand. "I wish you luck! But this thing of permanently detaching yourself from humanity, while still with the body of a man, may prove rather disastrous to your mind."

"I have no fear for my mind," smiled Jaquet. "Nothing can upset me but myself, and I refuse to upset myself."

"You are some philosopher," yielded Davidson. "But there are yet some things that can dash the philosophy out of the sturdiest philosopher and leave him but a groping, broken old man. You had better return to the earth and cast your lot with other men, till you have some other form than the human form."

Jaquet put the advice aside as a man might a handful of marbles offered him by a boy. "You cannot move me for I am self-moved only, and I hold that there is only cowardice between a man and all attainment. Who puts off fear has eaten of the tree of life and become as the gods. I wish you a pleasant journey back to the earth and remember, though, you may sometime cast your mind into me, you cannot plummet me."

The little corporal took it that Jaquet was merely politely telling him to go to the devil. That he didn't want his company. But Davidson wanted his companion to give over this madness for the serpent-woman, and return with him to the earth. Perhaps Bailee and Hal-Al had already got themselves into a net of folly, from

which he would be unable to extricate them, and he would be compelled to make the long voyage home alone. He was of an average sociable disposition and while loneliness was not intolerable to him, it was very trying. He could not go long on his own bare companionship without distress, and was inclined to believe that those who did, with few exceptions, ate too much of their own liver to be healthy, or at least happy.

"Come," he urged Jaquet. "Help me unload these dead crystallized girls from the plane, and return them where you got them. They are not paintings nor jewels, man, but dead women, and the inhabitants of this planet may hope that by the advancement of science they may some day be able to resurrect their dead, and so have preserved them in that hope. Or, for all we know, they may not be dead, but were crystallized alive, and these inhabitants already have the science to resurrect them at will. At least respect the feeling of the living for their dead, if you do not respect the dead."

"I have forgotten where I gathered them," replied Jaquet. "Some here, some there, but all from the bright waters. Take them back with you to the earth and show the earth how beautiful death can be made. Every dead a jewel, every lost love an everlasting possession of crystal. The earth preserves the voices of the dead, and their pictures, but here are the dead themselves. No closed, cold tomb; but the individual form of individual love. What a noble planet we have chanced upon! How rich in pleasure, how void of care! How thoughtless, where thought were only sorrow! How virtuous, not to make cold virtue its gladless quest!"

"Have they no towns or cities?" inquired Davidson.

"I came on several cities of men with pig-serpent heads," replied Jaquet. "And also on a city of forbidden ladies."

"Girl-harpies, that drink your blood," nodded Davidson.

"Mere milk-and-moonshine girls!" exclaimed Jaquet. "But these women of The City of Forbidden Ladies—they are as terrible as they are surpassingly beautiful!" He would discover no more, either because he had chanced on some city of unholy women whose profligacy had shocked even his too liberal mind, or because he was fabricating the whole business, and his best lie was silence.

"Is this city very distant?" inquired Davidson, recalling Bailee and Hal-Al, and fearing that they might have come on danger or death from that quarter.

"I kept no reckoning of distance: it may be near or far. Should you come on this city you will scarcely believe what you see for a time, but think yourself mad, and these forbidden ladies—clothed in the luminous light of their own beauty—but a vision of your own madness. But all is as real as the eyes in your head that witness these ladies at their dreadful revels."

"You seem to have come off scot-free," said Davidson.

Jaquet touched his forehead. "Even I was

shaken here by the sights I witnessed." He put his shirt aside and displayed a broad frightful-looking scar encircling his body. "Where their laughing mouths ringed me with kisses!"

The little corporal suspected the tale. Jaquet could have been scarred by any of a dozen sordid accidents. Yet there might be such a city of forbidden ladies, and Davidson's anxiety for Bailee and Hal-Al increased.

"Come," he said. "I must be going: I've work to do. Do I understand it is your final resolution not to return to the earth, but remain here and cast your lot with these amazing inhabitants?"

"The earth!" Jaquet smiled. "I have drank that cup dry and here is a new cup, filled to the brim with a sparkling liquor of a most delightful bouquet. Would you dash that cup from my lips just as I am about to drink of it?"

"It's poisonous!" warned the little corporal. "It will kill you before you can become adjusted to it."

"Death has its worlds too," replied Jaquet. "I've many a true friend in those worlds, and if there is a way into death, there is a way out, and who finds one can find the other. You cannot alarm me or turn me from my purpose with that wheel in your mouth. I've as good a wheel of words in my own mouth, that can answer you word for word, and none can persuade me but myself."

Davidson extended his hand. "Good luck to you, and I hope you will keep yourself from too great danger, and maintain the better customs of the earth among these peculiar people."

Jaquet took the hand of the little corporal and pressed it, and in another moment the latter found himself on his back with all the breath knocked out of him, and his treacherous companion winding a cord about his arms and legs, making him a prisoner. For the space of a thought, Davidson could not believe he had been tricked and trapped, but fancied he had been paralyzed by some ray, and the other was seeking to recover him. Then he realized the situation: he had trusted a snake and the snake had fanged him. He struggled to regain his freedom, but the cord was tougher than his muscles could crack, and his enemy's strength was greater than his own.

Stranded!

HE snarled in disgust. "Pass me a thistle! I was an ass to trust a snake!"

"Softly," replied Jaquet. "To each man is given his turn to win, and the next time will be your turn to win, and mine to lose. Where's the planet-plane?"

"Find it!" was all Davidson would answer.

"Quick!" commanded Jaquet. "Or I'll throw you to a spider-woman and she'll lay her eggs in your liver."

For a moment the little corporal grew cold about the heart. There was something frightful in the other's threat, which seemed not so impossible on this great scarlet planet with its strange forms of life. But Davidson held his tongue: all was not lost till courage was lost.

Jaquet must have felt that it would take longer to wring the truth from his stubborn prisoner than to locate the plane, for he bound the latter to the tandem of the radiocycle with some cords he drew from his belt and, mounting the machine, began slowly to retrace the way that Davidson had lately come, by the faint indentations of the wheels in the soil and grass.

After some time he came around a wood and in sight of the planet-plane. Instantly he was as erect and alert as a young man filled with a fine new enterprise and, dashing up to the plane, dismounted, leaving Davidson still bound to the radiocycle, to tumble unregarded to the grass. It may be he had never abandoned the plane but had accidentally fallen from it, or in some way it had mounted and drifted away while he was absent.

Yet he may have as suddenly decided to recover it as he had previously suddenly decided to abandon it. A few minutes later he had obtained access to the plane, and the great machine rose and vanished.

Davidson lay motionless awhile and gave himself the silent lash of his own contempt. He had thought to be sincere with a man wholly insincere; he had thought to gather figs from a thistle and all he had for his reward was a handful of thorns. "Well, life is said to be but a play!" he mused. "But I'll be hanged if I like this actor!"

He was still quite alive and uninjured except in fortune, and after a time he succeeded in working himself free of his bonds. He examined the radiocycle and found there was sufficient power in the tank for about three thousand miles of travel, and he still had his automatic and some ammunition. He might yet get into communication with Hal-Al and Bailee and, with the little H-T again in his command, chance on the planet-plane. The two young fellows would now have the best of him since, with all his supposed superior judgment, he had lost the plane; and that too, by trusting a known opportunist. But at least he had not been thrown to a half-human spider, and this was some consolation.

He mounted the radiocycle and returned to the neighborhood where he had first seen the serpent-woman. If Jaquet had not already removed her to the plane, perhaps he would return to do so, or to continue his liaison with her.

For hours he hung about the locality, waiting for the man to reappear, or something to turn up; for every line of communication was cut between himself and those he sought, and he was thrown on pure chance. His immediate business was to keep alive and in good spirits till chance should favor him with some clew to the whereabouts of his friends or enemy, and if chance should not favor him within a reasonable time, he would move on and keep searching, for chance serves effort, since effort opens a wider field for chance.

The motto of the Runner of Navare was *ON*. So when, after twenty hours and Jaquet did not reappear, nor could the little corporal catch any glimpse of the serpent-woman about the pool, he proceeded to move onward in the direction

which Hal-Al and Bailee had taken. He pushed the radiocycle beside him, for he had decided to ride only in emergencies.

For a period of time that would have been many days and nights on the earth he moved onward, afoot, through a country abounding with game and fruit, but no creature of human-like form or intelligence crossed his path. Neither did he meet with any spheres. The country was pleasant enough but was abandoned. He fancied that perhaps there was something about it inimical to the health or life of the natives, but which had no effect upon him.

Yet the four-footed creatures were all healthy enough. Finally he concluded that he was moving across some private domain to which admission was forbidden, or it was the scene of some old war or distress of spirit that was so cursed of memory that no inhabitant would tread its soil. Vexed by his slow progress afoot, once he mounted the radiocycle and raced many miles, but still without a glimpse of a sphere or an inhabitant.

He was about to turn sharply off to his right, hoping thereby to chance sooner on an inhabited country, when he came suddenly on a sight to discourage even a stouter heart than his own, and made him ask himself, "What's the use?" But the man who cannot in some way answer that question is of little use himself.

CHAPTER XIV.

Reunited!

DIRECTLY before Davidson, smashed into shapelessness, and half buried in the ground where it had nosed its own grave from some frightful descent from the skies, lay the little hydro-terra scout-plane. He went down on his knees with all the heart out of him and searched for the forms of his two late merry companions. This, then, was their end, and he was poor indeed not to have died with them. Life, at best, is but worth the good friends we have.

But soon his search showed him that the two men had not fallen with the plane, but must have fallen previously to its descent. Perhaps in some merry scuffle one of them had fallen overboard and the other, finding himself unable to swing the plane beneath him and save him, had cast himself after him to die in the same manner.

For hours he searched the country about but came on no trace of their bodies. He returned to the plane but it was too smashed for him to judge why it had fallen. Cooler judgment asserted itself now and he recalled that the construction of the plane was such that had any mere accident happened aloft, it would have fluttered and drifted downward like a falling leaf, and have been but slightly damaged, unless it had been caught in some elemental disturbance. That it had been smashed in this cloudless and windless locality showed that the engine had been left running purposely and the plane deliberately directed downwards. Was it possible that the men had been bereft of their senses

while in the air, the effect of some food or drink, and had suicided. Or had the treacherous Jaquet come on the little plane while its pilots were absent and, taking it aloft, shot it downward like a rocket to its destruction?

He felt reasonably confident that Jaquet had not killed either Hal-Al or Bailee, for to his knowledge the man had never shown any direct maliciousness towards individual human life. His curve of crime inclined differently. The little corporal now encamped on the first hill and, mapping the country about, searched it for hours through his binoculars, till his eyes rebelled and would toil for his anxious heart no more. Then he fell asleep with his head on the front wheel of the radiocycle.

There was a considerable wood not far distant and when Davidson awakened he decided to learn what lay beyond. He had no sooner rounded the heel of this wood than he came on Hal-Al and Bailee. They were again fighting, but not in sport. He hurried forward and slashed a flowering branch between them, but they sprang at one another straight through the branch like two wild animals. They were both bleeding about the face.

The little corporal threatened the younger men with his Metzger but they were too angry at one another to heed him. Then he threw himself into the fight—since he disliked to put the others to sleep with his cocaine pistol—and succeeded in knocking out of them what little wind they had left one another. He was able to pick out the choicest parts of their anatomy, as they were both groggy and scarcely heeded him in their desire to land the other a knock-out blow.

He finally got them well apart and sat on Hal-Al. Davidson too was feeling his own devil's oats. He had lost the planet-plane, and they had lost the H-T, and so between them they had lost the earth and made a mess of hope in general. The whole situation was particularly nasty, and chameleon like, or more correctly human-like, he partook much of the color of the situation.

Finally he got from Hal-Al's chest. "Well, will we have peace now?" he demanded.

Hal-Al rose to his knees unsteadily and cursed Bailee. "The damn fool—went back for more!"

"More what?" rasped Davidson.

"Girls!" half panted, half groaned Hal-Al. "And we had three!"

Bailee wiped the blood from his lips. "I wanted just one more to make it even! Oh, the beauties!"

Hal-Al tried to get at Bailee, but the little corporal held him off with a branch. "You've smashed the H-T! Now smash some of this nonsense in yourself for a change!"

"Oh, the beauties!" groaned Bailee. "And all gone!"

"To hell!" groaned Hal-Al.

How It Happened

"COME out of this madness!" commanded Davidson, but knowing he had lost all authority over the others. "If there were four girls

in one place there must be others to be had without beating one another into a goulash."

"'Tis a good word!" grunted Hal-Al. "His brains are only a goulash of garlic and rotten mackerel!"

"Maybe—" began Bailee.

"Forget it!" snarled Hal-Al. "You can't kiss a maybe."

"I passed the H-T a short ways back," Davidson now informed them. "It's soup!"

Bailee grinned feebly. "We were hunting for it, but the fight wouldn't keep. Were there any left among the scraps?"

"I came on no evidence of blood or flesh about it," replied Davidson understandingly. "How did you wreck the machine?"

"It was this way, corporal," began Bailee.

"Begin with the sense of it and you won't have to begin at all," growled Hal-Al. "The girls are gone, the plane's gone, and the little respect the buzzards had for you is gone, and that's the end of it!"

"It was this way, corporal. We came to a great blue wall—me the man, and him the fish. And there was a blush and a smell in the air like morning-glories and roses around your first sweetheart's door. It would have made a sick clam seize a pen in his fin and write a poem."

"Write it!" commented Hal-Al.

"Go suck that all-day sucker I gave you!" retorted Bailee. "We looked through a little port-hole in this wall and there were all the girls you ever dreamt of having, and all the girls you ever wanted to kiss and couldn't get a chance; and all the girls you had promised yourself, when your star came out of its eclipse."

"He lies!" groaned Hal-Al. "It isn't half the truth or poetry of it! These girls—but we musn't speak of such things to an old codger like you, corporal. 'Twould break your heart to set a banquet like this before you, and you haven't even false teeth."

The little corporal laughed in their faces. "Because an older man has a brake on himself, you think he has no speed. Go on; tell me of these schoolgirls."

Bailee licked his lips. "Schoolgirls! I'd like to teach a primary class in that school. But never mind, corporal, we know you've got the speed, but why do you pass by all the girl signals?"

"Let's be moving!" growled Hal-Al. "There's nothing here but talk about what isn't here."

"We came to this little port-hole in the big blue wall," resumed Bailee. "And we were on foot, for we had hid the plane a ways back in a wood in a moment of weakness called caution, but I was for taking the plane with us."

"Go on!" commanded Hal-Al. "Why stop lying; you can't hope to tell the truth?"

Bailee grinned. "Be quiet! Don't interrupt your own funeral! There were no bars over this port-hole in the wall, but it was just big enough for me to squeeze through. Hal, on account of the stale beef below his neck, couldn't quite make it."

"Go on," snarled Hal-Al. "What ain't of you between your chin and your nose, ain't!"

Bailee resumed. "There were four girls walking on a golden walk near the port-hole just beside a fountain."

"You lie!" said Hal-Al. "They were walking on air and singing, with big rainbow bubbles floating around them."

"I'm telling it to be believed," sighed Bailee. "If I told the whole truth and nothing but the truth, he'd never believe me again. There they were, four of them, dressed in a kind of pink cobweb, with assertions of their own sweetness."

"Cut out the assertions," growled Hal-Al. "The corporal has come into his second innocence, which you should respect."

"There they were," resumed Bailee, groaning. "Singing among the shining fountains of bubbles! Oh, the beauties! the beauties!"

"You must have come to the City of Forbidden Ladies," nodded Davidson.

"'Tis a good name," said Bailee. "They must be forbidden, for no real man could do a day's work again after seeing one of them. He'd be talking with his hands as well as his mouth, to tell you about her sweetness, and couldn't work but with his feet."

HAL-AL turned over with a groan and bit at the grass.

"There were four of them!" Bailee bit at the scarlet grass himself, and spit it out. "And I choose the two left ones and Hal choose the two right ones, and we shot them in their sweet limbs with our Metzgers and waited for the sleep."

"You cads!" rasped Davidson.

"Nothing doing on that wire!" retorted Bailee. "We were men wanting our Jills, and Jack shall have Jill, blow fair or foul. It's all in the law of the pursuit of happiness, the first law and last law and only law; and all who talk of other laws but do so for their own better pursuit of happiness. What, don't you know that the true meaning of life is to kiss all the pretty girls, and fight all the bold lads, and keep a merry heart till Wop, the Worm, gets you?"

"If I were big enough I'd thrash you both for daring to presume on the hospitality of this county by kidnapping its ladies!" glared the little corporal.

Bailee grinned. "Don't you thrash me, mister, for I'm growing bigger every day and you're growing smaller."

"Go on with your story," said Davidson, laughing under his ragged mustache at the wholly natural young fellow, whose passions, while not refined by any large culture, were yet wholesome with sheer health and youth.

"Then the sleep came on the four girls," resumed Bailee, "and I crawled through the little port-hole and passed Hal two girls and followed with one, being alarmed before I could get a good hold on the other. We returned to the plane and had a few words over this other girl, Hal talking about as sensible as a pink baboon.

"I went back and had to delay a bit before the coast was clear and Hal came on, to look me up, and before I could get the fourth girl a crowd of other girls came dancing towards where she was sleeping, and we made back to the plane to

talk it over with our hands, and when we got there, there we both were, and that's all there was there—a man and a fish. The plane was gone and the girls were gone, and we came on fighting and hunting for the girls and plane, and we've been coming on ever since fighting and hunting for the girls and the plane.

"We feared the girls had awakened from the sleep, being more fairies than girls, and not so subject to the cocaine, and had started the plane, and as we had set the combination so that the plane would run and not fly, we hoped to come on it somewhere before long, caught among the trees or tall grass. But the nut of hope isn't all that the poets crack it up to be. Sometimes it's got more worms in it than nuttiness. Like Hal."

Davidson broke the news that he had lost the planet-plane, and added that no doubt Jaquet had seen the little H-T where the men had left it with the three girls aboard, and had installed the girls in the planet-plane and sent the little hydro-terra to its destruction.

"'Tis best!" said Hal-Al. "The girls might have got killed if they had managed to start the H-T. I'll kill that snake Jaquet for kissing them, but I'll put a nice headstone over his grave afterwards for saving them."

"You'll never find that snake to scotch him," sighed Bailee. "The curses of a just saint wouldn't harm him. He'd paint 'em green and pass 'em off for good money."

Davidson now suggested that they keep back over the same way that they had recently come and spy on the Forbidden City, to learn if the man Jaquet was anywhere about the locality.

At his suggestion of returning to the Forbidden City, Hal-Al and Bailee winked openly at one another, then began to rub the little corporal's ears pretty hard with the rough knuckles of their wit. But he let them rub, only faintly protesting that it was not the girls of the city he wished to spy on, but the man Jaquet. He saw that it would sooner cement their friendship to have him to pick on than to have one another, and he had no petty vanity for which he would sacrifice good policy.

He persuaded them to accompany him and look over the wreck of the H-T, to consider if anything could be done with it. It was hopeless for its original purposes, but they managed to assemble sufficient parts to make a sidecar for the radiocycle, in which to carry one of their party, as well as some salvaged supplies. Forty pounds of solidified radiolite* was saved from the debris, and, altogether Davidson felt they had practiced a little coup on calamity.

The City of Forbidden Ladies

THE younger men were impatient to return to the Forbidden City and Davidson thought it would be more sportsmanlike, and better policy besides, to say nothing about saving their radiolite by walking instead of riding. So he joined them on the radiocycle and they proceeded, their pace cut down considerably by addition of the side car and luggage.

* The radioactive element that operates the cycles.

Long before they came to the great purple wall they located it with the binoculars, and when they drew near to the Forbidden City they proceeded in the cool obscurity afforded by a wonderful wood of tall, graceful fern-like trees, with large scarlet blossoms.

"Just like looking at Hal's brain," grinned Bailee, as they dismounted from the radiocycle and regarded the purple wall beyond. "You are only conscious of a proximity to an obstruction. Now to locate the little post-hole and elope with three handsome girls."

"What will you have, corporal?" demanded Hal-Al. "A brunette, blonde, or such a dashing, smashing beauty that you'll never notice the color of her eyebrows for seven years?"

"I'll choose the girl myself," smiled Davidson. "I'm very particular about her voice, and the way she treats animals, for I'm one. We'll conceal the radiocycle here among this group of trees and the first one in distress can make use of it to escape, but with the understanding that he is to do his best to return and pick up any other who is hiding about. I'm going to climb the highest tree and look over the wall into the city through the binoculars."

"It may be possible that Jaquet has returned the three girls he found aboard the H-T, and is holding friendly relations with the inhabitants, as a reward for recovering the girls. Perhaps if we are careful not to offend the hospitality of the city, we may be admitted within the walls and gain the love of three of these girls without endangering our lives."

"Love, courtship and marriage, mother-in-law, home and heaven!" sighed Bailee. "How long do you want us to follow your idea, corporal, before it tastes sour to yourself?"

"Forty-eight hours," hazarded Davidson.

"If meantime these girls don't function to love and kindness, have we got your vote to do a bit of gentlemanly cave stuff?" demanded Hal-Al.

"Men," said the little corporal, "I am no longer in any authority over you, but just a fellow country-man in a tight hole alongside with you, and because of my disposition this tight hole seems to be squeezing me a little tighter than it squeezes you, and consequently squeezes a little more caution into my head."

"This is a huge planet we are now on and so much larger than the earth, and probably so far less human, that its inhabitants may have gradually gathered into fixed groups, each distinct in their mental tastes, and perhaps more or less distinct in forms of body. The people living behind this high wall may be a handsome and kindly race, of fine culture, and as we would expect them to observe the laws and customs on the earth, were they transported there, we should be willing to go as far with them as we would ask them to go with us."

Bailee grinned. "If culture makes girls like these, I'm out for culture and running strong for myself."

"I'll put all my votes in your basket," nodded Hal-Al. "But I'll hold the basket."

"You are both merry men," said Davidson, "and I wish you a merry success. But remember,

if you have nothing better to offer this walled city than violence you need not expect to get and long hold that which is the product of the very opposite of violence. Now I'm going to climb the tallest tree I can find and study the minds behind this wall, before I have a fall-out with them."

HAL-AL nodded agreeably. "And meantime we'll go on ahead and look over the ground at about a fistful of distance away, and among the three of us we should get the length, breadth, and thickness of the dimensions of trouble."

They concealed the radiocycle beneath a quantity of broken branches, then the two younger men hurried off with more speed than caution towards that side of the purple wall lying nearest while Davidson sought out a very tall tree. Keeping to the main body, for the branches were rather brittle, he mounted almost to the extreme top among a cluster of magnificent scarlet blossoms over eighty meters from the ground.

Before him, and beyond the wall, lay the panorama of a great city, but so different from any city of the earth that at first he thought it but a vast estate of some luxurious trillionaire. A kind of glorified landscape garden, composed of a zone of exquisite parks, set with lakes and pools of variously tinted waters, like jewels.

There were broad highways, and avenues, and lanes and paths, and greater and lesser groups of flowering trees and shrubbery, while everywhere were fountains that threw up, not water, nor spray, but sheer bubbles, that floated and danced and collided and burst, till the air was bright with their rainbow colors and sweet with a fragrance that may have exhaled from them.

There were no buildings of any sort, after the manner of buildings on the earth, but lying like pearls of dew on a great variegated leaf, the whole panorama before him was splendid with large crystal spheres, some of which were noiselessly gliding about as if moving to a definite position, but the greater majority were as motionless as buildings. These spheres, no doubt, were the houses of the inhabitants, capable of bearing their owners wherever their fancies should dictate. These people were always at home, for they took their homes with them.

For a time Davidson studied the city and searched it length and breadth for some sight of the planet-plane, but his search was fruitless. Occasionally he trained his glasses on his two companions, who were creeping about the base of the sheer thirty-meter wall, seeking for an entrance. They were as eager as two bear-cubs after honey, and the honey was there. For about the pools and lakes and fountains of this Forbidden City danced thousands of lovely forms, whose femininity the little corporal was assured of by their gracefulness.

Bailee and Hal-Al now disappeared behind some bloom-weighted shrubbery growing at the base of the purple wall, and as the minutes passed and they did not reappear, Davidson concluded that they must have gained access to the Forbidden City. His jaw twisted. They were two fine examples of young men of class C-3, but they were now engaged about a piece of busi-

ness which had little to excuse it but youth and hot blood. Much as he liked both of them and needed their society, he proposed that they should not play the barbarians except with barbarians. He abhorred a kill-sport, but this sport seemed to him all one-sided, which is not sport, but the very contrary, for the soul of sport is mutual consent.

Suddenly through his binoculars he espied the two men come from behind the bloom-laden shrubbery and dash towards the wood where the radiocycle was concealed. Each bore a slender, captive in his arms and bore her so lightly that he judged their excitement had given them unnatural strength, or else the ladies of this Forbidden City were slight as earth girls of twelve.

IT is a difficult position to be placed suddenly on a footing of moral opposition against a comrade, and on such a footing Davidson was placed upon seeing Hal-Al and Bailee approaching with their all too human-like burdens. They

CHAPTER XV.

A Prison of Bubbles

AS Hal-Al and Bailee hurried forward towards the wood, bearing their precious burdens, and the little corporal raced towards them, a tremendous wave of exquisitely bright bubbles, of every dimension from a boy's marble to the size of a push-ball at an athletic meet, swept down upon them, shutting out every view but that of their own amazed faces and the lovely faces of the two ladies kidnapped from the Forbidden City.

For a minute Davidson was confused, fancying that they were beset by a million varied spheres, each containing some manner of pigmy



(Illustration by Paul)

The no-man shot out of the corporal's hands, like an arrow from a bow and raced with astounding speed for the sphere.

would have fought off ten furies to have protected their burdens from danger, all but from the danger of themselves.

Davidson had decided to cross their too ardent wooing, and now descended from the tree, sliding, jumping, falling, any way to get down quickly and safely. He landed on both feet and getting from the wood raced towards his companions. He proposed to tell them that the wood was beset by enemies and they must drop their burdens and run at top speed toward a distant wood to the left, where their pursuers might not follow. He knew that it would be as useless to plead with them to return the girls as to plead with fire not to burn.

Then there befell the three men an experience that would have passed their belief had it been told of others.

engineer, but on smashing at a bubble with his automatic butt and witnessing it burst into thin air, he grasped the situation more definitely. The Forbidden City had buried them in an avalanche of harmless bubbles, to shut off their view and surround and attack them.

The two younger men dropped to their knees and glared about in rage at the flood of bubbles overwhelming them and delaying their flight, with their lovely captives. They could breathe as well as ever and move about freely, and when the bubbles burst, as they jabbed at them with their automatics, they did not give forth any dangerous gas, but a delightful fragrance. They could but plunge on—into the hands of the enemy, or some trap. Or by great good luck into the shelter of the wood, where perhaps they could climb above the bubbles.

"Oh, the sweet girls!" groaned Bailee, gazing down on the loveliest female face that Davidson had ever seen, so lovely that he glimpsed his own two bronzed hands stretched before him among the bubbles to take the girl into his arms. "The damned beetles would have had them both in another minute!"

"Beetles!" exclaimed the little corporal.

Hal-Al swept the bubbles from before his face, like a mass of clinging butterflies. "The girls were chained with strings of pearls to a tall gold column and two big seven-foot stick-bugs were smelling them over!" His bared arm swept like a boomerang of bronze over his shoulder towards where he judged lay the Forbidden City. "And damn the law that says they aren't ours, since we saved them from such a fate!"

Bailee threw his free arm before him. "I was running this way, when the damned bubbles came!" he panted. "The radiocycle was straight ahead." Seizing up his burden he plunged forward through the bubbles, followed by Hal-Al with the other girl. Davidson came at their heels, holding to Hal-Al's shirt so as not to lose sight of him.

The little corporal had attempted to swallow the tale of the ropes of pearl, and gold column, and seven-foot stick-bugs, but the whole airy bubble broke into a bitter spume of laughter in his throat. His companions were two choice liars, but this last story was a little too choice. They had merely seized on two beautiful girls for their sweethearts and made for cover with them, and told him a tale of saving the girls from a horrible death to keep his jaw from wagging at their barbarism.

Suddenly they seemed to meet with resistance from the bubbles, and in a few moments were able to proceed only with considerable effort. Then to Davidson's amazement and despair, and to the rage of his companions, they found they could not proceed further without extreme effort. The bubbles about them had become almost as substantial and rigid as thick spheres of fixed glass. Neither could they any longer smash the bubbles; the butt of their automatics rebounded from them as from some tough, unbreakable crystal. They attempted to turn off to the right, then the left, then turn back, but found themselves everyway in a like evil situation. They were shut in a trap by their invisible enemy, who might give them no quarter.

THEY were not crushed by the bubbles closing about them like a matrix, and the air still circulated freely so that they were not in danger of suffocation, while the younger men could still swear as freely as they breathed. But this was the extent of their liberties.

"I'm sad for once, and a little afraid!" sighed Bailee, wiping at the sweat on his forehead, and it took all the strength in his arm to press the bubbles away to do so. "Let's not believe a damn thing of it but the girls, and see what happens. They say it's all in the thinking, anyway, and here's our chance to prove it."

Hal-Al pressed back his powerful shoulders

and began to roar maledictions upon the unseen enemy.

"They cannot kill us in this manner without killing the girls, too," said Davidson. "And they will scarcely kill their own kind."

Bailee kissed the wonderfully lovely face of his silent captive. "Cheer up, my girl! Maybe it isn't so bad after all to a merry heart!"

Hal-Al began to snarl like a caged lion, and Davidson feared the man's heart would burst with rage, or at least his spleen burst, at his helplessness.

Suddenly the little corporal turned to Bailee. "Put her down," he commanded. "She's not a girl, nor even an animal."

"You lie!" retorted Bailee, not grasping the other's meaning. "She's but fainted and not dead."

"She never was alive," said Davidson. "Look, you sorry fools, these girls are but some form of statuary, some yielding plastic creation of art that you have mistaken for blood in your mad excitement!"

"Hell!" said Bailee, after a little time. "Oh, hell!"

"Let me die now!" growled Hal-Al. "I might live and trust his fool word again." He moved a ponderous but helpless fist in the face of Bailee.

"You grabbed as quick as I!" retorted the latter. "I only saw them first, chained to the column." He put aside the lovely face. "I thought she was awful still, but who would have thought she was not real."

"Uh!" grunted Hal-Al. "And I smashed the face off one of those stick-bugs that was nosing the girls. I suppose he wasn't real, either, but the whole thing some damn work of art."

The two younger men now fell to fighting among the bubbles, and heaved back and forth with ineffectual blows, like men struggling under a weight of heavy loose chains.

For a time the little corporal was furiously angry at both of his companions. They had rushed through an opening in the purple wall and seized on what in their extreme haste and excitement had appeared to be two beautiful girls in distress, but were only a part of some wonderfully life-like work of art, and for this useless escapade they were now in danger of losing their liberty, if not their lives. And Davidson had thrown away his one chance for safety in an attempt to restore these supposed girls to their liberty.

Suddenly Bailee left off fighting and began to laugh. "A damned statue! And I told her I could whip my weight in rip saws and promised her a seven room flat with perfume parlor in Omaha!" He laid back against the support of bubbles and roared. "And you should have seen Hal whacking the face off that seven-foot stick-bug!"

"Shut your jaw!" commanded Davidson. "Climb on Hal's shoulders, if you can, and I'll climb on yours, and maybe I can see over these bubbles. There's probably less pressure from above than around us."

The Crystal Vision

WITH great difficulty Bailee worked his way upwards to the shoulders of Hal-Al, and the little corporal succeeded in getting at last to Bailee's shoulders, where, standing erect, he could just see over the bubbles, as a man might over an avalanche of stones that had buried him to the neck.

He attempted to climb higher and lay flat on the surface of the wave of bubbles, that he might learn if he could creep forward and escape in this manner, but this feat proved impossible as the bubbles were so slippery that in spite of their firmness he could not get any foothold on them to climb higher. But he had seen enough to hope. The bubbles extended scarcely three meters to his left, on which side was the wood. If they could force their way forward that short distance they might run for it and escape.

He descended and informed the others of the situation and they immediately made a wedge and forced their way slowly forward, and suddenly burst from the bubbles with such force that they fell headlong to the ground. In an instant they were up and running towards the wood.

What happened behind them they never knew for they did not waste an instant to look back, but, reaching the wood, plunged into it like three fishes back into water. Luckily they were able to keep together and continued until they felt they dared pause and take stock of their luck.

"Well!" demanded Davidson, being the least winded and first to speak. "Will this be enough of that fool's paradise?"

Hal-Al rubbed his chin savagely. "It is impossible to do myself justice with words! I would like to smash something rotten!" He edged towards Bailee.

Bailee grinned. "Don't strike me, Hal! Kiss sister!"

"Shall we keep on or climb a tree?" demanded the little corporal.

"We'll keep on," said Bailee. "Expectation in this instance will smell sweeter than retrospection."

They kept on through the neck of the wood till them came out on the other side where they had concealed their radiocycle, and for some hours dallied about in the neighborhood. They had escaped they knew not just what manner of imprisonment, torture or death, or all three; and they had partly lost their nerve for the time being.

There had been something about the wave of bubbles that had alarmed Davidson more than any danger he had experienced since landing on the scarlet planet. How had these bright infinitely thin spheres of mere air been changed or hardened into tough, heavy globes of slippery, dull crystal? Had heavier and heavier bubbles been hurled at them from some kind of great gun or hose, or had the air itself about them been turned to bubbles that thickened like a boiling mass of sap or sugar? Were the bubbles mechanical or chemical? Or was it possible that much of the strength had gone out of their mus-

cles, due to some ray being played upon them, and they had fancied that these soap bubbles were heavy as metal, because they had little strength remaining to press forward? Yet in that case would they not have fallen to the ground in sheer weakness, the bubbles not being firm enough to support their bodies upright?

Finally Davidson came to a kind of half conclusion, which he refrained from telling the others, perhaps because he was not wholly convinced himself. This half conclusion was that there had not been any bubbles about them. The Forbidden City had turned upon them some kind of idea or delusion ray, befuddling their brains, and they had imagined that they were buried under a wave of bubbles, like a fevered man who fights mere figments of his own fancy.

"The next time, I'm going to kiss the girl I grab," sighed Bailee. "And if she closes her eyes, I'll know she's real; and if she kisses me back, I'll know she's realistic."

They were now about to take turns at each getting a snatch of slumber when around the wood and upon them, silent as a floating soap bubble, came a crystal sphere. It was quite large and clear as a watch crystal, so of itself offered practically no obstruction or resistance to the vision. But there was that at the very heart of the crystal sphere which so affixed their gaze that they did not look around.

DAVIDSON heard a gasp from Bailee and a half soft from Hal-Al, and the sight wrung a groan of passion from his own heart. In the center of the sphere, like a full-blown rose in a great drop of dew, was the loveliest form of woman that a man could imagine with all the fervor of first love.

"She's mine!" panted Hal-Al. "Take your eyes off of her—both of you!"

"You lie!" cried Bailee. "She's mine! She came to me in a dream last night and I kissed her."

"Get back into your fool dream!" commanded Hal-Al. "Or I'll smash you! She's mine!"

Bailee's hand went to his automatic but Davidson stepped between the men. Their blood had turned to fire at the encrusted vision. "Wait till you get her out, before you fight over her," he advised them. "She's as far away as in a dream; can't you see there's no entrance to the sphere!"

"There's got to be," cried Bailee. "She's alive and had to get in there."

They spread about the crystal sphere, examining it for some door or entrance, but found none. They beat upon it with their bare fists, but it was as solid as marble.

"They've blown the sphere about her," decided Davidson. "But somewhere there's an orifice leading to her, or she would have perished before this for lack of air."

"We must get her out," muttered Hal-Al, and before the little corporal could protest, the impatient fellow had drawn his automatic and rashly sought to crack the crystal along one side. Fortunately he hit the sphere at sufficient angle

to prevent the bullet rebounding and injuring one of them.

"Damn you!" raged Bailee. "You'll hurt her!"

"I know it," replied Hal-Al, in utter scorn. "Now tell me so that I'll believe it."

The bullet had made no perceptible impression in the surface of the crystal. "It evidently can't be scratched," said Davidson. "But it might be split with the grain, like a piece of slate or a diamond." The two younger men fell on the supplies stored in the sidecar of the radiocycle and fetched a small but heavy sledge and finely tempered chisel. But they found it impossible to split so much as a sliver from the marvelous crystal sphere. The point of the chisel slipped off the polished surface without biting at all, while the sledge hammer, when smashed full against the face of the sphere, merely rang and rebounded in Hal-Al's powerful arms, till he gave over from a conviction that was despair.

Davidson now sought by speech and pantomime to persuade the girl to come from the sphere, but in vain.

Bailee groaned. "The City of Forbidden Ladies! No use to forbid them—you can't reach them! Right about face, there's nothing for us in the Forbidden City but—nothing!"

"You're yellow!" growled Hal-Al. "There are girls there and we can smash our way to them, if we are men enough not to be turned back by appearances, or doubts. Shall we hang defeat on our own noses and call it sagacity?"

"I'll fight to the last man and then fight myself!" retorted Bailee. "Come now, you hesitating, sweet young buzzard, crack this diamond nut here and get the kernel out, and I'll believe you're worth following into this city with the big blue spite-fence around it."

Suddenly the bright crystal sphere began to cloud, like a mirror breathed upon, and as the men watched in astonishment and despair it grew more and more opaque, till it became wholly obscured and stood before them a great frost-clouded ball into which they could not peer at all.

"Serves us right!" groaned Hal-Al. "We're a muddy pair and she'll none of us! Shall a cherub unveil herself before two bull frogs?"

"She's gone—like a snow girl in hell!" sighed Bailee.

CHAPTER XVI

The Lure

WHEN the form of the girl within the crystal sphere was no longer visible, Davidson was almost persuaded that there had not been any girl within the sphere, but the lovely vision which they had seen had been a mere illusion thrown into the crystal by means of some invisible ray from the Forbidden City, as a cinematograph projects a picture upon a screen. He told the others of his suspicion and Hal-Al considered the matter with half closed eyes, but Bailee shook his head stubbornly.

"She was real and alive," the latter maintained. "She may have diffused herself into frost from looking at Hal's homely face, but she was there herself a minute ago. You go far with your rays—why not go further and say—"

Hal-Al threw up his hands. "Why not go further and give yourself a bloody nose. Maybe the little corporal is right and she's only a reflection in a glass push-ball that these pig-headed devils play some kind of a game with in this pink hell."

Bailee turned to Davidson. "It isn't your lying I mind. Neither the style of it or the persistence of it, but that you expect me to believe it. You mean to say that this girl in this big glass marble isn't the real thing?"

"It's a choice of marvels," replied Davidson. "How could she have breathed in there, without any opening in the sphere, yet how could she have been otherwise than a living girl, being so very lifelike, so absolutely convincing to the eye?"

Hal-Al struck the obscured crystal. "Solid as marble! real as my right hand! persistent as Bailee's jaw-bone! If this is not a big crystal with a live girl inside of it, then it is time I was scrapped by old man Junk!"

The frost over the crystal now began to clear like breath evaporating from a mirror, and in a few moments the lovely reality or deception within, whichever it was, showed as clearly as before.

"Yes, I'm convinced it's a live girl in a crystal coach!" exclaimed Hal-Al. "And damned be he who would unconvince me!"

"It's the real article!" agreed Bailee. "And we'll have to go lightly and not startle it, or the frost may come over it again."

Within the next few minutes Davidson too was convinced that the lovely figure in the crystal was that of a living girl, who had some means of breathing through the sphere, and perhaps possessed the power of obscuring its surface so that she could not be seen. Though possibly this latter effect had been accomplished by some imperceptible ray of energy directed from the Forbidden City. But the little corporal did not express his convictions to his companions, hoping by some fortunate chance of misjudgment on their part that they might yet conclude the girl was but a work of art, or an illusion of science, and not surrender themselves wholly to her dangerous beauty.

There arose a suspicion in his mind that the two girls that his companions had kidnapped from the Forbidden City and abandoned amidst the bubbles had not been works of art, but living creatures capable of throwing themselves into a trance as a means of escape.

The crystal sphere now began to glide away, and they followed. The two younger men were so rapt with the beauty of the girl, and their desire for her, that they seemed unconscious that they were being drawn away from the security of the woods. Davidson's morale was unsettled too.

While he knew he was leaving the wood and the radiocycle, he thought it would do no harm to follow a little way, and when he gave the sit-

uation a second thought it was only to deceive himself with the persuasion that he must keep his two companions in sight. But when he had gone so far that, looking back, he was not sure he could locate that quarter of the wood where he had concealed the radiocycle, he became alarmed and sought to persuade his companions to return. But his pleadings were in vain.

HE left them and made his way back alone. A man never realizes how far he has gone for a woman until he has to retrace that way without her. After a while he came to where he had concealed the radiocycle. He found the branches scattered about and the machine gone. The girl in the crystal sphere had perhaps been a lure to separate them from their cycle and sidecar.

He made a brief search for the machine, then giving over he hastened back after Bailee and Hal-Al. Only their companionship remained to be snatched from this treacherous swirl of circumstance that threatened to carry everything away from him, and he proposed to save this much.

He climbed the highest tree at hand and studied the country through his binoculars. He decided it was best not to proceed too fast, as he was more likely to leave his companions behind than come upon them, since he was freer than they to proceed with speed. Again and again as the hours passed the same situation occurred: he delayed to climb a tree and search the country through the binoculars, then descending and hurrying on. Finally he turned directly around and went back, he believed, towards the Forbidden City. The girl within the crystal sphere had evidently come from there, and being associated with the city, he reflected, she would more likely linger in its environments than wander on.

He kept on for such a length of time that, not coming at last into sight of the great purple walls, he realized he had taken the wrong direction.

Then pure chance accomplished what his best efforts had failed of. Or destiny, that other name by which men call chance, when they are emotionally impressed. He came suddenly on Hal-Al, seated on a rock with his hand to his head, muttering incoherently to himself. His face was as gnarled and sunken with some great despair as a dry root. His clothes were torn from his chest and nowhere else, and Davidson concluded they had been torn by the man's hands and not by brambles or an enemy.

He talked of such things that the little corporal put him to sleep with a split cocaine pellet. Then, after he had awakened, got out of him that he had killed Bailee. At first Davidson thought his companion was still irresponsible, and some more hours of sleep might so reduce his fever that he could get an authentic communication from him. But what he thought to be the ravings of fever appeared to be the situation itself. Hal-Al had killed his friend Bailee in a jealous dispute over the girl in the crystal sphere.

They had both hit bottom together and fallen upon each other like two brutes to possess the female, and the physically stronger brute had overcome the weaker. But it seemed that Hal-Al had not possessed the girl, neither by her consent nor force, for on the death of Bailee the frost had obscured the sphere till her form could not be seen, then slowly the great crystal had turned black, and Hal-Al had fled, leaving his dead friend lying before the great black sphere in a wood of tall fern-like trees.

Davidson questioned Hal-Al if he had returned and buried Bailee, or returned at all to the scene. But Hal-Al hadn't or, if he had, he didn't know. He had sought to return but at such times he had always found himself coming *from* the wood instead of going into the wood. His reason must have lapsed on each occasion that he had set foot among the fern-like trees to revisit the scene of dead friendship.

He had struck Bailee with a piece of branch that he had seized up in sudden, jealous fury; and the next instant would have given his own life, and the girl to boot, to have undone the deed. "But it's done!" he groaned. "And I'm too tough to break myself!"

The Search for the Dead

DAVIDSON could not find Hal-Al's automatic on him and its loss had no doubt saved the young fellow from suicide. But later the little corporal stumbled on the weapon lying on the ground and slipped it into his own pocket, saying nothing to the other at the time.

"Hold on," the little corporal advised. "Don't go trying to shake the life out of yourself till we look into this matter further. I've handled some of that fern timber and it would stun but hardly kill. There's a pulpy core at its center and I'll not be sure Bailee is dead till I examine his body, and then—"

"And then!" groaned Hal-Al, with his eyes looking away as if he was looking down all eternity, and saw no peace.

"And then we'll bury his body," said the little corporal, "and come out of the wood, and not do such a fool thing again."

"There won't be any next time!" groaned the other. "I'll never have another pal!"

The little corporal got Hal-Al to accompany him, and the latter would stand just outside of every wood and mark time, like a man standing on burning coals, while Davidson went into the wood and searched for the body of their dead friend, and for the black crystal sphere. Finally they came to the wood where the deed had been done, for Davidson found Bailee's cap lying on the ground, and nearby some earth clotted with blood. But the man's body was not about, nor the crystal sphere.

A little further among the trees he found a blood stained handkerchief done into a toque, and as Hal-Al had been deep enough into hell and sufficiently punished for his rash deed, Davidson hurried from the wood and showed his companion the handkerchief, informing him that he had

found it some distance beyond where Bailee evidently had been attacked.

The younger man communed as with himself. "It's his left handed knot, and it was further on in the wood. He didn't drop it there before I hit him, for he had on that cap he got from the smashed H-T. It must have fallen from his head after I left him." Hal-Al's broad shoulders sprang back, like a man released from carrying his own coffin. "Then the damn cheese-grater isn't dead!" he growled.

"No; he probably went on to search for the girl in the crystal sphere, and may be kissing her at this moment."

Hal-Al came wholly from his formed crushed mood like a bear from under a rock. "Damn him!" he roared. "I'll muss him up again!"

"I haven't the least doubt of it, if we can find him, or he hasn't since died of his injury," replied Davidson. "If the girl abandoned him, he may have become conscious for the first time that the blow you gave him was hard enough to kill a man, and so has laid down and died."

The mention of death sobered Hal-Al, but the extreme tension was removed from his mind and heart, both of which had been too greatly overwrought with remorse. Evidently he had turned Bailee over, and looking into his glazed eyes, had mistaken unconsciousness for death, and fled in a panic. Or else the injured man had assumed death as a trick to alarm his friend, that the latter might abandon the pursuit of the girl in the crystal, and leave the field clear. Afterwards, remorse and loneliness had wrought Hal-Al into a fever, perhaps superinduced by his blood being overheated with passion, and the lack of proper food.

They now went shouting through the wood for the missing man but came on no further evidence of him, and much of the old misery came back upon their hearts lest Bailee had died of his injuries.

Suddenly Hal-Al leaned against a tree and groaned. "I've got to go back to hell!"

Davidson sought to cheer his companions with some rude phrases that would get at his simple, blunt nature more direct than any of those platitudes of submission to the unalterable that make a virtue of resignation. He even cursed him roundly, till he realized it would be better to say nothing at all. If silence was not very consoling it at least was wholly sincere, and the deeper another feels the more sincere must consolation be to reach him.

They moved on in silence through the wood, and like Cain, Hal-Al was again shut out from the face of peace, and his grief seemed more than he could bear. Then suddenly, ahead of them, clear as the sweet old bell of the English language could ring out the words, came the song of *Annie Laurie*.

CHAPTER XVII

Bailee's Story

AS the sound of the old familiar song reached them, the little corporal and Hal-Al stopped like men jolted into stone and stared at one an-

other. Then the sweat of tears rolled in two great beads down Hal-Al's cheeks.

"The damn son of a gun!" he sobbed. "I'll have to smash him again!"

Davidson gave a shout and the song ceased. Then Hal-Al's voice boomed out the name of the friend he thought he had killed, and back came a familiar answering call.

In a few moments they met, and Hal-Al and Bailee shifted their delight at again coming together from the quicksand of sentiment to the solid ground of a cheerful fight. When they had succeeded in giving one another a bloody nose, and considerable bruised cuticle, they were once more on a secure footing of wholesome animalism, and began their usual rough banter.

"You lie before you speak," rumbled Hal-Al, "if you are going to say you saw the girl again in the crystal after I jolted you out."

Bailee grinned. "In a little while after you left us we came to a sparkling pool in the woods, and this girl stepped for the first time from her crystal coach and gave me to understand that she wished to take a bath, and would I please wait until she was through."

"You lie!" growled Hal-Al. "But what's the use of checking you in one lie when you have another and greater one ready on your lips."

"For a moment I had her in my arms," continued Bailee. "But her woman's tears drowned out my manly courage, and so I stood looking the other way, at attention, while she had her bath."

"You lie again!" roared Hal-Al. "The nearest you came to her was to lay your soiled fist on her crystal coach."

"If I had not the fact, can't you allow me the fancy?" demanded Bailee. "Such fancies as never filtered through your thick, muddy skull."

"It never was cracked," retorted Hal-Al. "So the light within never shines out. But you're like one of these little glow worms; you shine most of the time, but your shine is more smell than light."

"Better a smelly light without than a smelly darkness within!" grinned Bailee. "Then we came to another sparkling pool."

"And I suppose you took a bath yourself," growled Hal-Al. "If you did, it took all the sparkle out of that pool."

Bailee resumed. "The water was so cool and refreshing as distilled dew. And as I lay floating at full length on the surface of the pool, looking up at the blue glimpses of the sky, with the sweet birds singing overhead on the swaying boughs—"

"Birds!" roared Hal-Al. "Birds! There you spring the frame of your lie! There isn't a bird on this planet but one plucked buzzard, and that's you!"

"There are exceptions to every rule, since all things are possible to a good liar," retorted Bailee. "And all the exceptions had got together in the trees over this pool where I lay floating at full length, and they were singing sweeter than a Hebrew nightingale in golden harvest time, when all of a sudden I began slowly—" he paused.

"Go on!" commanded Hal-Al. "It can't be possible that you should hesitate for a lie!"

"But the choice of them, the choice of them, man! Among so many gorgeous lies the selection is often a matter of some difficulty, but when a man has but one lie and that a plain, unvarnished one, it is soon told."

"If you say you're lying, then you aren't," growled Hal-Al. "There's no getting the truth out of you."

"Then we came to a third sparkling pool," resumed Bailee. "And she having bathed in the first pool and I in the second, what remained for us to bathe together in the sparkling waters of this third pool?"

Hal-Al reached forward and tore Bailee's shirt open to see if he showed any evidence of having lately suffered from a monomania for bathing, but the skin was so crisscrossed with recent wounds that the evidence could not be had. "You've been fighting, and I wasn't in it! You always did hog the good things."

"There was a serpent girl in the third pool," continued Bailee, buttoning his shirt. "And she got jealous of the girl from the crystal sphere. I tried to make peace between them, but there is no peace between two ladies in love with the same handsome young man."

"He welcomes the coming and delays the parting lie," groaned Hal-Al. "Did the serpent girl bite you with her feathers?"

"I'm done!" grinned Bailee. "I can't come nearer the truth than the facts, and since you won't accept the facts how can you receive the truth. Honest, now, haven't I more the air of having dined on spiced serpent girl, than just back from a six weeks' furlough at home on candied sister? Who's got a smoke?"

The others were out of tobacco, and Davidson informed his companions that the radiocycle was missing, with their entire supply of the weed.

"That's some jolt!" sighed Bailee.

"Damn the smokes!" growled Hal-Al. "What became of the girl and the sphere?"

"I had to sleep after a time," replied Bailee. "And when I wakened the girl and the sphere were gone."

"What became of the serpent girl?"

"I slept again and when I wakened she too was gone."

"It's all probable, but not possible since you tell it. Which way did they go?"

"I was asleep both times and can't say. However, I've stayed around here, thinking one of them might return, for out of every three departing women there's always a come-back in one."

Hal-Al scowled. "If you are ever shot while you're talking, you will be hit between two lies. When I left you, the girl was dead inside the crystal, or at least the crystal was black as death."

They quit the wood and went on a ways with no definite purpose, when Hal-Al suddenly came to a standstill.

"You said out of every three women there's a come-back in one. Were there three women, and you left one behind in the woods?"

Bailee sighed. "I didn't tell you of the third girl! But we'll not speak of her, for she passed me swift as rapture in a golden bubble, and the big scar on my chest is where my heart tore out and followed her. She's gone with the best of me and how can the worst of me describe her?"

"I almost believe you have kissed some sort of a girl lately," said Hal-Al. "You taste so damn sweet to yourself."

Bailee grinned. "The past with a pretty girl—is it ever past?"

A Geometric Flood

IN another moment they stampeded with a shout towards the nearest trees. At about one hundred meters distant the whole sweep of air before them, to a height of fully five meters, had suddenly burst into geometric figures, planes, cones, cubes, squares, triangles, hexagons, and endless polygons, and this flood of geometric bubble-like bodies bore down upon them with a roar as of a surf breaking upon a beach.

"The trees!" they shouted to one another. "Climb the trees!"

They went up a low-branched tree at top speed and did not stop till the tree stopped. As it was, they were barely in time, for the flood swept through the grove and swirled about the trees, carrying with it everything not rooted in the earth. It continued for a while to rush by, snapping branches and even breaking the weaker tree trunks.

"This won't do!" cried Bailee. "But hell, it's done!"

"It's mostly cones and polygons now," said Hal-Al, as the flood subsided and its strange composition lay below them to a depth they judged of about three meters.

Davidson broke off a branch and cast it down on the surface of the flood, and the branch was very slowly borne away as if by sluggish water. But the limb was not heavy and had fallen parallel with the surface. Should he attempt to step upon this flood he feared he would sink with his greater weight.

"Nothing doing yet!" grinned Bailee. "My confidence must thicken as well as those polygons, before I step down."

"What were we doing that they should come at us with a flood of geometric tricks!" demanded Hal-Al. "Why are their girls so handsome beauty but for pursuit?"

"They just don't understand what fine fellows we are," said Bailee. "We will teach the girls and then they will teach the men folks. Women are great teachers of a man's merits, after he has kissed them a few times. One hugged girl is a whole calliope to sound your virtues abroad."

"You haven't kissed but one live girl after you

left Xea," growled Hal-Al. "And then she took a piece out of your wrist with her teeth. I'm getting soured on the situation and I'll smash it shortly, if there isn't a change. This is all pursuit and no attainment. Never were more beautiful girls but never were they more unattainable!

He was in a rebellious mood and attempted to fight Bailee amidst the branches. Both were in danger of falling into the strange flood of geometrically solidified air below them, which might have proved their grave. The little corporal now began to crack such a lash of vituperation about their ears that they ceased their fight to listen, and being but great children at heart they quickly forgot their differences, and when he ceased they begged him to continue to curse them.

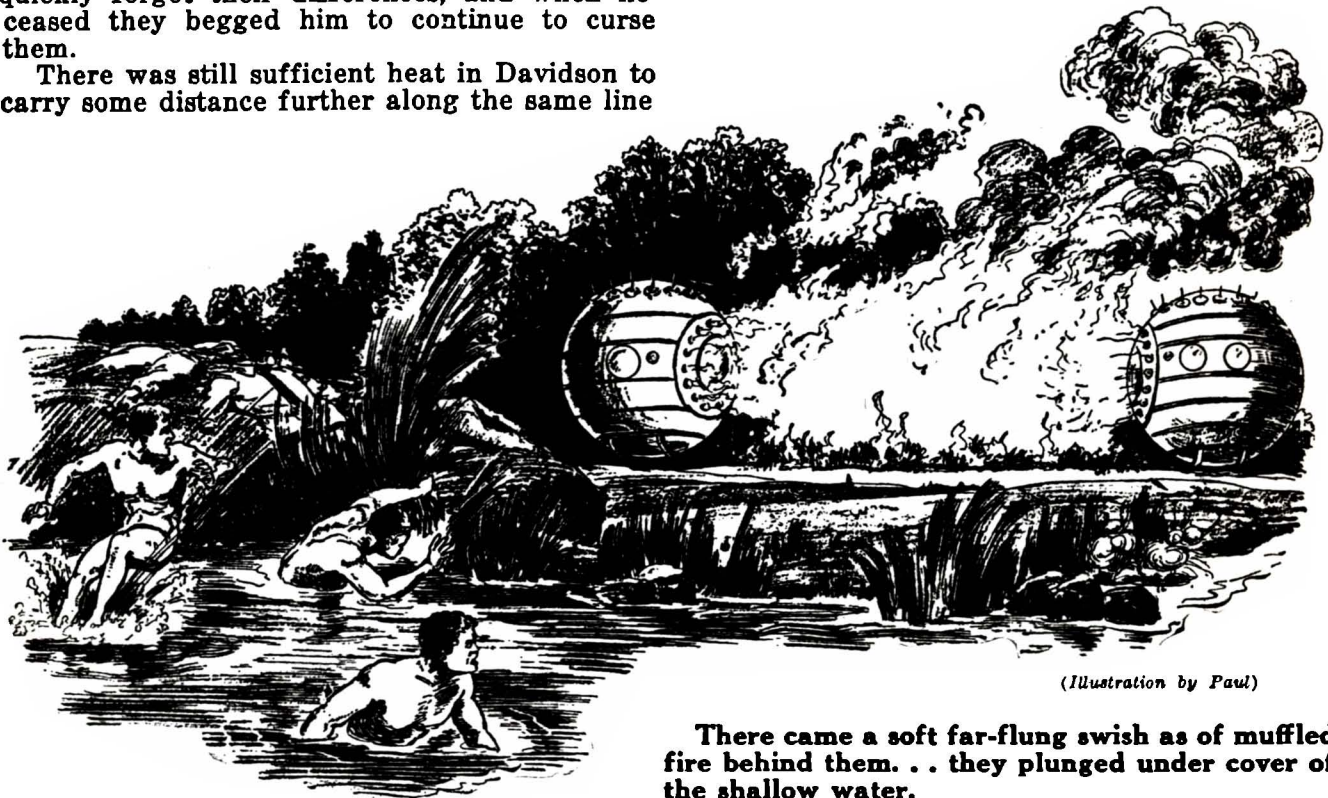
There was still sufficient heat in Davidson to carry some distance further along the same line

Suddenly a limb snapped and Bailee plunged into the strange flood beneath, but he came quickly to his feet and thrashed his way through the geometric crystallizations to the trunk of the tree from which he had fallen.

"The devil take it!" he spluttered. "I feel like I had swallowed a polygon."

"Swallow a cone for an antidote," advised Hal-Al. "Didn't you know that limb you jumped for wouldn't support the missing link between an uncensored odor and a smell?"

"I saw you leave it alone," retorted Bailee, clinging to the tree trunk with one hand and rubbing his stomach with the other. "I tell you, I swallowed a polygon and an isosceles triangle,



(Illustration by Paul)

There came a soft far-flung swish as of muffled fire behind them. . . they plunged under cover of the shallow water.

of endeavor and he continued to flay them with the cat-o'-nine-tails in his mouth.

"Oh man!" sighed Bailee, after he had ceased. "What great gifts some little men are given! A little corporal no higher than bub, but he can curse like Beelzebub! And here I am, a real man, six feet high, leading a little one-foot curse around by the hand and bragging about my wonderful child of vituperation. I must get my curse a pair of stilts."

"We had best be planning some way out of our difficulty," warned Davidson. "As soon as this flood subsides and it is found we are not quashed, we may be attacked in another manner, and one even more dangerous."

HE suggested that they attempt to advance from tree to tree, until they should reach the end of the flood, or come over a place where it seemed less dangerous to descend. Their progress proved slow, as the trees were not close together, and they found that all but the heavier branches were too brittle to sustain their weight.

and I can feel the isosceles getting in its disgusting self-determination."

He attempted to climb the trunk of the tree but sank back with a groan. Davidson quickly swung down and gave him a helping hand, and got him to a lower branch, where he had an evil time in the region of his stomach. But whether he had actually swallowed one of the smaller crystallizations, or whether he had struck his stomach on a larger one, was a question. The little corporal poured a few drops in the palm of his hand of the spirits of zac* from a small vial he carried, and after Bailee had swallowed this he quickly improved, and fell to cursing the flood and its perpetrators so heartily that the others knew he was a well man again.

"The dirty scientific dogs!" he raged. "Turn a flood of poisoned geometric figures on a man! If that triangle hadn't melted with the heat of my

*An oil found on the planet of Xea possessing wonderful curative properties.

stomach into a sphere, I'd be the handsome corpse now."

"You just strangled and swallowed one of your own lies," commented Hal-Al, concealing with a rough and ready jest his relief at his companion's recovery. "You had better take the rest of the medicine and lay quiet for a week."

Bailee tried his grin and found it as flexible as ever. "Is that you over there, Hal? Then I'm still in hell."

The flood of geometric figures had fallen so low they could glimpse the ground, so they decided to descend, but they kept among the trees in case the danger should again threaten them. They found progress quite easy among the crystallizations, which now had little resistance or weight, like shallow inactive water, and shortly came to the end of them, where they paused to examine their composition.

They found their outer surface smooth and glazed but, cutting into several, discovered the interior to be honeycombed in miniature of the outer form. A large polygon, for instance, being composed of innumerable minute polygons.

"Just crystallized air," said Hal-Al, as a severed polygon melted away in his hand and left no visible residue.

"Like a dead man's soul," said Bailee. "Gone back into thin air and is just atmosphere, the oxygen being the ladies, the hydrogen the gentlemen and the nitrogen the gents."

"Now that's settled and settled wrong, let's be moving on to where there is less science and more girls," grumbled Hal-Al.

Davidson turned well off from the way they had been going when threatened by the geometric flood, and his two companions followed him. The little corporal wished to return to the neighborhood of the City of Forbidden Ladies because the man Jaquet had so strongly advised him to shun that locality. He probably had wished the Forbidden City all to himself and, if he was there, no doubt the planet plane was there also.

They kept on till sheer physical weariness overcame them, without coming in sight of the great purple wall. Then they took turns and slept and watched.

"What's the use of one of us keeping watch anyway," growled Hal-Al. "We haven't met with any danger since that geometry lesson, and we never learned who sprung that on us. I could welcome a little danger with a kiss just now."

"Go on!" exclaimed Bailee. "Put a skirt on it and let its hair down its back, and I'll welcome and kiss danger too."

A Sudden Antipathy

THEN they fell into danger of a most treacherous and unexpected sort, for the danger came from within themselves. All of an instant they began quarreling. Hal-Al shouldered the little corporal from his path and told him to fall behind, and lead his own fool shadow, which was all he was capable of leading. Davidson consigned Hal-Al's soul to a state of evil rather than a state of longitude. Then Bailee's wit snapped

blue and sulphurous, and he befriended Davidson awhile but as a better means of quarreling with Hal-Al. Then he took Hal-Al's part to vituperate the little corporal more viciously. Finally he clotted them both in one goulash of contempt.

They did not come to physical blows, but expended their energy on words, and this alone saved them from destroying, or at least maiming one another. They went at it like three madmen, ploughing up the past months with their tongues, dragging forth every old antipathy, envy, fear, impatience, and shaking the foul bones of aversion in one another's face.

Had their sense of humor not been asphyxiated by the fumes of their spleen, they would have shook with laughter at their endeavor to get at the bottom of the slough of contempt and throw its rankest muck at one another.

All this time the little corporal was swinging his hands alternately before his face as if to brush away a torment of gnats or mosquitoes, till he realized through his strange mood of anger that there were no insects about, and ceased the action. But again he returned to it, finally becoming aware that the others were acting as oddly.

They now withdrew from one another, shaking their fists and calling back imprecations too distorted and chromatic with anger for sober repetition or recollection. Out of his companions' sight, Davidson continued to quarrel with their very recollection, and damn them even to the fourth dimension, and damn himself for having associated them for so long a period.

Then the little corporal's anger passed, instant as it had come, and he stood stock still with fallen jaw, as if he saw the ghost of all folly and that ghost was himself. What had come over him that had caused him to make such an unnecessary and unprofitable ass of himself? There is an unexpected ass in every man, an axis of insanity or imbecility around which the whole man may suddenly revolve—after revolving for years around the axis of rationality—to the astonishment of his friends at the time, and his own greater astonishment later.

Around such an axis Davidson had revolved, and now, to his previous opinion of himself, he made certain oral annotations which would have delighted his worst enemy. Then cold suspicion cleared his brain. Why had he persisted in swinging his hands before his face? Had there been some kind of ray thrown into his eyes that had annoyed him—like, in a lesser way, the reflection of a hand-glass thrown by some mischievous boy—but in his anger at his companions he had been only automatically aware of the annoyance?

He turned, and running back at top speed shouted the names of his friends. He understood now what had happened. He had been separated from them by a ray of antipathy, perhaps that he might more easily be taken a prisoner, as the lion in the old fable got the oxen to quarreling amongst themselves that they should go apart from one another in aversion, and so be more surely overcome by their enemy.

Possibly there was but one sphere in the neighborhood containing but one pig-serpent headed fellow, and the latter had feared to attack the three men traveling together, but considered himself a match for each separately, and so had separated them by playing on their persons a ray of antipathy.

The little corporal continued to run back the way he had lately come, but soon ceased to shout lest he should betray his presence to the enemy. Suddenly he came on a cluster of tall flowering grass in a state of violent agitation and heard the heavings of two human or animal bodies in conflict.

CHAPTER XVIII

The Stick-Bug Man

DAVIDSON drew his automatic and, stepping closer, peered amidst the tall grass and saw Hal-Al in combat with what at first glance appeared to be a great stick insect. But as the former's fist caught the insect's jaws, the head was swung around and the little corporal saw its face, thin, elongated, but almost human. Then he stared at the long limbs and body and realized that these, too, were human-like, but almost pure cartilage and sinew, with little or no bony frame beneath.

The strength of this no-man was great indeed for, recovering from the blow, he soon began to master the powerful Hal-Al. Davidson raised his automatic yet hesitated to shoot, and as he hesitated Hal-Al glimpsed him through the grass and grunted: "My fight! Keep clear!"

The little corporal chuckled with delight. He was going to see a man in any-man's land put up a fight against a no-man. So he kept clear and watched this no-man bend like a split-bamboo pole playing a great trout. Again and again he thought the rod would land the trout, but suddenly the rod seemed to split with a queer half-human sound, and Hal-Al all but collapsed beside it, the victor by only a sheer ounce of superior energy.

Davidson now thrust himself on the scene and regarded the no-man. He reflected that there were queer fishes in the sea of the old green earth, and queerer fishes in the seven seas of space surrounding the earth, but here was as queer a specimen as a man might meet within a year of interplanetary travel. Yet perhaps, as this no-man regarded the little corporal through his thin, mottled, vertically elongated eyes, the no-man thought Davidson was the queer fish and heathen, while he himself was the mirror of virtue and the mold of graceful form.

"He's no fool!" heaved Hal-Al, after he had rested a bit. "He can stink and smell sweet as the occasion requires. He came to me smiling and fluttering his scarlet cloak, and I said, 'Here a friendliness in an unfriendly land!' and I walked up to him and offered to shake hands. Then he whipped the cloak about my head and started with me towards the big pink sphere over there among the pink ferns. But he got no further than the brilliant idea, for I dumped myself all

over his anatomy, and between us we worked our way up here among the grass, catch-as-catch-can and the devil catch the loser."

"Where's Bailee?" questioned Davidson.

Hal-Al gave a half shame-faced look. "We split company about a quarter of a mile back, and he went off on a hot trot as if the ground about me burnt his feet. What the deuce came over the three of us all of a sudden to forget three years in three seconds?"

Davidson offered his own conclusions for what they were worth, and Hal-Al indorsed them by nodding his head soberly. Then he pointed at the no-man who was now seated with his thin knees drawn up and his thin head resting on them, a picture of defeat and shame and demanded: "What are you going to make of impossibilities that it's impossible to deny the evidence of, and there's the impossibility and the evidence you can't deny."

"He's a queer chap," smiled Davidson. "But what if he does look like a stick-bug, don't we look like two unshaved babboons? Don't kill him! Maybe he'll serve us, now you've got the best of him."

Hal-Al shook his head decisively. "I won't kill this snake, but I'll have no snake for a servant, for he'll make himself the master again through his services."

Davidson looked about him anxiously. "We must find Bailee. No doubt he has recovered from the effects of the antipathy ray, and is seeking us. However, we should bind this fellow, so that he can't return to his sphere and play that ray on us again, if he was the one who did the mischief."

The little corporal drew his pocket whistle and shrilled for Bailee, and after a time he believed he heard an answering call, but so faintly that he could scarcely decide whether it was hope or realization. He repeated the call a number of times and finally, by this slender thread of sound, drew their absent companion back to them.

BAILEE grinned like old times. "And how's the meek little fellow from amen's pew?" he demanded.

"Speaking of me?" growled Hal-Al.

"Speaking of thee, little one."

"Forget it!" retorted Hal-Al. "This stricture here threw a spark into our antipathy tanks and we blew up—that's all!" He pointed at the no-man, who still remained in his posture of despair, if not submission.

Bailee had not yet noted the presence of this fourth party, huddled on the ground behind Hal-Al, and resembling more a collection of dry, white branches than a creature of motion and intelligence.

"A stick-bug!" he exclaimed. "Then those two girls we left among the bubbles were real, if the stick-bugs were real!" He threw up his hands in disgust. "And I threw away a perfectly good girl!"

"They played possum and we were a bit excited," growled Hal-Al.

"The next time I get hold of a girl, I'm going

to hang on to her, if she's only marble!" affirmed Bailee.

"Perhaps we had better try to make friends with this fellow," suggested Davidson. "We have made enough enemies to stave off the ennu." "

"He's mine," said Hal-Al. "I broke his spirit, but you may have him for a gift. Perhaps you can train him to carry your tooth-brush, if you ever have another tooth-brush."

"Very well," agreed Davidson. He fetched the no-man's garment which lay not far away on the grass. It was a narrow scarlet toga, of exquisite fineness, warm and light and soft as ermine, yet evidently not a skin but an artificial creation.

He placed the garment upon the no-man's shoulder.

The no-man rose slowly and drawing the garment closer about him pointed to the left with both hands, then suddenly sank down at Davidson's feet with a kind of gasp.

"He's hurt!" exclaimed the little corporal. "Let's get him back to his sphere and maybe he'll repay us liberally for our pains."

"Isn't hope wonderful!" grinned Bailee. "It sees gratitude in snakes and magnanimity in crocodiles, not to mention the teasing, tantalizing trait of tender tears in the laughing hyena."

"I'll take a chance with hope," smiled Davidson. He helped the no-man to his feet and aided the latter in the direction he had pointed, for Davidson had caught a glimpse of a sphere amidst the scarlet growth.

Suddenly the no-man shot out of the little corporal's hands like an arrow from a bow and raced with astonishing speed towards the scarlet sphere. Evidently he had tricked them into the belief that he was injured, that he might gain the immediate neighborhood of the sphere, and then seek to escape without the risk of a long pursuit. The act was more cunning than treachery on his part for he owed the three men no fealty; he was merely a fox that had escaped the hounds, a fish that had escaped the fisherman.

Hal-Al gave a grunt, which was followed by the low, smothered whoof of his automatic. But luck was with the no-man for the bullet missed and there were no other charges in the weapon. Davidson and Hal-Al rushed, muttering curses, in pursuit of their late captive, with Bailee but a pace behind. But their quarry though a kind of man, was of an essentially different physical nature, capable of greater speed, and before they had covered half the short distance to the sphere he had re-entered it, and the sphere glided away too swiftly for pursuit.

"He's scared, anyway!" commented Bailee, and drawing his automatic he sent a shot after the sphere, against which it rang with a peculiar distinct clearness.

"We must get away from here quickly," advised Davidson, after Hal-Al had joined them. "This fellow hasn't shown us his heels to carry any good report of us to his own kind."

"My hand was a little unsteady from the fight I had with him," growled Hal-Al. "Or I'd have brought him down like a rabbit."

"The son of a yellow streak!" suddenly exclaimed Bailee. "It was 4-X-Olite!"

"4-X-Olite!" repeated Hal-Al, for his friend had named the most valuable substance known to man, a few grains of which would add fifty years to any man's life.

"The whole damn sphere!" groaned Bailee. "Did you hear it ring when I hit it with my automatic and notice the peculiar color of it?"

The Air Afire!

THE two young fellows stared at one another as two penniless adventurers on an island might stare at one another upon realizing that the whole island beneath their feet was pure gold.

"The color," continued Bailee. "That scarlet! Then the ring of it! I rang the great Dalton consignment of sheet 4-X-Olite at the Borneo Basic with my automatic, and got hell for it. But hell pays on its bonds—in time!"

"This whole planet is scarlet," nodded Davidson. "It's chief element may be crude 4-X-Olite."

"The sweet girls die!" groaned Bailee. "And turn their bodies into crystal and call that immortality. And they might live—young—forever—with a planet of 4-X-Olite under their feet."

"Perhaps the snake men know," said Hal-Al, "or the snake women. And keep it from the others, to use for themselves. But what of it? We can't get back to the earth with any of it, and we mayn't be able while here to extract the salts of it for our personal use. Let's forget it and keep moving!"

"On!" exclaimed Davidson. "It is the motto of the Runners of Navare. The greatest word of the greatest lodge."

"But the girls!" sighed Bailee. "The sweet girls! They walk under the crystal waters and perish, to keep from withering into age, and here is the scarlet metal of everlasting youth going to waste to make the coach of a stick-bug! The damned inconsistency of the consistency of it!"

"It may be the same with us on the earth," mused the little corporal. "There may be some material there as common as mud that would give us all perpetual youth, and some wanderer from this planet might learn of it but die before he could tell us of it. After all, knowledge is about all that's worth searching for, for with perfect knowledge all things would follow."

"I'd rather kiss a pretty girl than know the reason for it," growled Hal-Al. "Let's put one foot before another instead of one word before another and get somewhere on the solid ground, instead of on the worthless whey and curd of conversation."

The little corporal promptly led off to the right and away from the course taken by the scarlet sphere, as he suspected the no-man had hurried off to bring assistance to capture them. As they went on, he informed his companions that while searching for the man Jacquet he had come on a quantity of what he believed was the quartz of 4-X-Olite, and had stored enough in the

planet-plane to make them the richest of earthmen, should they succeed in recovering the plane and returning to earth. "You can buy Omaha and Chicago between you and give them to your sweethearts," he added.

"I'll buy my old home town," said Hal-Al. "And change the names of all the streets to the names of pretty girls, with the main drive named after myself. Then I'll buy Bailee's home town and forget it!"

What the witty Bailee had up the sleeve of repartee in answer to this fling at his home town was jolted still further up by danger suddenly uprearing itself along the horizon. Since alighting on the scarlet planet the three men had never seen any fire, or smoke, save that of their own making; but now a sweep of fire about seven meters high moved rapidly towards them from the direction the scarlet sphere had taken!

"Out of this grass!" exclaimed Hal-Al. "Let's find a clear space, or water."

"It's not the grass afire!" cried Davidson, in great alarm. "The grass is too moist to burn like that. They've set the air afire!"

"We passed a stream back aways!" exclaimed Bailee, and all three turned and ran at top speed for the safety of water. There came a soft, far-flung swish as of muffled fire behind them, but being well ahead they reached the stream before the flame, and with no more ceremony than three dismal grunts plunged under cover of the shallow water.

When his lungs rebelled, the little corporal thrust a hand well above the water and realizing no painful effect of dry or moist heat, came to the surface. Getting the water from his eyes he looked about. The fire had passed beyond the stream and was moving rapidly away.

Then Hal-Al and Bailee came to the surface. "After this I'm going to lift my hat whenever I see water!" said the latter.

DAVIDSON pointed at the two large scarlet spheres gliding along, one at either end of the retreating sheet of flame. "They play the flame between them and sweep along with it like a drag-net. But how do we know the net was intended for us? These may be some pig-serpent headed fellows, gunning out for that noman. Or it may be just some sport between them, or something entirely foreign to our understanding."

"You can give them the benefit of the doubt," replied Bailee. "But I'd like to stow a thick hot brick between the benefit and the doubt, for their benefit."

"They're after us all right," rumbled Hal-Al. "They hit too near us to be shooting at some other target."

The little corporal still maintained his opinion in spite of the seeming inconsistency of it. "If they had been after us, would they not have realized we could escape the fire by hiding under water, and returned to search the stream?"

"They'll be back, then," said Bailee. "Let's work down stream to some place where it's too deep for them to boil us out. I can stand a great deal of moisture but very little boiling."

"Like the lobster," said Hal-Al.

Bailee's suggestion that they work down stream seemed the most sensible thing to do, for should they leave the water and expose their persons, they might be seen, and captured or killed.

But the fire-drag did not return, and the little corporal concluded that either the drag had not been intended for them, or else the enemy was very stupid, or careless to the point of stupidity, to have taken it for granted that they had been killed.

"They may have been stupid to trust to luck," he said. "But we were as stupid not to look to see if any vegetation had been burnt or injured in the path of the fire. It may not have been real fire, but a mere optical deception, and we should have learned which it was, in case we should meet with it again."

"Never mind going back," grinned Bailee. "We may learn it wasn't fire, but that won't prove that Hal could live through it out of water, where it would filter through the cracks in his decency. We must not expose him to the slightest risk, for it's so easy to kill a rotten mackerel."

"We can learn what it is next time," growled Hal-Al. "But there's not likely to be any next time. This clean, sweet fire may have been gladder to get away from Bailee than he from it."

"I'll let you have the last say, as you never have the last sense," nodded Bailee.

After a time they came on a large rock-like formation, and here the two younger men divested themselves of all their clothing, in spite of Davidson's warning that it would be wise to let their clothing dry on their backs, since they were in enemy country.

"I'm no old woman that I always have to hang on to my trousers, like an only petticoat!" exclaimed Bailee, spreading out his clothing on the sunny side of the rock beside that of Hal-Al.

To keep in closer sympathy with his companions the little corporal now flung caution aside and, divesting himself of his own wet clothing, placed it on the rock to dry. "He's a good old sport," he overheard Bailee comment aside to Hal-Al. "But did you notice how those trousers of his came off as hard as an old woman's only petticoat at church?"

By concealing themselves behind a rock and remaining quiet for a time they succeeded in bringing down a small, fat, pig-like animal, which they roasted, and this tender meat, with some fruit from a neighboring grove, thoroughly satisfied their hunger.

"I'd give ten years of eternity for a smoke," said Bailee, with a wry face, throwing aside a cigarette that he had improvised from some dry grass. "Oh for a snipe from the streets of Omaha! Even a snipe from a Chicago gutter would be almost welcome at this miserable moment!"

"How are the mighty fallen!" scowled Hal-Al. "All that remains to us of the joy of the weed is to remember and to spit."

"Every man has got the makings of happiness, if not a cigarette," philosophized Bailee. "But each has to roll his own joy-smoke. I'm going

to fall asleep and dream of a package of the finest."

Hal-Al yawned. "I'll take a little snatch of sleep too, while the corporal watches. But I'll not sleep near you, for you may dream of fine-cut and spit in my eye."

They fell asleep feet to feet, while Davidson remained awake. He felt about as helpless as a feeble old woman watching over two healthy half-grown boys. He couldn't reason with them, and they were too large for him to thrash. He was tempted to put on his clothes and leave them to their own devices, while he set about alone to recover the planet-plane or perish in the attempt. In numbers and unity there is not always strength or wisdom, but the contrary is sometimes the wiser medium. Men are neither animals nor insects, and often are greater individually than collectively.

But the power of the little corporal's will seemed to fall just short of the strength which would allow him to go his way alone. Fellowship was about all that was left him, and he decided he had best hold fast to this. The two younger men were bright and brave comrades, though careless generally, with the pardonable carelessness of youth, and better large distresses with good fellowship than small distresses with none.

He was about to resume his clothing, which was now fairly dry, when from around the nearest wood a sweep of flame similar to the one they had previously escaped, came racing with great speed towards himself and sleeping companions.

CHAPTER XIX

Human Gargoyles

AS the flame bore down on Davidson, he realized that they had been followed by the enemy. He rushed around to the shady side of the rock where his companions were asleep and awakening them without any ceremony, fairly drove them into the water. Each man seized his automatic, but there was not a moment to spare to save any of their clothing. They hit the water as a wave of heat flushed their backs, and remained under till they were compelled to come to the surface for air.

The fire-drag had gone on, and the engineers of that drag either thought they had succeeded this time in killing the three men if such mood was their purpose or they were now in the mood of the tiger, who, it is said, will spring but once for his prey and, missing it, goes surlily on.

"You'll have to admit that we are the target," growled Hal-Al. "They all but rang the bell that shot."

"Don't insult the corporal," grinned Bailee. "He's cautious, but he's open to truth, when she arrives and brings along all her relatives, with a calliope and a brass band."

"I rather think I was wrong before," admitted Davidson. "Twice directly over us seems more than a coincidence, but I have experienced coincidences that were more magnificent and consist-

tent than any arrangement we call truth, yet they were coincidences."

"That's right, corporal," nodded Bailee. "Always keep a string on your acquiescence: you may want to yank it back at any moment."

They got from the water and, though they anticipated ill luck, it was with a start that they perceived but a tissue of gray ashes in lieu of their clothing, lying upon the rock.

Bailee laid the muzzle of his automatic across his wrist watch. "The time, the man, and the gun! What a movie I would make!"

"Not even a shirt left!" rumbled Hal-Al, savagely.

"We're alive at least," said Davidson. "Evidently this is some kind of fire that destroys, with no perceptible smoke, like a powerful acid. Let us move on quickly."

"Naked as a babe and innocent as a ram," grinned Bailee. "Forward, gentlemen of the light wardrobe!"

Under the heavy hand of disaster he reacted as lightly as a cork from under water, but Hal-Al shook a bronzed fist after the distant fire-drag and swore revenge.

The binoculars that Davidson had left on the rock appeared to be ruined, the lenses encrusted with a peculiar green smut. However, he retained the instrument as something might yet be got from it. Their hunting knives were still serviceable, and with the point of his Hal-Al moodily scraped some incrustation from the great rock. Suddenly the stone showed warmly scarlet beneath, and the men decided it was the precious life-giving quartz of 4-X-Olite.

"The joke's on us," sighed Bailee. "We can't make use of the quartz, or sell it, or tell the natives about it, and be rewarded with a magnificent shawl or kimono. And the quartz that you stored on the planet-plane, since we'll never see the plane again, will be about as useful to us as a prize bird-dog in a live alligator's stomach. Button your vest, Hal!"

The two younger men fell to boxing while Davidson leaned against the great nugget of 4-X-Olite and held a solitary counsel of war. They were naked in the enemy's country, with not even shoes on their feet. They had remaining but a few charges in their automatics, and they must soon protect themselves with stones, and kill their game by the same method, with the possible aid of a pitfall. Fruits there were aplenty, but they would become mush on a diet of fruit only.

"We must capture a sphere of some sort," decided the little corporal.

The others gave over their boxing. "Lead on!" said Bailee. "You are less naked than we, for beside your watch you still have a ring on your person. It's little, but every little will help the ladies."

"I'll follow," nodded Hal-Al. "But not in the water. I'm no homesick sponge!"

"Then stay on the shore and start a feather cannery," grinned Bailee, stepping into the water behind Davidson, who had taken to the stream as the best method of concealing their retreat from the enemy.

This retort brought Hal-Al into the water, where an aquatic fight followed, covering a mile. Here a wood grew down to the stream, and they left the water and Davidson climbed a tall tree. Far off to his left he glimpsed the purple walls of the City of Forbidden Ladies. He had placed the city in the opposite direction and had thought to lead his companions away from this dangerous locality until they were better armed against attack. He descended from the tree and frankly informed the men of the fact, and the danger of the fact. But they were highly elated, and Bailee suggested that they proceed at once to the city and throw themselves on the generosity of the ladies for wearing apparel.

The little corporal bit his ragged mustache. "We might as well throw ourselves on the generosity of a barbed-wire fence for a little esoteric peace. We will have to commandeer the toga of some no-man or pig-serpent headed native, if he doesn't first commandeer our skins for his own devious ends."

"Don't talk so familiarly of my flesh separated from my bones," protested Bailee. "It makes me feel too much up against it! Loan me a necktie, Hal."

THEY leapt to their bare feet in sudden alarm. Between them and the river came the sound as of numerous moving bodies, and cut off from escape by water, and fearing they know not just what danger, but vaguely suspecting a dozen dangers from another flood of geometric figures to a herd of wild creatures they took the shortest line to safety, which among trees is upward. A few minutes later, concealed amidst the thick branches, they saw a score of deaths go by. Hateful, squat figures with brutal human forms below the neck, and almost human faces, but toadish and compressed, as if some horror had sat on top of them in their infancy and flattened their skulls. "Human gargoyles, or humanity gone to the damnation toads," as Bailee's deft-pencil of a tongue illustrated them afterwards.

When these and strange and alarming creatures had gone by, and the three men had recovered their somewhat shaken nerve, they descended from the trees and made back to the stream, to learn if the enemy had left any sphere or any guard in that direction. Davidson reflected that that which was evidently the humanity of this scarlet planet had split into many forms, while on the earth it had split into but two forms, man and ape. Perhaps these fellows were the apes of the planet, for they had swung by with the agility of apes, and with a slight apish crouch.

"And every one had a handsome shawl, and me naked!" sighed Bailee. "The insult of it!"

At the edge of the wood stood a great scarlet sphere. They rushed it with drawn automatics and, finding no one to bar their entry, sprang inside the open door.

"We're as lucky as three picked roosters jumping back into their feathers," grinned Bailee. He found the metal arm that locked the door and thrust it around till it functioned.

Evidently they were alone in the sphere, for

they were not hindered, and examining the pilot key-board found it similar in general appearance to the one in the sphere of the bat girls, but they had to try half the keys before the sphere responded to simple motion ahead, for the response of the keys was different from that of the other pilot-board. Then Davidson located the stop-key, and with the power to go ahead or stop at will, they again felt almost masters of their fate.

"Let's head around the wood and attempt to learn what these fellows are up to," suggested Bailee. "Perhaps if we are careful, and with the help of a kindly providence, we can get into a glorious scrap with them."

The little corporal feared to cross the stream in the sphere, so he kept around the woods, but with no wish to get into a fight with the enemy.

"You two might get busy and lace any cloth you can find into three togas for us," he suggested.

Bailee and Hal-Al fell to work on some fabric which may have been the bedding of the squat fellows, and it was a quick and easy matter to lace them with thongs of the same fabric into rude bags, from which their legs, arms and heads protruded with perfect freedom. All the while they had proceeded very slowly along the wood, for Davidson had been unable to find any key or combination that would accelerate the almost dragging progress of the sphere. He concluded that perhaps these squat fellows were allowed only so much speed by the government, that they might be easily apprehended, should they seek to overstep the law. He kept the sphere well within the shadow thrown by the trees, as this offered the best means of escape, should the owners of the sphere discover its absence and take to the treetops to locate it. Occasionally they stopped while one of the men listened at the half opened door, more advantageously to sense any sound or sight of pursuit. But they localized no enemy.

The Furies Unleashed!

THERE was a quantity of what appeared to be dry, pressed food-substance, in briquette form, in a large metal hamper on the upper floor of the sphere. Bailee volunteered to sample a bit, and if it satisfied hunger and did not distress him, they could consider it the stuff on which these squat fellows sustained life. According to Bailee's verdict, it tasted better than it looked, and digested better than it tasted, and had the flavor of a compound of salted dried meat, cheese, nuts and grain.

There was no water on the sphere, so they ran in among some tall scarlet, feather-like growth near a sparkling little spring, and here filled with water several large vessels that they found aboard and afterwards remained at the spring, on guard, waiting for developments. Developments followed so swiftly that they never drank but a few cupfuls of this water they had collected.

They were just about to retire into the sphere to make a thorough study of its possibilities as a means of offense and defense, when four of

those squat, human-like figures came hurrying from the neighboring wood directly towards the sphere bearing amongst them some struggling creature swathed evidently in their own garments, for the captors were nude. Their bodies revealed in ugliness.

They came directly to the open door of the sphere, as if they had themselves left that vehicle there, or expected to find it in the neighborhood, and were in the very act of bearing their burden into the sphere when the three men sprang upon them from the tall scarlet grass, where they had crouched for concealment at the unexpected approach of the enemy.

"Don't kill!" the little corporal cried to his companions. Yet they found they had to kill, and Davidson was the first to do so, for the enemy proved to be four furies that only death could turn aside. The toad-men would have made short work of them if they had not been armed with their automatics, and as it was they were torn as by rip saws. The enemy ripped them down to nakedness in a trice with their teeth and nails, then laid strips of their flesh bare from the bone.

Half-blinded with his own blood, Davidson shot to kill before he could no longer distinguish friend from foe, and Hal-Al and Bailee gave no quarter. Such was the fury and tenacity of the toad-men that one of them, with his head hanging on his chest from his neck being shot half away, seized a companion, being no longer able to distinguish his own kind, and tore an arm from its socket.

"Devils of the old school!" grinned Bailee, rather ghastly, the blood pouring from his very hair roots. Then he patted his automatic. "He's barked his last, but he barked up the right tree!"

They carried their dead enemies' captive into the sphere, for long, fair hair hanging from one end of the swathed form told its story of beauty in distress. Then they shut fast the door and removed from the scene, as they thought it wiser to be elsewhere, and that too with dispatch.

Bailee bore the swathed form that they had rescued closer to the circular glass-like substance that allowed light to enter the sphere. "Let's take a look at what we pulled out of that crater of steel cats."

They gathered around and unwrapped the bundle, half on guard lest the captive might prove to be a female of the same species, and if the female was more cruel than the male they might well retreat before they advanced, according to the old humorous bull of caution.

They gasped as their capture was exposed. Innocence, distress, and loveliness, in one perfect womanly form, glowed before them in the half-light, like some holy flame suddenly disclosed by their rude, torn and blood-stained hands.

"Not for me!" muttered Hal-Al, half veiling his eyes with his hands as from a light too bright to bear.

Bailee got up and moved away, but quickly returned with three long strips of cloth, which he distributed, one to each man. Wrapping his own about his nude, blood-stained person, he

drew a breath of relief. Hal-Al and Davidson attired themselves similarly, then the latter fetched some water in a small shallow vessel of clear blue crystal and offered it to their guest.

She drank, and the offer of water must have been among her kind a token of friendship, for she seemed at once relieved of her former fears. Or else she sensed that these were males of another sort than her former captors. She was very lovely, and it must go at that. To attempt to paint such beauty, with a glow of innocence behind it exceeding beauty itself, would be, with the limitation of words, but to fail miserably, and traduce the lovely original with a crude imitation.

"She's no bat-girl!" sighed Bailee. "The cherubs have lit up the holy angel in her and you can see that bright taper burning! I must go take a bath!"

Hal-Al fell to stripping thongs from a piece of fabric, and offered no comment. Davidson went above to study the pilot-board, and when he returned below he found both of the others attired in sack garments similar to those torn from them by the toad-men, and Hal-Al was just finishing a third garment, which he informed the little corporal was for him. Their guest had removed to a kind of couch against the wall of the sphere, where she remained very quietly regarding them.

"She certainly has about her something above common blood and salt," meditated Davidson. "If we can get her safely back to her own kind, her people may stake us, just from gratitude, to a little certainty on this uncertain planet."

For a moment the little corporal felt his spine tingle, for he had noted a light in the lovely, intelligent eyes of their guest as if she had understood what he had said. But he immediately dismissed the thought as the wildest fancy that hope could conjure of imagination.

Suddenly Bailee demanded of the girl. "Is there anything I can do for you? I am the captain, and these two rude fellows are my crew."

The girl seemed to understand that she had been addressed. She replied in a language at once so unfamiliar and musical that it seemed more like the low, sweet tone of some harmonic instrument than the voice of a living creature.

Bailee turned to the others. "She says she has long looked up the winding future towards this happy hour, as one might look through the tender blue toward a distant, golden star that mystic voices whispered was the star of destiny. She requests that you both withdraw and allow her to remain alone with her fate, which is me. She adds that fate is mighty but love prevails, and both love and fate being in my favor, it is unnecessary that she advertise further for a tall handsome young destiny, or interview any other applicants waiting in the vestibule of time. In brief, she has selected her leading man and I am that handsome, uncensored Close-Up."

With a groan of disgust Hal-Al wound a bronzed arm around Bailee's neck and led him to the upper floor of the sphere. Davidson re-

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*The Scarlet Planet**(Continued from Page 205)*

mained regarding their guest. She was so exquisitely innocent and lovely that physical passion seemed hushed like a shamed thing in her presence. Yet the corporal feared, when familiarity should dull this delicate halo of innocence that nature would resume itself in the two healthy, combative young fellows above stairs, and they would fall upon one another in a fierce primal rivalry for the possession of this jewel of femininity.

BUT the little corporal held himself to be stuff of another sort than his companions. He had left the earth and journeyed to distant planets, ostensibly to gain his daily bread in the clean interests of science, but within this circle of effort was another circle, which was to aid in establishing the aims of the Runners of Navare throughout the cosmos. While within this second circle was the secret and inmost circle of his genius and purpose—to track down C-X, the Master Criminal of the known universe. There were but ninety-nine members of that inner circle, each sworn to kill C-X at sight.

Davidson had followed a rumor of the Master Criminal as far as Kopex, only to be compelled to abandon that planet in great haste with Bailee, Hal-Al, and the man Jaquet, and now he was sidetracked, and he feared hopelessly so, on this great scarlet planet, and must resign the palm of victory to some other member of the Ninety-Nine. Yet perhaps no man would ever achieve such fame as to track and destroy the subtle C-X.

But now, in the presence of this lovely girl, the little corporal felt himself slipping. Slipping back into the crude, easy harness of a man, from the difficult yoke and livery of an almost priestly purpose.

But, as their guest smiled and threw back her shining hair, Davidson suddenly turned, for Honor had tapped his shoulder and dragged himself upstairs from the treacherous quicksands of fancy. He joined his two companions, who had wrapped their hands in strips of cloth-like fabric and were fiercely boxing.

"We had best be moving along," he said, craving the saving salt of action, that he might not again be tempted by the too sweetly dangerous fancies of idleness. "A little action may show us a better plan than hiding away quietly for days."

He turned to the pilot board, to study it again when, glancing casually from the observatory window, he saw that the sphere was moving.

CHAPTER XX**The Relentless Prison**

DAVIDSON smothered his ejaculation of surprise, almost alarm, as he realized the sphere was moving of itself. He tried to bring it to a standstill by pressing the accustomed key, but unsuccessfully. Then he sought to turn it

aside, but it continued steadily ahead. He fussed a bit with the pilot-board, thinking it jammed; then observed that they were moving directly towards the great purple wall about the City of Forbidden Ladies. Had the sphere been caught in some current of power, by chance or purpose, and was being drawn towards the Forbidden City? Or had they been tricked by their fair guest below, who was familiar with some secret method of directing the sphere?

He informed his companions of the situation, and they decided to go below and learn if the girl had started the sphere, or if she could stop it. But they were unable to make her understand. They used every civil persuasion, and when it came to uncivil persuasion none of them would volunteer or be conscripted for the harsh purpose.

"If I can't get her to smile it out, I'll never make her weep it out," said Hal-Al. "Let's get out of here and put up a clean fight in the open."

They tried the bolt that released the door, but while the bolt moved freely the door refused to open. They were trapped by a secret bolt. Davidson raised his automatic and sent a projectile through one of the side observatory windows, thinking to shatter the glass-like substance, that they might escape from the sphere by this means. But the steel projectile merely passed through the window clean as a die. Then, with the butt of his automatic, for there was no heavier object to be had, he sought to shatter the transparent sheet, but it neither cracked nor loosened, and but dented very slightly.

They scattered about the sphere, seeking to find way of escape, but unsuccessfully. Davidson smashed the pilot-board, hoping to turn the sphere from its course, if not stop it; but it continued directly ahead towards the purple walls, as insensible as time to persuasion.

Bailee sighed. "We might as well expect trigonometry to have a heart and change its self-determination as for this big marble to turn aside. If I was only in Mexico now, wouldn't I go up and see auntie Columbia quick!"

"You're a coward and afraid to die!" rumbled Hal-Al. "Go wash your petticoat!"

"You lie!" grinned Bailee. "It isn't leaving life, I mind; it's leaving the girls. There may be spiritual girls beyond death, but I fear these spiritual girls have no kick in them."

"There'll be a kick wherever I go, or I'll put the kick in it," scowled Hal-Al. "We'll line up here beside the door, and the instant it's opened, we'll smash!"

They fell to examining their automatics. Hal-Al had four shots remaining, Bailee none, while Davidson had two. They divided even, this giving each man two shots for a break for life and liberty.

"I don't feel my time is coming yet," growled Hal-Al. "But I feel there's a hell of a time coming for some one else!"

"Fohh!" said Bailee. "These scientific fellows here will just have to snap their scientific thumb-

and-digit at you and your head will drop off, like—"

"Like what? Go on, finish your fool comparison. What! your elocution legs haven't become palsied at the sight of death, that you must sit down on the first comma and gasp for breath. I thought your jaw would carry twenty words into death, like the muddy Amazon carries twenty miles into the clean Pacific. Like what?"

"Save your breath to cool the sulphur pudding you're soon going to eat," grinned Bailee. He extended his hand to Hal-Al. "Shake hands before you go! I have been chosen to remain with life, you have been chosen to go to death! Life, the blonde, and death, the brunette! Girls of Fate, Hal; and you for the dark and me for the light. Step before the curtain, Hal: Death has called you out to clap you, and hand you his bouquet of persimmon blossoms, while Life is waiting for me around at the stage door, with a hat full of love-notes."

HAL-AL shook hands. "Death has lost its sting to me, since I hear you are to remain behind!"

Bailee turned to Davidson. "I have a few words to say to you, before you cross the Great Divide. Take them and cherish them, for where you go there are no more words, since words are unavailing. Remember, always I loved you, not for what you were but for what you might have been. Look after Hal, for I need not ask you to look after yourself. The foolish lambs need to be led to the pastures, but the goats have already fenced the choicest pastures with barbed-wire. Fear not the devil, for you have served him faithfully these many years, and now you go to your reward. Man, born of woman, is reborn of many other women before he dies, and there you will meet them all, Belle, Margaret, Kate, and fat Louise. And so, Farewell!"

The little corporal shook the mocking fellow's hand somewhat grimly, for they were now approaching the purple wall at great speed, as compared with their former progress. Was the game about over—were they but helpless pawns to be swept from the plane of physical existence by the hand of destiny, to be arranged again and played as pawns in a greater or lesser game on the yet invisible plane of spiritual life. Or to be chucked into the discard of unconsciousness and oblivion?

Suddenly the sphere slowed down. Then they came into the shadow cast by the purple wall, a broad gate swung open before them, and they glided into the City of Forbidden Ladies.

"All out for Omaha!" grinned Bailee.

"It's sweet and clean, like Chicago—since you left it," growled Hal-Al.

"Now I am about to die," said Bailee. "I will tell the whole truth about Chicago. Chicago—"

The door of the sphere glided open and Bailee's jaw shut like a steel trap and his gray eyes glinted dangerously. Hal-Al, with a step, placed himself by his comrade's side. Davidson knew that they would die together, fighting for each other to the last. He sprang before them. He might stay death a moment till they had found an avenue of escape. He had fetched them to

this scarlet planet and lost the great plane, and so deserved to receive the first thrust of calamity. Besides, he was a courageous man, and jealous of his honor. He would lead them against the enemy.

The girl stood to one side, holding in her hand the clear blue vessel from which the men had lately drank. It was filled with water. She seemed to scan the water, as if it were a crystal in which Futurity was writing an important message. Suddenly she left off scanning the water and came and poured it before Bailee's bare, tanned feet. Then, putting down the vessel, took her position on his left hand, gazing levelly before her in clear-eyed content.

The End of C-X

BAILEE grinned. "Never mind, my girl, you needn't pour your heart out at my unfrocked feet like water. I'll drink it from your lips as I want it, and if death doesn't win the next throw out of the little old dice box of chance, I'll get a shave and hair-cut and marry you, and all the little honey-fisted Joys will fill our days and nights with peach blossoms and bubbling rainbows."

The sphere now came to a standstill, but though the door was wide open the men hesitated to leap forth, for there was a hush as of death itself just without.

"Let 'em make the first move," rasped Hal-Al to Davidson. "Then we'll smash!"

They waited, but the enemy was too cunning to make the first move. Or else did not need to make any more, for the three men were already fast in the trap.

Davidson stepped from the sphere. He was no coward, but there is a circle of fear in every man's heart that cannot be wholly removed. Its eradication would shortly remove the physical man himself through his total disregard of dangers, and this circle in the little corporal's heart now dilated in the presence of real or imagined danger till he paled slightly. Had he been able to recognize the danger he might have smashed at it and gained courage from the blows that warmed his blood with action, but though he believed there was extreme danger near there was nothing to lift his hand against. It was like fighting emptiness.

Then he gasped, as his eyes adjusted themselves to the brighter light without. Close on his right was docked the great planet-plane, with its fore-port thrown wide open and the bridge down. He turned to Hal-Al and Bailee standing just at his back, staring at the plane. Beside Bailee stood the girl, with her hand in his.

"I'll go first," Davidson directed. "If I'm not stopped, follow at once."

He was about to dash across the open space lying between him and the plane, when two figures came from the open port of the plane and advanced towards him. The situation was as bare of all theatrical accessories as an ancient Greek tragedy, yet it was as dramatic to Davidson.

There was no mistaking one of the two figures

approaching. It was the man Jaquet, who had treacherously overcome the little corporal and made away with the planet-plane. His companion was a woman, and her vivid beauty was such that at first sight reason skipped a beat in Davidson's brain and a fleeting madness pulsed to possess her. She paled the exquisite girl beside Bailee as scarlet pales a delicate pink. Hal-Al gave a look and was lost.

Jaquet lifted his hand as a sign of silence, and a strange smile of power played about his thin lips.

"It has pleased myself," he said, in his deep, sonorous voice, "to invite you into the City of Forbidden Ladies, and since I have been informed by secret communication that you have saved the friend of my fiancée from my blood-toads who found her chasing a love-moth outside the walls and stole her, I beg each of you to select of my ladies ten of the fairest to accompany you back to the earth as treasure of ineffable delight."

Davidson could scarcely remove his eyes from the woman beside Jaquet. If this radiant beauty was the latter's fiancée, who then was this man that he had appraised but as a penniless-obscure opportunist? "I thank you for your generous offer," said the little corporal, "but my purpose here is merely to recover the planet-plane and return to the earth, satisfied that since there appears to be no night on this planet, it will scarcely serve as a suitable habitation for a colony from the earth."

"You have seen but our day," replied Jaquet. "We have also a night of equal length, when there is no light but one small golden moon in the sky, and light not anywhere else but in the eyes of lovely women."

Then Davidson saw the fatal sign. It lay just above the high, thin nose, at the base of the high, thin forehead, the sign of C-X, the Master Criminal of the known universe. He had followed a rumor of this man to Kopex, but that very man had accompanied him there in the guise of a half-charlatan, half-philosopher, and he had never dreamt the truth, for only now had the sign become visible to him. Perhaps because only now, in a moment of relaxed caution, Jaquet had failed to conceal the sign with the trick of his high wrinkled brow.

THE little corporal swung up his automatic and fired, straight at the accursed sign, as he had swung up his automatic and fired at ten thousand glass balls thrown from a trap, that he might acquire the expeditiousness and certainty of mind and hand that would thrust out of the physical worlds this master criminal, who best served Lucifer, the Devil.

It was this man's secret and dastardly manipulation of power credits, while he was secretary of the Third Credit Board, that plunged the earth, Venus, Jupiter and Saturn into the terrible financial panic of '42, followed by the Great Inter-Planetary Pestilence, whose spontaneous receptive centers were not isolated and broken down by the Klung opti-serum until billions had died, or been hopelessly paralyzed. And it was his re-

morseless Iago humor that staged the Sid Savior, that enthusia-irritant whose mysticism incited the unspeakable race massacres of planet Cid Quix.

Besides these cataclysms of misfortune which could be directly traced to C-X, the Master Criminal, there were a hundred lesser atrocities that smelt too strongly of his unholy lamp of genius to emanate from any other light. Evidently the scarlet planet was his harem-star, where he retired from time to time to rest from his pernicious labors, and renew his physical body with the salts of 4-X-Olite.

The two steel projectiles from the automatic of the little corporal toppled the Master Criminal to the ground, where he writhed like a snake at the feet of his slayer. Seizing Bailee's automatic, Davidson emptied its contents into the writhing form, then casting the weapon down, shouted: "The devil is dead! Quick! to the plane before his blood-toads get us!"

He ran towards the open port of the planet-plane, and even as he turned and ran the darkness came. It may have been the night of the scarlet planet, coming upon them without any twilight in the dustless air. Or some celestial calamity may have instantly obscured the sunstar above them. In both instances a purely physical phenomenon of the physical cosmos. Or the transcendent powers of evil so suddenly released from the person of the Master Criminal may have been retarded an instant from absorption by the spiritual cosmos, and beaten back like a billow of smoke just before the flame bursts, and clouded and darkened an area of the physical world.

But whether natural or supernatural, or something of both, sudden darkness came upon the three men, and Hal-Al and Bailee were alarmed into flight almost at the heels of the little corporal. They dashed into the planet-plane, where Davidson hurled himself through the murky light to the pilot-board, while his companions shot the massive bolts of the fore-port.

In another minute the great planet-plane arose amidst a down-sweeping hurricane of hail and fire, that tore at the plane like furies at a living creature, and Davidson saw some sights through the pilot's observatory window that he would never speak of, for there are things for speech and there are things for silence, and of the latter were these.

The little corporal was confident that the sudden oncoming of darkness, and the fury of the storm that swiftly followed, had justified his acts to his two companions, for they did not censure him at all. Neither for killing Jaquet—Davidson was confident his bullets had killed the Master Criminal—nor for abandoning the scarlet planet. The two young fellows went about their duties of bringing the planet-plane back to the earth, as soberly and orderly as their superior could have desired, seemingly indifferent to the sudden turn of the wheel of adventure.

But Davidson was completely fooled by his merry companions. The instant obscurity had come over the scene, youth had leapt into the arms of youth. The girl from the scarlet sphere had leapt into the arms of Bailee, and the fiancée

of the Master Criminal had leapt into the arms of Hal-Al, and they had fled into the planet-plane through the murk, at the very heels of the little corporal. Here the two happy lovers had concealed their sweethearts abaft, with Chang and Chow, the cat and dog mascots, to amuse them when they were alone, and after landing on the earth they had smuggled them from the plane without Davidson's knowledge.

Some months later, after the store of 4-X-Olite, that the little corporal had gathered on the scarlet planet, was removed from the plane, tested, sold, and credited in his name and the name of his two companions, making them the richest of earth men, Davidson was invited to a dinner where Hal-Al and Bailee confessed in high delight to the truth about the two girls, and brought forth from an inner room the lovely and visible proofs of the verity of their confession, begging him to do the honors of Best Man at their formal wedding. Afterwards they presented Davidson with a great gold shield, on one side of which was a life-size image of himself in a kind of crude toga, killing a serpent with an automatic, while on the other side were several original verses, compounded of their best wit and affection, and reading:

John Howard Davidson

Without a doubt
A good old Scout!

He turned the trick
And nicked Old Nick!

Long may he live
To take and give,

And still believe
Truth's up his sleeve!

And when at last
His term is past,

And he is not
Here, nor forgot,

May Story limn
The Grit of him

And make his name
An heir of Fame!

THE END