

Fantastic

ADVENTURES

TRADE MARK REGISTERED

Contents for August, 1942

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VOLUME 4, NUMBER 8

The Editor's Notebook

A CONFIDENTIAL CHAT WITH THE EDITOR

DAVID WRIGHT O'BRIEN and Robert Moore Williams engaged in a duel in this issue, both having long stories which have your editor guessing as to which will win the nod as "best" from you readers. Confidentially, if you can definitely pick one or the other, you are sticking your neck out further than we are willing to!

The Son of Death

by ROBERT MOORE WILLIAMS

John Ward was being hunted like an animal—but
unlike a beast, he could do more than run away!

A lance of light leaped
from Ward's cigarette.





“JUST a minute, buddy,” the man said, stopping and staring at John Ward.

The two men had met on the sidewalk of a busy street. John Ward had seen the stranger stop and look curiously at him, he had seen the startled look of recognition in the man’s eyes.

Ward was being hunted again!

Being hunted was not a new sensation with John Ward. All his life he had known he was being hunted. Ever since he had been old enough to know anything, he had known that somewhere on earth an enemy was searching for him. He did not know the iden-

tity of this enemy. He did not know why the enemy wanted to kill him. He had never seen this enemy and he did not know how he knew this enemy existed. All he knew was that his life was being sought. Day and night, never stopping, he was being hunted. Day and night, ever since he could remember, in the back of his mind a warning voice had been whispering, “Watch out. You’re being hunted.”

Now the voice was whispering again. “Be alert. Be careful. He’s after you!”

Ward stopped and looked at the man who had spoken. He saw an individual who would not stand out in any

crowd. A grayish suit and a grayish hat. Everything about this man was gray, even to his eyes. He looked like a moderately successful lawyer, or possibly like a small-time business man. There was nothing outstanding about him, except his grayness.

"Were you speaking to me?" Ward said.

"Yes. Don't I know you?"

Ward shook his head. "I think not," he said. "At least, I don't know you."

The gray man's eyes searched his face. Every sense alert, Ward watched him. "Is this my enemy?" he thought. He didn't know. There was something strange about this gray man, something very strange. It was not his clothes. It was *his face*. There was no trace of any emotion on it. It was stolid, indifferent, mask-like. The mindless face of an idiot might look like this. But this man was no idiot. There was something purposeful about him, and an idiot rarely showed purpose.

"I saw a picture of you once," the man said. "It was taken four or five years ago, when you were about sixteen. You've changed a lot since then but I can still recognize you. You're John Ward."

Triumph sounded in the stranger's voice. His gray eyes lit with sudden fire.

Ward frowned. "What kind of nonsense is this?"

"It's not nonsense."

"No? It can't be anything else. I never had a picture taken in my life."

He hadn't, either. Pictures could be dangerous things.

"The picture was taken without your knowledge," the gray man said. "There is no use in trying to deny your identity. It was pure accident, my stumbling on to you here, after all the places we've looked for you. But I recognized you as soon as I saw you. You're John Ward."

"And you're either a lunatic or a fool," Ward said. "If it's any information to you, my name is William Black."

"Yes?" A little uncertainty showed in the gray man's eyes. "I could be mistaken, of course," he mumbled.

"You are mistaken," Ward said. He reached into his coat pocket, pulled out a package of cigarettes, selected one and coolly lit it. All the time he was watching the gray man's hands. "Anything else I can do for you?" he said.

"No," the man said. "No, I guess not. Are you sure your name is really William Black?"

"Hell, don't you think I know my own name?" Ward demanded.

"Yes," the gray man said hastily. "Of—of course. Sorry to have bothered you, sir. I thought you were somebody else." Bowing and apologizing, he backed away. One hand went inside his coat.

Instantly his manner changed.

"You fool!" he grated. "You should have shot first! Don't you know that in this game the stakes are mortal?"

The gray man's hand came out from under his coat. There was a gun in it, a heavy caliber, bull-dog revolver. The sunlight glinted on the sheen of blue steel.

IT WAS a busy street. People were passing on the sidewalk. Cars were swishing by on the pavement. Taxis were honking. In the next block a street car was rumbling along. Dozens of witnesses were certain to see the gray man. But in spite of that, he was going to commit murder!

Ward was standing with his back against a building. As soon as the man had stopped him, long established habits of safety had seen to it that he move until his back was protected. This process was entirely unconscious. He

didn't have to think about it. Still smoking the cigarette, he was standing there now.

A triumphant glint in his eyes, the gray man brought up the gun.

Ward didn't try to run. That was useless. He merely pointed the cigarette at the gray man's face, pressed his fingers against the tiny white tube. An ordinary cigarette would have crumbled under the pressure. This one didn't. The lighted end exploded with a tiny *pop*. A jet of gray vapor lanced from it.

The vapor struck the gray man in the face. He dropped the gun and began to scratch at his eyes.

"I can't see!" he howled. "You've blinded me!"

"Not permanently," Ward said.

"Are—are you going to kill me?"

"No. I want you to carry a message for me."

"A m—m—message?"

"Yes. You can tell the man back of you that I know the stakes are mortal. Tell him from now on he doesn't need to hunt me any more *because I will be hunting for him*. Do you get it?"

"Y—y—yes. But there's not anybody back of me."

"The hell there isn't! Tell him I'm not running any longer. Tell him I'm coming after him."

Ward was aware that pedestrians, startled at the scene taking place before their eyes, were veering away. Curious eyes were staring at him, at the gray man, most of all at the gun lying in plain sight on the sidewalk. He turned and walked casually away. Glancing back, he saw the gray man try to run. The fellow blundered into a parked car, lost his balance and fell down. He was still scratching at his eyes.

A cop came lumbering up.

"What's going on here?"

"There was an attempted hold-up," Ward said excitedly. "I saw it all. A guy tried to stick up a pedestrian and the pedestrian smacked him down and ran. There's the hold-up artist lying in the gutter. That's his gun on the sidewalk. Arrest him, officer, before he gets away."

The gray man was trying to get to his feet again. He must have realized he was in imminent danger of being arrested. Obviously he didn't want to make any explanations to the law. Neither did John Ward.

"Get him, officer, before he escapes."

"I'll get him!" the cop grimly said. Jerking a set of handcuffs out of his pocket, he ran toward the gray man. Suppressing a smile, Ward turned and walked the other way.

TURNING the corner, he strolled casually around the block. He made a complete circuit and entered the building in front of which the gray man had tried to kill him. A curious crowd had gathered and a siren was whining in the street as a squad car drove up. The gray man, his hands in iron bracelets, was vigorously shouting that *he* was the victim of a holdup and would the dumb cops please catch the guy who pulled a gun on him, then squirted tear gas in his eyes. He sounded very unhappy and very convincing. The cops were looking bewildered. Ward grinned. The gray man would probably be able to explain his way out the mess but it would take time and Ward wanted to be uninterrupted during the next two hours.

Ward entered the building and walked up to the third floor. There was an elevator but he preferred not to use it. Nothing had changed here on this third floor. It was still as he had remembered it, including the name

on the door. The name was

JAMES SIMPSON
Attorney at Law

He opened the door and found himself in the deluxe reception room of a suite of swank offices. There were venetian blinds on the windows, thick rugs on the floor. The receptionist's desk was made of mahogany and was ornamented with a bowl of roses. The receptionist herself had pushed one of the blinds aside and was leaning out the window, revealing a nice pair of legs as she did so.

"Lot of excitement outside," Ward said. "I caught a glimpse of it as I came in. What's going on out there?"

The girl jumped, then blushed when she discovered she had been revealing her legs.

"There was a hold-up, or something," she said. Then she became stiff and formal. "What can I do for you?"

"I want to see Mr. Simpson."

"Do you have an appointment?"

"No."

"Then I am afraid Mr. Simpson can't see you. He is a very busy man—"

"I think he'll see me all right. Tell him John Ward is here."

CHAPTER II

The Lawyer's Story

"**WHAT** the devil happened to you?" the bewildered attorney demanded. "I was just ready to enter you in college when you disappeared."

"I was sorry to miss college," Ward said. "I tried to educate myself, and I think possibly I managed to do a fair job of it, from books and correspondence courses. Not like the real thing, of course, but it was the best I could do."

The attorney was an elderly man, with white hair and a lined, benevolent, face. He was looking bewildered now. "But where did you go?" he said.

Ward shrugged. "First stop, Australia. I shipped on a tramp steamer as a mess boy, jumped ship in Sydney, knocked around there for six months. The next hop was to South Africa. I stayed there a year. After that, Brazil, Panama, Texas. I spent the last year in New York, returning to Los Angeles only this morning."

The attorney blinked. Ulysses had not sailed a tenth as far as had John Ward. And the marks of his travels showed in the tanned brown of his lean face, in the alertness of his eyes, in the sureness of his bearing. As a skinny kid, Ward had run away. Now after five years he had returned, a man.

"But why did you run away in the first place?" the puzzled lawyer asked.

"They were getting a little too close to me."

"They were getting too close to you? What are you talking about? Who are *they*?"

"The killers."

"The—"

"The hunters," Ward supplied. "The men who were trying to kill me. They were getting a little too hot. I had to hide, if I wanted to keep on living."

"You—" Amazement in his eyes, the lawyer stared at the man sitting across the desk from him. Ward had spoken calmly. The matter of fact tone of his voice, even more than what he said, startled the attorney, made him wonder if this hard, bronzed young man sitting across from him was insane.

"Somebody was trying to kill you?" Simpson said, when he had found enough breath to speak. "You thought your life was in danger?"

"Hell, I know it was in danger. Oh,

they were being clever about it. They were trying to kill me by accident. I would go for a ride on my bicycle. A car would almost run me down. I would go for a walk along the street. A brick would fall off a building. After three or four of these fake accidents where I barely managed to escape by the skin of my teeth, I got the idea. The only thing for me to do was to take air. I took air, and I didn't leave a forwarding address."

"But—"

"Somehow they managed to pick up my trail. How they located me in Sydney, I don't know. Maybe they located the freighter I had shipped on and some of the crew told them I had jumped ship in Sydney. Anyhow they found me. This time they didn't bother to try an accident. I was living in a cheap hotel. They took a shot at me from an adjoining building, while I was reading in bed, and blew the book out of my hands. So," Ward grinned wryly. "I left Sydney."

"But—but this is preposterous!" the lawyer gasped. "It's incredible. It's impossible. Do you realize what you are saying? Do you mean to tell me that you have been hunted over almost the entire surface of the earth?"

Ward nodded. "That's about the size of it," he said.

A BAFFLED look appeared on Simpson's face. "I—I scarcely know what to say," he stuttered. "I can't bring myself to believe this wild tale. I—"

"You think I'm nuts," Ward said quietly.

"N—no. That is—"

"You don't have to be evasive. I don't blame you for thinking I have a screw loose somewhere. A lot of times I have thought so myself. But—did you hear that siren in the street out-

side your office a few minutes ago?"

"Yes. But what's that got to do with this?"

"It's got this to do with it," Ward said. "That siren was on a squad car coming to pick up a man who had tried to kill me, and failed!" He told the story of the gray man, and what the gray man had said, and what the gray man had tried to do.

As the lawyer listened, the baffled look on his face grew more baffled. He looked like a man the foundations of whose faith have been rocked to the bottom. He lived in a world of law and order, where everything was cut and dried, where every action was determined by precedent. It was with the greatest difficulty that he could conceive of a situation that violated every human law. He had no knowledge of the dark and sinister forces that now and again seem to operate on earth, and little wish to know of them. When Ward had finished speaking, he wiped his face with a fine linen handkerchief, and restored it to his breast pocket.

"But why," he whispered. "Why on earth should anyone want to kill you? What meaning is hidden behind these attempts to kill you?"

"That," said Ward, "is why I came to you. You were, and I presume you still are, my guardian."

"Yes. My guardianship does not lapse until you are 21."

"I am 21 today. I do not know who my parents were. Nor do I know who I am. I have no knowledge of my real identity. But inasmuch as these attempts to kill me must have their roots in my past, I have come to you. You are my guardian. If anyone can tell me who I am, and can help me find the man who is hunting me, you can do it. That is why I came to you, Mr. Simpson."

For several minutes the attorney

stared without speaking at the man sitting across the desk from him. He swallowed once or twice. He noticed that Ward had taken a cigarette from his pocket and without lighting it, had placed it between his lips. He cleared his throat and pressed the buzzer on his desk. When the receptionist answered his ring, he said,

"Bring me the file in the case of John Ward."

WHEN the girl had left, Ward leaned back in his chair. He could feel the throbbing of the vein in his temple. This was the only sign which indicated how much this moment meant to him.

For years he had dreamed of this hour. For years he had been hunted by secret, invisible enemies that had struck at him out of hiding. Only the sharpness of his wits, only the voice in the back of his mind constantly whispering, "Be alert. You're being hunted. He's after you!" had kept him alive. Because of these circumstances, his mind had been sharpened and his body had been forged into a hard, keen instrument fit to do his will. Where other boys had been mothered through college, their life made easy for them, he had been forced to stand against the world, and in the process he had been made fit to stand against anything. At 21, John Ward was a better man than most men can ever hope to be.

Now, with pounding heart, he was waiting for the girl to return with the file.

The file was his only link with his unknown identity, and since the enemies hunting him could only have come out of his past, the file was his only hope of discovering who his enemies were. For years he had run from them, trying to find some hiding place where

he might be safe. Always they had hunted him out. Now he had stopped running. Now he was turning to fight.

The girl returned. She was empty handed. She looked perplexed. "I'm sorry, sir," she said to the lawyer. "I can't find a file on John Ward."

"It's in the vault, where all important documents are kept. Did you look in the vault?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you didn't find it?"

"No sir." It isn't there. I looked very carefully."

"But it *has* to be there," the lawyer insisted. He got to his feet. "I'll go get it myself," he said.

Ward watched him leave the room. He was conscious of a sinking feeling at the pit of his stomach. The feeling grew stronger when the lawyer returned.

"I—I don't understand it," the lawyer was muttering. "That vault is supposed to be burglar-proof. I am the only person who has the combination. I unlock it every morning and lock it every evening. To the best of my knowledge, it has never been tampered with. But—"

"The records in my case are gone?" Ward quietly asked.

"Damn it, yes!" the lawyer shouted. He looked more bewildered than ever.

"I'm not too surprized."

THE tone of his voice rather than the words he used focused the lawyer's attention on him. Simpson's face turned purple. "Damn it, sir!" he shouted. "Are you suggesting that I am deliberately withholding information?" Then the lawyer's voice changed again. "I'm sorry, my boy," he apologized. "Under the circumstances, I would not blame you too much if you were suspicious of me. But I can give you my word of honor that

I have no knowledge of what happened to the records in your case."

"I believe you," Ward said. He had had experience in judging men. Unless he was badly mistaken, this attorney was honest. "I suspect the records were stolen, to make certain they would not fall into my hands."

"But my vaults are burglar-proof."

"I know the men who are seeking me are killers. I see no reason to believe they are not burglars also. Since they located me here in Los Angeles five years ago, they must also have located you. What would be more logical for them to do than to remove my records from your files?"

"But why should they do that?" the lawyer protested.

"I don't know," Ward said. "But possibly those records contained information that they thought was dangerous to them, information about my identity that they didn't want to get into my hands."

"Then they wasted their time!" the lawyer snorted. "There was no information of any conceivable importance about you in those files."

"There wasn't?" Ward questioned. "You mean you don't know anything about me, that you don't know who I am?"

"That's exactly what I mean," the attorney said. "I don't know who you are. I have never known."

"What?" Ward gasped. "But you're my guardian! If anybody knows who I am, you must."

"I'm your guardian all right, but I was appointed by the court to serve in that capacity. As to any information about you, I can give you from memory all the information I have, or have ever had, about you."

"Then go ahead," Ward said eagerly.

The attorney leaned back in his chair and crossed his hands in front of his

vest. A meditative, judicial look appeared on his face. For the first time since John Ward had entered his office, the lawyer felt he was on familiar ground.

"This is June 5, 1945," he said musingly. "On June 5, 1925—twenty years ago today—the Los Angeles police received an anonymous telephone call directing them to go to a vacant house on Avalon Boulevard, where they would find an abandoned baby. The police, investigating this mysterious call, went to the address given to them. There they found a child asleep in an ordinary basket. You were this child."

The attorney paused. Ward leaned forward.

"With the child was a note," the lawyer continued. "The note was addressed to the police department. Its contents were simple, a few brief lines on a sheet of cheap paper. 'I regret the necessity that compels me to take this drastic action but circumstances beyond my control leave me no alternative. The child's name is John Ward. He is one year old today. I request that he be carefully and completely educated and funds are provided for that purpose.'"

The lawyer's dry voice went into silence.

"**WAS**—was that all?" Ward said.

"Except for the fact that the pillow on which you were so blissfully sleeping was made of a roll of currency totaling twenty thousand dollars, that was all," the lawyer said. "The note was unsigned, there was nothing to indicate your relationship to the writer, there was nothing to show why you were abandoned. Because of the money, which was obviously intended to provide for your maintenance and education, the case received considerable newspaper publicity. Incidentally,

it is possible, in view of what you have told me, that these newspaper stories provided the means by which you were later located by those who were seeking to destroy you. This, however, is conjecture.

"Naturally, under such circumstances, you became a ward of the court, and I was appointed your guardian by the court. I placed you in a foster home, and, until you vanished, provided for your support and education, using the funds left with you for that purpose. Incidentally, about eight thousand dollars remain unspent of the original twenty thousand. Inasmuch as you have now reached your majority, I shall be glad to turn this sum over to you at your convenience."

"Thank you," Ward said. "I can use the money but I am not greatly interested in it. But—" For the first time, a trace of desperation showed on his brown face, "is that all you know about me? Isn't there something else you can tell me?"

The answer to this question was of tremendous importance to John Ward. Only he knew how important it really was. There is a hunger in every human being to belong somewhere, to fit some place. Not knowing who he was, Ward had never been able to feel he belonged anywhere. His life had been made purposeless by this fact. Always he had felt at loose ends.

If he could learn who he was, his life would come into focus, would achieve meaning. If he could learn the secret of the hidden forces that had unquestionably been set in motion before he was born, he would know where to find his enemies, where to strike at them. Without this knowledge he was like a man lost in the dark who is beset by hidden enemies that strike at him out of nowhere, out of nothingness. He *had* to know who he was, he *had*

to know the secrets hidden away from him.

"Can't you tell me more than this?" he whispered.

The lawyer shook his head. There was compassion on his face, and a trace of bewildered fear. "I'm sorry," he said. "I have given you all the facts in my possession. Naturally, considering the circumstances under which you were found, the police attempted an investigation. It came to nothing. They picked up no clue about the person who had left you in the vacant house. They thought this person was a man, because it was a man's voice who called them on the phone, and because the note was written in a man's handwriting. It might have been your father. It might not have been. Nobody knows. Where he came from, where he went, and the reason he deserted you, were enigmas the police could not solve. I'm sorry, lad—"

WARD rose to his feet. "Thanks, anyhow," he said. "I want you to know that I appreciate all the things you did for me when I was a kid growing up. It isn't your fault that you know no more about me than you do. And thanks for trying to help me."

"I did no more than my duty," the lawyer answered. "I'm sorry I can't be of more help. If at any time—" The attorney stopped in midsentence. His eyes lit with a new gleam. "Wait a minute!" he said. "There is something else. I just this moment recalled it. When you were found, something else *was* found in the basket with you. It had completely slipped my mind. Just a second and I'll get it for you if—" he faltered, as he recalled what had happened to the file on John Ward. "—if it's still here."

"What is it?" Ward asked eagerly.

But the lawyer had already got to

his feet and was bustling out of the room. A moment later he returned.

"It was there!" he said exultantly. He had a small cardboard box in his hand. Once the cover of the box had been white. Now it was yellow. The lawyer handed the box to Ward.

Inside was a note. Written in a cramped, Spencerian hand, the note said,

"To my dear son, to be given to him on the day when he is twenty-one years of age."

The note was unsigned.

Under it was—

"It's a watch!" Ward said. Disappointment and pleasure were mingled in the tone of his voice, disappointment, because he had hoped for information, pleasure, because somebody had thought enough of him to remember him with a present on the day when he became of age.

It was an odd watch, he saw as he examined it. Old style. But it was at least twenty years old and back in those days stream-lining had not been discovered. A thick case, made of some metal that was not gold. It was a wrist watch, with a heavy metal band attached to it.

Ward wound it, slipped it on his wrist.

"Thanks," he smiled at the lawyer. "Thanks for—"

The words faltered into silence. The smile vanished from his face. Sudden, startled fear came into his eyes. Involuntarily his mouth dropped open.

The lawyer saw the change come over him. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"N—nothing. I'm—I'm all right."

Ward's face was turning white.

"But there is something wrong," the lawyer insisted. "Are you ill? Do you want me to call a doctor?"

Ward's voice was a whisper. "I'm all right," he said. "But—the watch is

talking to me!"

"The watch is talking—" The surprise on the lawyer's face gave way to dismay. "Are you—are you insane? Watches don't talk!"

"This one does!" Ward said grimly. He saw the dismay on the lawyer's face, knew what he was thinking. With an effort of will, the bronzed youth gained control of himself. He turned and started toward the door. Without thinking, he knew what he had to do.

"Wait a minute," the lawyer shouted. "Where are you going?"

"Away," Ward answered. "If I stick around here, you will have me clapped in the booby hatch."

The door slammed behind him.

The incredulous lawyer followed him into the reception room and tried to detain him.

"Sorry," said Ward. "I have to go. Don't try to stop me. I know what I'm doing. For the first time in my life, I really know what I am doing."

"But how did you find out what to do?" the lawyer husked.

"The watch is telling me," Ward answered. He slammed the outer door behind him, leaving a bewildered attorney and his equally bewildered receptionist gasping at each other in the office he had quitted.

IN the hall outside, Ward stopped, put his back to the wall, and leaned against it. He had regained control of himself now. For a moment, he had been startled, but the first shock of surprise had passed.

All his life a voice had whispered to him. "Watch out. Be on the alert. He's after you."

The voice had seemed to come from somewhere deep within his mind. He had long since given up attempting to discover its source. It had become a part of him, something that he had

taken for granted.

It had never told him anything except to be on the alert, to watch out, to be careful.

The instant he had put the wrist watch on his arm, the voice had started speaking to him again. It was no longer telling him to be on the alert. It was talking directly to him, telling him what to do.

"John Ward," the voice was saying, *"the hour has come. You are now of age, you are now old enough to take up the task that has been set for you. Go at once to the Big Cypress Swamp in the Everglades of Florida. Go to the Knoll of the Three Pines. There you will receive information, and instruction. Go at once. Be on the alert. There is danger ahead of you. Take every precaution. But go at once."*

The mysterious voice whispered into silence.

John Ward blinked. He looked appreciatively down at the wrist watch on his arm.

"And I thought I knew something about gadgets!" he said. "But I never thought of a gadget like *this!*"

He did know something about gadgets. The cigarette that had hurled tear gas into the eyes of the gray man, blinding him, had been a clever gadget. Ward had put in many an hour of hard work perfecting the cigarette trick. But the cigarette was nothing compared to this watch that after twenty years could faithfully deliver a message entrusted to it!

"Must be some kind of radio," he thought, dismissing it from his mind.

He had no time to waste thinking about the watch, and how it operated. He had something to do. It seemed to him that without his conscious direction all his life had been spent in preparing to do the job that was before him.

CHAPTER III

The Secret of the Swamp

"**M**ISTER, you mean you're going into Big Cypress?" the lanky Florida native said.

John Ward nodded. A four-motored sub-stratosphere transport plane had brought him from Los Angeles to Miami. A chartered plane had brought him to this small village on the west coast of Florida. "Certainly I'm going into Big Cypress Swamp," he said. "That's why I came to you. I want to rent a boat."

The native wore ragged, dirty overalls. A growth of tobacco-stained whiskers covered his face. Looking at the ground, he said, "Sorry, mister, but I ain't got any boats to rent."

"You haven't?" Ward said. Suspended between two poles thrust into the muck at the bank of the small river that flowed sluggishly out of the swamp, was a sign. The lettering was faded but still decipherable. The sign read

BOATS FOR RENT

"Isn't that your sign?" Ward said, pointing to it.

"Yep, I guess so," the man hesitantly admitted.

"What do you mean, 'You guess so?' Is it your sign or isn't it?"

"Yep, it's mine all right."

"Aren't those your boats?" Ward continued, pointing to several flat-bottomed rowboats and two canoes drawn up on the bank of the river.

The man in overalls was a fair sample of Georgia cracker, with all the stubborn, wilful contrariness that the cracker so often displays. It was obvious that he didn't want to talk, probably for no reason other than contrariness. He spat tobacco juice at a beetle

on the ground and did not answer.

"I asked you if you owned those boats?" Ward said.

At the tone of his voice, the native squirmed. "Yep, they're my boats," he reluctantly admitted.

"All right," Ward said. "I want to rent a canoe."

"To go into Big Cypress?"

"Certainly."

"Sorry, mister," the native said. "None of my canoes are for rent, if the feller that rents 'em is going into Big Cypress."

"Why not?" Ward challenged.

"If I rent my boats, I want 'em back," the boatman answered.

"You will get it back," Ward said impatiently.

The boatman shook his head. "The chances are I won't get it back, mister, not if the man who rents it is going into that swamp!"

"Do you think I'm going to steal it?" Ward said.

"I ain't saying anything like that, mister," the boatman answered.

"What are you hinting at?" Ward demanded. "Are you trying to tell me I'll be killed if I go into the swamp?"

THE boatman didn't answer. Ward plied him with questions. The man squirmed and twisted but he wouldn't talk. From his evasive answers, Ward gathered that he was scared of the swamp.

"What are you scared of?" Ward demanded.

"I ain't scared, I don't know nuthin', and I ain't talkin'," the boatman sullenly answered. "My boats just ain't for rent, that's all."

"All right," Ward said. "I'll *buy* one of them. How much do you want for one of those canoes? Or are you afraid to sell?"

The boatman was not afraid to sell.

Ward had in his pocket a good chunk of the eight thousand dollars he had received from the lawyer before leaving Los Angeles. He didn't in the least mind spending money. Money wasn't important.

Reaching the Knoll of the Three Pines was important.

The boatman helped Ward stow his equipment in the canoe.

"You got any relatives or anybody you want notified if you don't come back?" the boatman asked, as Ward shoved the canoe out into the river.

"No," Ward answered. He dug the paddle into the water and sent the canoe up the river. If he didn't return, or if his body floated back down the sluggish stream, there was no one to be notified.

The Knoll of the Three Pines was just exactly what its name said it was, a sandy knoll rising above the muck of the Florida Everglades. Three huge pine trees stood on top of the knoll. Stretching away for miles in every direction, was nothing but swamp, an almost impenetrable tangle of saw-edged grass growing out of black muck. No roads ran into his region, no trails crossed it. The only method of travel was by boat. It was a true jungle, one of the few jungle areas still existing in North America, and it was so remote, so hard to enter, so dangerous, that the only inhabitants, aside from the far too numerous alligators and deadly cotton mouth moccasins, were a few hardy Seminole Indians, who still managed to survive in this fastness.*

* The Everglades region of Florida, according to one scientist, is one of the few places on earth today where coal beds are in the process of formation. Thus these vast tide-water swamps must to some extent duplicate the great swamps that must have existed on earth millions of years ago when our present supply of coal was laid down.—Ed.

John Ward reached the Knoll of the Three Pines late in the afternoon. He had paddled for miles, forcing his canoe through stagnant sloughs over-grown with water plants, along narrow passages where black water marked the only passable trail. In Miami he had consulted detailed maps of this region and from them had learned the location of the place he was seeking. But of far more help to him than the maps had been the fact that he seemed to recognize this region as soon as he entered it. When he had been in doubt as to a turning, a voice in the back of his mind had whispered, "This way."

IT was the same voice that had whispered to him all his life.

It was whispering to him now.

"Be on the alert. Be ready. He's after you."

He sat in the canoe studying the knoll. In reality it was a small island rising in the midst of a swamp. Covered with a growth of scrub pine, it rose a few feet above the water level.

"If I were hunting for a place to hide," he thought. "This would be the kind of a place I would choose."

His eyes searched the island. There was no sign of human life, no indications that men had ever been here. What if humans had never been here? The implications of the question were stunning. For the first time in his life he realized he did not know whether or not the enemy he was seeking was human! True, men had tried to kill him, but they might have been tools of a master that was not human!

As he shoved the canoe toward the shore, a heavy splash came from somewhere in the swamp. A startled blue crane squawked into the air and flapped away. The splash did not come again. He reached the canoe, drew it well up on the sandy bank, then, as silently as

a shadow, slid into the growth of scrub pines.

Not fifty yards from the shore, in a little clearing, he found signs that humans had once been here. Stubs that had once been the foundations of a house protruded from the ground. Judging from the extent of the foundation, it had been a rambling structure of several rooms.

It had been burned to the ground.

The burning had taken place many years in the past. Small pine trees were growing where the house had once stood.

The whole clearing had been dug full of deep holes. Covered with briars and weeds now, the pits were still plainly visible. Not a foot of ground had remained unexcavated. The depressions were even visible between the burned poles that marked the foundations of the house.

"Whee!" Ward whistled. "Who dug all those holes?"

Once, on the Gulf of Mexico near Galveston, he had seen a place where treasure hunters had dug for a hoard of gold and jewels reputedly buried there by the pirate, Jean La Fitte. That place had looked like this.

Had treasure seekers been digging here on this island in the Florida Everglades? If so, what had they been seeking?

Ward searched the place carefully, seeking some clue that might reveal what had happened here. He began to find things, bits of broken glass, small pieces of corroded metal, pieces of broken pottery. There was a tremendous amount of the stuff. He found one thing that particularly interested him. Burned and twisted, it had obviously been a delicate chemical balance, a set of those super-sensitive scales that chemists use to measure microscopic amounts of various chem-

icals. He also found a broken test tube.

"A laboratory," he thought. "This place was once a laboratory."

The broken test tube, the chemist's balance, the other odds and ends, all pointed to the conclusion that somebody, at some time in the past, had set up a laboratory here on the Knoll of the Three Pines.

But who? And why? And when? And what part did this burned laboratory play in the mysterious past of John Ward?

"I should find more than this," he thought. "There should be more here than rubbish."

HE glanced at the watch the lawyer had given him. He was still wearing it. The mysterious voice that had spoken when first he put the watch on his wrist had not spoken again. Nor did it speak now.

He rose to his feet and prepared to make a complete search of the knoll. The sun, low in the west, was sinking behind a bank of thunder heads. A wind was beginning to moan through the pines. A storm was coming.

Overhead, at the top of the knoll, the three huge pines beckoned to him. He climbed the knoll.

The three large pines formed a triangle on top of the knoll. In the triangle was a granite marker that looked like a tombstone. Carved in the granite were the words

SACRED TO THE MEMORY OF
RICHARD AND ELIZABETH
WARD

For a long time John Ward stood without moving. There was a numbness in his mind. Again and again he read the words carved in the granite, but his mind refused to seek for the meaning that must be back of them.

He did not know what he had expected to find here, but it had not been a grave. Intuitively he knew he had been brought here for some purpose. What purpose could reach beyond the grave?

As he stood there, the sun plunged behind the bank of western clouds and the wind began to moan louder through the pines. Twilight was at hand. Fast falling tropic night was not far away.

Dimly he began to realize that a voice, *the* voice, was whispering again in his mind.

"Lay the watch in the circle on top of the stone."

A spider with feet of ice went walking up Ward's spine.

"Lay the watch in the circle on top of the stone."

The voice that had been in the back of his mind all his life, warning him, watching over him, was telling him what to do! Because the voice had been a part of him all his life, he had never questioned its origin. He had grown so accustomed to it that he had never thought of challenging its commands.

He did not challenge it now. Old habits of obedience were too well established for that, but cold winds were playing over his body as he stepped forward and looked at the top of the tombstone.

A circle, forming the letter O, had been carved in the granite.

He laid the watch in the circle. Leaping back, he crouched against one of the pines.

"All right," he thought. "What it is that is going to happen, let it happen!"

He was expecting anything to happen. If the earth opened up and a monster with horns leaped from the ground, he would not be too surprized. There were strong elements of witchcraft in this situation. He had the impression he was playing with forces

that were more than human. Trying to still the fevered beating of his heart, he crouched with his back to the trunk of the pine. The moaning wind went by overhead. In the distance a flash of lightning fingered against the black cloud moving through the sky.

THERE was a soft, muffled click. The opening of the latch on a door would make such a sound. It was followed by a thin screech like the turning of a door on a rusty hinge. That was all.

Ward waited.

The sounds did not come again.

Whatever it was that was going to happen, had happened. He couldn't see what it was. Heavy twilight had fallen. Then, straining his eyes, he saw it.

Something had projected itself from the top of the stone. A slim cylinder three feet in length had suddenly thrust upward there. Approaching, he saw what it was.

The circle carved on the top of the stone had been a plug closing an opening that led downward.

"Something was hidden in the stone!" he gasped. "There is—must be—a spring down in there, with a trigger to release it. The watch released the trigger. Somebody—somebody went to a lot of trouble to hide something where it would never be found!"

The object that had been projected from the granite was a cylinder made of a sheet of soft lead. The edges, the top and the bottom, had been soldered shut, apparently in an effort to make it waterproof. Using a pocket knife, Ward cut the lead away.

A roll of paper fell into his hands. It was a manuscript made up of many pages of yellowed paper rolled into a cylinder. With trembling fingers, Ward pulled a flashlight out of his pocket.

Written in a cramped hand on the first page were the words

"To John Ward and Patricia Holm, an explanation of their strange destiny."

His heart leaped as he read the words. Here, at last, was an explanation of the strange things that had happened to him. Here was the secret of his past. Eagerly he flipped the pages and started to read.

"Drop that manuscript and get your hands up."

He jerked his eyes away from the yellowed pages and looked straight into the beam of a flashlight and into the muzzle of a gun.

CHAPTER IV

The Thing in the Night

THE hand that held the gun did not waver. Ward could not see its owner but he could see the hand itself. Small and delicate, with well-kept nails, it was the hand of a girl.

Ward would have doubted the presence of anyone in this pestilential swamp. He had seen no one on the knoll and he had found no reason to believe that anyone was here. Now to find himself looking into the muzzle of a gun held by a girl was incredible.

He did not drop the manuscript.

The fingers circling the butt of the gun whitened.

"You'll shoot!" Ward involuntarily gasped. There was no mistaking the meaning of the whitening of those fingers.

"You darned right I'll shoot!" a girl's voice said. "If you don't drop that manuscript and get your hands up within ten seconds, you'll be a dead man."

He dropped the manuscript and jerked his hands into the air. He had

no choice except to obey. Inwardly he was cursing himself. He had been so interested in reading the manuscript that he had forgotten to be on the alert. It was one of the few times in his life that this had happened.

"Turn around," the girl ordered.

"But—"

"I said to turn around!" she snapped.

"Nuts, Patricia Holm," he answered.

"I'm not going to turn around and you're not going to shoot either."

"How did you know my name?" the girl gasped. Startled surprise was in her voice. For a second, the muzzle of the gun wavered. Ward brought his palm down edge first, striking at the gun. He was fast. Surprise was on his side.

But if he was fast, she was faster. The gun was jerked back out of his reach. He found himself looking again into its muzzle.

"Try that again and I'll blow a hole in you," the girl said.

Ward grimaced. He had been too hasty. He really hadn't had a chance to succeed. Only in western stories did the hero knock the gun out of the hand of his enemy.

"Wait a minute, Patricia," he said. "I shouldn't have done that. I'm sorry. You startled me."

"I'll say you shouldn't have done it," she answered. "Turn around."

"Listen, Patricia Holm," he said. "I'm John Ward."

"I don't know how you know my name," she said. "But I can't see that it makes any difference. As for you being John Ward, so what? I never heard the name before."

"And I had never heard of Patricia Holm until I looked at the front page of that manuscript!" Ward blazed. "Don't you understand? That manuscript is addressed to John Ward and Patricia Holm, and I'm John Ward."

For an instant the girl hesitated. "Is that manuscript really addressed to me?" she asked at last.

"To both of us," Ward answered.

"But how do you come into this situation?"

"Probably the same way you do," Ward answered grimly.

"But that's impossible. I don't believe it."

"Then look for yourself."

"All right," the girl assented. "But you back away and keep your hands up. If this is a trick, you might be interested to know that what I shoot at, I usually hit."

"This is no trick," Ward said, backing away. His mind in a turmoil, he watched her warily bend over and pick up the bundle of yellowed papers.

WHO was this girl? When he had called her Patricia Holm he had been stabbing in the dark. He had been guessing. It had seemed to be a good guess. The instant he had learned that there was a girl linked with him in this incredible adventure, it had seemed logical to assume that she would also come here. But he had not thought she was already here.

What part did she play in the chain of events that had brought him here? Had she also been hunted across the earth?

She looked up from the manuscript. "This is addressed to me all right," she hesitantly said. "And to John Ward."

"I am he."

"You are? Prove it?"

"Prove it?" Ward echoed.

"After all, you can scarcely expect me to take your word."

"Isn't the fact that I am here enough proof?" he demanded.

"Not for me," she coolly answered.

"If you are going to take that attitude, I must remember that I have no

proof that you are really Patricia Holm—*Look out! There is something back of you!*”

In the darkness Ward had caught a glimpse of a movement directly behind the girl. He shouted a warning at her. She gave no sign that she had even heard it.

“Do you think I will fall for an old trick like that?” she asked.

“It’s no trick. There is— Look out, girl, there *is* something back there. I saw it again.”

He started forward, and found the muzzle of the pistol centered on his heart. It brought him to a halt.

“I gather I am supposed to turn around and look behind me, giving you a chance—Eeeeeee!” Her scream split the night.

A hand and an arm came down across her shoulder. It ignored the gun and the flashlight and reached instead for the manuscript which she had tucked under her arm.

“I take,” a guttural voice muttered.

The manuscript was snatched from her grasp. She jerked herself away, began firing blindly. Ward had not clearly seen the thing that had attacked her. It was too dark for that. All he had glimpsed was a dark bulk moving behind the girl but he had seen the arm that came down and snatched the manuscript. The arm had been long and heavy. It had been covered with heavy reddish fur.

Ward had been forced to lay his own flashlight on the ground. The girl had dropped hers. Holstered under his left armpit was a pistol, but without light it was useless. Dropping to his knees he began to feel for one of the lights. Shrubs were cracking as a heavy body ran down the hill. The girl was still shooting blindly. Ward found a light, sent its beam down the side of the knoll. He caught a glimpse of something that

looked like a gorilla. It vanished among the scrub pines.

“What—what was that thing?” the girl gasped in a frightened voice.

“I don’t know. Are you hurt?”

“No. It barely touched me. Did— did it get the manuscript?”

“Yes.”

WARD did not add that if she had not been so suspicious, his warning might have enabled her to save the precious roll of paper. He started running down the slope.

“Where are you going?”

“I’m going to get that manuscript,” he answered, plunging down the side of the knoll. She called to him but he did not hesitate. A few minutes later, when he paused to search the ground for the trail of the beast that had come out of the night, she caught up with him.

“Let me go with you,” she panted.

“Why?”

“Because—because that manuscript means a lot to me too. If you are really John Ward you will know how much it means. I’m sorry I didn’t believe you when you tried to warn me but I was afraid you were tricking me.”

“And you’re not afraid of it now?”

“No. When that thing attacked me, you could have shot me. You didn’t. You tried to help me. I don’t know who you are or where you came from, John Ward, but I think you are my friend, the first one I ever had. And somehow, although I don’t know how, I think we are both mixed up in this business together.”

Her voice was low and tense. There was still fear in it but the frightened panic had gone. There was a new note in it too, a soft, pulsing eagerness that Ward had never heard before and could not define.

“Come on,” he said. “We’re in this together.”

He had accepted her. Her story could wait until later. The important task now was to find the creature—beast, devil, demon—that had stolen the all-important roll of paper.

That the task was almost hopeless, he knew before he started. Their only chance was to follow the tracks. And—he didn't like the looks of those tracks. They were big, at least a foot long, and while they were roughly human in shape, they showed the marks of claws.

"What—what could leave prints like this behind it?" the girl asked.

"I don't know," Ward answered bitterly. How many more questions would he have to answer with that unsatisfying phrase? He was sick of not knowing, of being always in the dark, of trying to elude an enemy that came from nowhere. He wanted to know what he was fighting.

The tracks led through the growth of scrub pines straight to the edge of the swamp. A lagoon of dark water, its surface ruffled by the constantly rising wind, lay before them. The tracks waded into the water, went out of sight.

"We haven't a chance," Ward groaned. "That thing can hide in this swamp forever."

GRIMLY he led the way back to the top of the knoll. He wanted to talk to this girl. She had come here. Obviously she must know something.

"What do you want me to tell you about myself?" she asked, in response to his question.

"Everything," he said. "Your whole life history."

"Well," she began, "I was raised in an orphanage—"

"I might have known it!" Ward interrupted. "And you don't know who your parents were or anything about yourself. You were found in a basket

on a doorstep, the only way you know your name is because there was a note that said you were Patricia Holm, a sum of money was left with you to provide for your education, and all your life a voice has been whispering to you, 'Be on the alert. He's after you.' A few weeks ago you became of age and you received a watch—"

"It was a ring," the girl interrupted. "But all the rest is true. How in the world did you know all these things about me?"

"Because the same thing happened to me!" Ward said. Briefly he told her what he knew of himself, then listened to what she had to say about herself. Her story duplicated his, with the exception that, as an infant, she had been left in New York instead of in Los Angeles.

"What does it all mean, John Ward?" she whispered.

"It means that we were hidden away. Tell me: have you been hunted all your life, have you had to hide?"

"No," she answered. "I have heard the same voice that you tell about and I've had the sensation that I was being hunted, but no one tried to kill me."

"Then they didn't find you," Ward said. "They found me, but missed you."

"But why were we hidden for so long? And why didn't the persons who hid us just leave a message for us? Why wasn't the manuscript simply left with our guardians?"

"I think I can answer that," Ward said. "No manuscript was left with our guardians because the persons who hid us doubted that such a message would ever reach us. And it wouldn't either. If any manuscript had been left with my guardian, it would never have got to me." He told her how the lawyer's vault had been burglarized. "Simpson's whole file on me had been taken. If the manuscript had been in

that file, I would never have seen it."

"Who are we, John Ward?" Her voice was tremulous. "What are we?"

"The manuscript would have told us," he answered. "Incidentally those holes I discovered here on the knoll may have been made by someone who suspected the manuscript was buried here and was searching for it. Did you see the holes?"

"No. I have just arrived and had concealed my canoe when I saw you coming. After that, I was trying to keep out of sight and shadow you at the same time. I didn't see any holes."

"The whole knoll has been dug full of them, especially around the place where the building once stood. I think there is little doubt that somebody searched this knoll very carefully, looking for that manuscript, and didn't find it, because it had been too cleverly hidden."

Little by little a picture was building up in his mind. It was vague and shadowy as yet, but he was beginning to get glimpses of the operation of some vast scheme in which he and this girl played central parts. He felt a little like an actor in a play, but unlike an actor, he did not know his part, he did not know his lines, nor his entrance cues. Obviously the play had been written before he was born, before Patricia Holm was born. They had been hidden away and clues had been left for them to enable them to learn the parts they were to play. The clues led here, to a roll of manuscript hidden away in what looked like a tombstone. But before they had a chance to learn their lines, the manuscript had been taken.

"WHAT *was* that thing?" Patricia Holm asked.

"It spoke English, saying 'I take' when it grabbed the manuscript. There-

fore it ought to be human. But if it wore clothes, I didn't see them. It didn't wear shoes and its tracks looked like it had claws. Therefore it ought to be a beast. Anything I say about it will be only a guess. Maybe it's both human and beast, which leaves only the questions of where it came from and what it was doing here."

"Do you think it dug the holes you found? Do you think it was searching for the manuscript?"

"I don't know. But it certainly ignored everything else and grabbed the manuscript. For all I know—" Ward shivered—"it may be our enemy."

He didn't believe that, but he didn't know it *wasn't* true, and in spite of his cast-iron-nerve, the thought sent shivers up his spine.

"What are we going to do?"

"Wait until tomorrow and see what can be done. Meanwhile," he glanced at the sky, "There is a storm coming."

Rain was already falling, in big splattering drops driven by the wind. Thunder was crashing nearer. They sought the protection of the pines on top of the knoll. Lightning began to flash.

A particularly brilliant flash of lightning came and Ward found himself waiting for the roar of the thunder.

The thunder did not come.

Not until then did Ward realize that the lighting flash had not come and gone in the split fraction of a second, the way lightning should. Coming from the clouds overhead, it had beamed down to earth. It did not die away. It hung in the air, a finger of intense light reaching to the ground.

"That's not lightning!" the girl gasped.

"It's a searchlight," Ward said. "But don't ask me what kind of a ship big enough to carry a searchlight of that power can stay in the air in a storm like this. I won't know the answer. But

that is a searchlight."

He knew that in spite of the tremendous stride aviation had made before the end of World War II, no nation had invented an airplane that could stay long aloft in the middle of a violent thunderstorm. But there was a plane up there in the clouds.

Illumined by a lightning flash, he caught a glimpse of the plane.

It wasn't a plane!

It was a ship something like a blimp. No motors were visible on it. It had no fins or elevators, to control it in air currents. Sleek and stream-lined, it was moving slowly through the darkness, oblivious of the storm.

"It's coming down," Patricia Holm said. "What shall we do?"

"Nothing," Ward said. "We can't run. We'll hide here and hope they won't find us."

"Do you think it's coming for *us*?" the girl persisted.

"I don't think it's here by accident!" Ward answered.

Slipping noiselessly through the night, the ship was dropping down toward the knoll.

CHAPTER V

The Impossible Fortress

THEY crouched under the pines, watching the ship.

"They'll have a hard time finding us in this storm," Patricia said. "Has it occurred to you that the people in the ship might be friends?"

"It has occurred to me that they mightn't, too," Ward answered drily. "What's going on there now?"

The ship had stopped moving. Seemingly without support it was hanging motionless in the air. The searchlight was focused on the clearing where the old laboratory had stood.

Something was moving in that clear-

ing. The light was focused on it.

"It's the beast that grabbed the manuscript!" the girl hissed.

The creature had been jumping up and down in the clearing, apparently trying to attract the attention of the occupants of the ship.

"It must have entered the lagoon and then doubled back. Probably it has been watching us all the time. Ah! I see what it is doing!" There was grim wonder in Ward's voice as he watched the scene taking place below them.

The beast had ceased jumping up and down. Looking up at the ship, it was pointing up toward the top of the knoll. As they watched, it started up the sandy slope. The ship followed it.

"It's telling them where we're hiding!" Patricia's startled voice rang out.

"Which proves that the people in that ship are scarcely friends," Ward commented. "Where are you going?"

The girl had leaped to her feet. "I'm going to hide," she answered. "Come on."

Ward rose to his feet but he made no effort to follow her.

"Aren't you coming?"

He shook his head.

"But we have to hide. It's our only chance. If they catch us, they'll kill us."

"Use your head," he said. "We would have to hide in the swamps. People who go into these swamps on foot usually don't come out. Besides, they can follow us through the air. They can hunt us down as no animal was ever hunted. If we run now, we haven't a chance."

"Is that your only reason?" the girl blazed.

"No," Ward said quietly.

"What's the rest of it?"

"I'm tired of running. I'm sick of hiding. And I am desperately sick of not knowing what I am running from.

So I am going out into the open and give myself up."

"But they'll kill you!"

"Maybe," he shrugged. "But if I am to fight my enemy, I have to know my enemy. Now that the manuscript is gone, the only way I can learn about my enemy is to go to him. I'm going to do just that."

THE girl was silent.

"But you don't have to go with me," Ward continued. "They may not know about you, and if they get me they may let you escape. You can hide tonight and tomorrow you can find my canoe or your boat and get out of here."

It was a reasonable suggestion. And it would give Patricia Holm a chance to keep on living.

"In the meantime, what about you?" she asked.

"I'll be all right," Ward said. "Get going now. They mustn't see you."

"You wouldn't be giving yourself up so I can escape?" she demanded.

"Partly," Ward admitted. "But that is not the important part. If you weren't here, I would do the same thing, for the same reasons. I'm tired of being hunted. I want to do a little hunting myself."

"You won't do any hunting if you're dead!"

Ward didn't answer that. "Beat it," he said. "And good luck."

"You're—you're really going out there and surrender?"

"Yes." He turned and walked down the side of the knoll.

The ship was just above the top of the scrub pine. Below it he could hear the beast-creature fighting its way through the undergrowth. The searchlight was darting everywhere. Suddenly, as he stepped into an open space in the pines, the light caught him. The

beam was blinding. He couldn't face it. He had to turn his head aside.

This was the moment that would decide his fate. If they didn't shoot him as soon as they saw him, he might, just possibly might, have a chance. He held his breath and lifted his hands.

Seconds passed while the light was focused on him. He waited for the shots. No shots came. The ship stopped moving. He had the impression he was being carefully scrutinized. He could feel his heart pounding savagely in his breast. Involuntarily his muscles tensed against the slugs he was afraid would come tearing into his body.

Would they shoot him? All over the earth they had tried to kill him. Now that he had walked into their arms would they shoot? Or would they stop to ask questions? Would the fact that he was willingly surrendering make them curious?

Abruptly the ship began to descend. It came straight down, in a way that no dirigible could ever move.

They hadn't shot him! They were going to take him prisoner!

"Well, they're going to ask questions before they shoot!" a relieved voice sighed near him.

It was Patricia Holm. Turning, he saw her standing within a few feet of him. She had followed him down the side of the knoll.

"I thought I told you to hide!" he challenged.

"You did," she answered. "But you didn't expect me to let you take all the risks while I saved my neck, did you? This is my fight too."

SMASHING the growth of pines aside, the ship came down. Trees six and eight inches in diameter were broken under its weight as easily as reeds. That fact startled Ward. He

had thought the ship might possibly be some form of advanced dirigible. The way it smashed the pines showed it was no dirigible. It must be made out of steel and it must weigh tons.

It stopped a few feet above the ground, hung there in the air as easily as a hummingbird might hang above a flower. A door opened in the side, revealing a lighted interior. A man appeared in the door!

"You!" Ward gasped.

It was the gray man, who had tried to kill him in Los Angeles. There was no mistaking the expressionless face, the emotionless eyes. He had changed clothes and was now wearing a kind of uniform. It was gray. Behind him were other men. They were also gray. All of them were holding strange looking devices that looked like sub-machine guns made out of polished aluminum and glass.

"There are two of you," the gray man said, as if this fact puzzled him. "If there had only been you, Ward, I would have known what to do. This complicates matters. I have to take both of you to the boss. Search them!" he said to the men with him. "If they make a move, blast them!"

The two captives did not attempt to resist.

"How did you get here?" Ward asked.

"Simpson phoned us," the gray man casually answered. "As soon as you turned up, he let us know you were there. We trailed you. As soon as it was obvious that you were coming here, I put in a call for the ship so we could come out here and pick you up.

"Simpson is in your employ!" Ward gasped.

"Well, yes," the gray man answered. "He has been working with us since you skipped out five years ago. We thought you would eventually come

back to him. Yes, Simpson has helped us out, although he doesn't know it."

"How can he keep from knowing it?"

"We have ways and means," was the enigmatic answer.

"But—who are you? And why have you been trying to kill me. What is this all about?"

"Don't you know?" the gray man said. "Well, it's not my turn to tell you. The boss will take care of that. Now no more questions. We're going to take you along to the boss. He'll know what to do with you. Into the ship with them, men. And watch them. This guy is tricky."

As they started toward the ship the beast-creature came waddling up. Seen in full light, he looked more like a beast than a man. He wore no clothes and he looked like a gorilla. Dirty, muddy, wet with rain, he came toward them.

"I got!" he was saying. "I got!"

HE WAS holding the roll of manuscript in his hands. Like an ungainly dog bringing something to its master he came up to the gray man and handed the manuscript to him.

The gray man grabbed it, ran his eyes over it. Surprise showed on his face. "This is what the boss has been looking for!" he exulted. "Will he be glad to get this! Toro, you've done a wonderful job, finding this," he said to the half beast.

"Toro good boy," the thing said, dim traces of pride in its voice. "Toro get. Toro watch. Toro hunt. Toro find. Something for Toro?" The voice was plaintive now. It sounded like an idiot who has done a good deed and is hesitatingly waiting for a promised reward.

"Sure," the gray man said. "There will be something for you."

Without a second's hesitation, he

brought up the strange device he carried, and pointed it at Toro. The half beast looked at it, a vague wondering smile on its face. The gray man pressed the trigger.

From the muzzle of the device there leaped a bolt of radiation. It looked like lightning. It smashed straight into the waiting face of Toro. The face vanished in a splash of red.

The huge, ungainly body fell like a sack of mud. It twitched, tried to roll over, then was still.

"Is that the way you reward your faithful servants?" Ward said.

The gray man shrugged. "His job was finished. We've had him here for years searching for this manuscript, waiting for you, if you happened to turn up. From what I've heard he has scared the natives clear out of these swamps."

"I'll say he has," Ward said, remembering the actions of the man from whom he had tried to rent a boat. "But why did you kill him?"

"Because his job was done," the gray man answered carelessly. "Because we don't need him any more."

At a wave of his hand, his men herded Ward and the girl into the ship. Patricia Holm looked sick.

"THEY'RE beasts!" the girl sobbed. "He wasn't anything but a harmless idiot. He scared me when he took the manuscript, but I didn't know what he was. And they murdered him! They're worse than beasts."

"They're kind of tough all right," Ward answered grimly.

They had been thrust into a small windowless hole that was without furniture of any kind. A tube in the ceiling shed a pale blue light over the cheerless room. Ward was listening to the whine of the mysterious motors that lifted the ship. The sensation of

increased weight told him that the vessel was rising fast.

The door opened. The gray man stood there.

"I just wanted to warn you not to try to escape," he said.

"Worried about us?" Ward asked.

"The boss does our worrying for us," the gray man answered.

"Who is the boss?"

"You'll find out soon enough," was the enigmatic answer.

"Okay," Ward shrugged. He changed the subject. "This is rather an unusual ship, isn't it? How does it operate?"

"I don't know," came the reply. "All we do is fly it. It is something in the way of a ship, though. The boss invented it."

"Hmm," Ward thought. Aloud he said. "I'm surprized I haven't seen stories about it in the newspapers. I should think it would arouse a lot of curiosity."

"It would," the gray man answered, "if anybody ever saw it."

"How can you keep people from seeing it?"

"Oh, it has been seen, a few times. But nobody has ever believed the people who said they saw such a thing. We only land at night. When we're out in the daytime, we fly too high to be seen. A ship twenty to thirty miles high is invisible."

"Twenty or thirty miles?" Ward gasped. "Will it go that high?"

"Yes, and a lot higher. We're about thirty miles high right now."

"The devil we are! Would you mind telling us where we are going?"

"Headquarters," the gray man promptly answered. "Headquarters is located in Grant Land."

"Grant Land?" Ward questioned. "I never heard of it."

"Most people haven't," the gray

man answered. "It's about eight degrees from the North Pole."

Carefully closing the door behind him, he exited. A lock clicked. John Ward and Patricia Holm stared in bewilderment at each other.

"The North Pole—" the girl whispered.

Humming with the surge of vast energies being released, the ship drove through the night.

CHAPTER VI

Thordon

HE HAD small delicate hands and a thin, pinched face. His head was completely bald, with that kind of abhorrent baldness that comes not from losing the normal head hair but from never having any hair to lose. His mouth was small and cruel; from a person with a mouth like that you would never expect kindness. He was sitting at a desk reading the manuscript. He read a whole page at a single glance.

John Ward and Patricia Holm were standing in front of him. The gray man had deferentially ushered them into this room, and after laying the manuscript on the desk in front of *him*, had tiptoed out. Other than a single glance, he had paid them no attention, but had grabbed the manuscript.

This was headquarters. They were somewhere near the north pole. The trip was over.

This was the enemy.

As soon as he saw the delicate figure seated at the desk, Ward knew he had found his enemy. At first sight, hate rose within him. It seemed to him that all his life, without knowing him, he had hated this man. Every instinct he had shouted at him to leap across the

desk and throttle the man seated there. Other instincts warned him to caution. Ward was unarmed. The man across the desk *looked* unarmed. Ward waited. He did not trust appearances here. To leap across the desk looked easy. Therefore it was probably hard, if not impossible.

Ward watched him read the manuscript. He covered a whole page at a single glance. That meant a photographic eye and a mind that retained impressions. A powerful mind. He finished reading the manuscript and looked up.

"Well, well," he said. "So you are John Ward." There was contempt in the tone.

"Yes," Ward said. "Who are you?"

"I have no name!" Malevolent hatred glistened in the eyes as he made that statement. "I am the master! I am ruler. I am the king but I have more powers than any king ever had. There is no word in the language strong enough to describe what I am. So I have selected a name for myself. I am Thordon. From Thor, the old Norse god who struck his enemies with lightning and thunder. Does that satisfy you?"

Ward ignored the outburst. "Why have you sent men to try to kill me?" he asked quietly.

"Because you were dangerous," Thordon snapped.

"How could I be dangerous? Until I found my life being threatened, I did not even suspect that you existed. And even if I had known all about you, I would not have been a menace to you here in this fortress in these frozen wastes."

"When you read this you would have known about me, and you would have been dangerous," Thordon answered, tapping the manuscript. "That is why my actions became necessary."

"BUT you tried to kill me before I even knew the manuscript was in existence."

"Certainly. I was taking a logical step to avert a possible source of danger. I knew that some day in some way that manuscript would reach your hands. I was never able to find it myself. Tell me, where did you find it?"

"Inside what looked like a tombstone," Ward answered. There was nothing to be gained by attempting to withhold this information. Thordon could find out.

"Curse him, so that is how he tricked me!" Thordon rasped. "How did you know it was hidden there?"

"I didn't," Ward answered honestly.

"Then how did you find it?"

"By accident," Ward answered.

The answer seemed to satisfy Thordon. He turned his attention to the girl and began to question her.

"So there were two of you," Thordon said, when he had finished questioning Patricia. "I knew Ward would send his son to try to destroy me but I did not think Holm would send his daughter. They tricked me again, damn them!"

Ward quickened inwardly. He had learned something that he desperately wanted to know. But he gave no sign. "Why should they want to destroy you?" he said calmly.

"Because—" Thordon caught himself. "You would try to trick me too?" he sneered. His hands moved to a bank of buttons on his desk. An angry gleam lit his eyes. There was no sign of mercy on his face.

Ward held his breath, not daring to move. He sensed the imminence of death. If Thordon pressed one of those buttons—who knew what forces were leashed within the gray fortress? Perhaps pressing one of those buttons would send death flaming at them.

"Why should I destroy you?" Thordon said. A vicious smile appeared on his weak face. He looked at the girl. "You, my dear, would make a splendid addition to my collection of beauties. How would you like to join my—ah—harem?"

"I wouldn't like it," Patricia said. She glanced wildly at Ward.

"No doubt you will learn to like it," Thordon said smoothly. "I am told by those who are in a position to know that I am a wonderful lover."

"You—" the girl choked. Disgust and loathing were on her face. She glanced again at Ward, then back at Thordon. "I won't do it. You can't—I won't—"

Ward leaped. Thordon's attention was quite taken up by the girl. Ward hurled himself through the air. His fists were all he had but one blow would be all he needed to break Thordon's pipe-stem neck.

As Ward leaped, Thordon's hand darted swiftly among the buttons set into the top of his desk.

"Ugh!" Ward gasped. In the split second that had elapsed he knew he had been too slow. He did not see anything hit him but something struck him a sickening blow in the stomach. He had the fleeting impression that he was lifted off his feet, spun in a dizzying circle, and then hurled outward. He hit with a crash that left him senseless for a second. When he recovered consciousness he was lying on the floor in the corner of the room. Blood was running down his face and into his mouth. Thordon was looking at him. The little devil was laughing.

HE SAT up just in time to see Patricia Holm attempt what he had tried and failed. Utilizing Thordon's preoccupation with Ward, she leaped at the self-styled master.

A second later, bruised and bleeding, she was lying on the floor beside Ward. Apparently from the solid front of the desk, a thin, almost invisible beam of light had leaped out in response to Thordon's manipulation of the buttons. It had struck her, seized her, hurled her backward.

Thordon grinned at them. "I am not exactly defenseless," he said. "Have you seen enough or would you like another demonstration?"

"Some other time," Ward gritted. "I'll give *you* a demonstration."

"That's what you think," Thordon said. "After my men finish with you, you will find it exceedingly difficult to demonstrate anything other than the efficient execution of my commands." He pressed another button.

The door quickly opened. A gray clad guard stood there. "You called, sir?" he apologetically asked.

"Yes," Thordon answered. "Have these two escorted to the hypnosis laboratories. Direct that they be given the standard treatments."

"Yes, sir," the guard said, saluting.

He turned to Ward and the girl.

"Get up, you two," he said. "And come with me."

"We've learned one thing," Ward whispered to the girl, as the watchful guard escorted them away.

"What's that?" the girl dully asked.

"Our purpose in life, the instructions we were to receive in the manuscript, is to destroy Thordon. He let that much slip."

"I knew that the moment I saw him," Patricia Holm answered. "The question is—How?"

"No talkin'," the guard said bluntly. "I'll kick the pants off you if you open your traps again."

THE guard shoved them into a cell. "Wait there until we're ready for

you," he said, slamming the iron grill that was the door.

"Well, here we are," Patricia Holm said dispiritedly.

"It looks like I stuck our necks out when I surrendered," Ward admitted. "I'm sorry I got you into this mess."

"I got myself into it," she answered. "And we're not licked yet. There must be some way out of this place. There must be some way we can beat that little devil."

"There is always a way out of everything," Ward said. "Our big problem is to stay alive long enough to find it."

"Do—do you think he is going to kill us?"

"No," Ward hesitated. "But we're in a spot, just the same."

He hated to admit defeat, he hated to think they were trapped without any hope of ever defending themselves. He had foreseen the possibility of some such situation as this and had made plans to meet it. But on the ship they had been carefully searched, very carefully searched. A tiny saw blade, made out of beryllium copper, had been removed from the sole of one of his shoes. A small but efficient tear gas bomb had been removed from the heel of the other shoe. His cigarettes had been taken and he had been stripped and searched to the skin. The gray man had taken no chances.

Three guards appeared at the door of the cell. With them was a fourth person, a stooped, white-haired old man who was clad in the gown of a surgeon.

"Ladies first," one of the guards said.

She did not hesitate. "Here I go," she said, smiling at Ward.

"Good luck, Patricia Holm," Ward gritted.

A startled, dazed look appeared on the surgeon's face. "What—what did he say?" he stammered, nodding toward Ward. His eyes were fixed with terri-

ble intensity on the girl.

"He wished me good luck," she answered bitterly. "Do you think I'll need it? After all, when you get through with me, I'm only going to join a harem!"

The surgeon seemed not to hear. "Did—did he call you Patricia Holm?" he faltered.

"That's my name," the girl said. "Why shouldn't he call me that?"

"No—no reason," the doctor said. He seemed to regain control of himself. Harshness crept into his voice. "This way," he said. He motioned to the guards. "Watch her closely. If she attempts to resist, over-power her."

"Sure, pop," the guards said. "We know what to do."

Ward watched them march her away. There was bitterness in his heart. He would have given anything to have been able to help her. But there was nothing he could do. To attempt resistance would invite destruction, and both of them must stay alive, no matter what the cost.

TWO hours later the door at the end of the hall opened and Patricia Holm emerged. She was not the same girl who had entered the room that lay beyond. Barely able to walk, she was supported between two guards. The boots and riding breeches she had been wearing had been replaced by a set of gray colored shorts and a gray blouse. And something had happened to her face.

As she was half carried past him, she slowly turned her head in his direction. There was no recognition in her eyes. She didn't know him. Her face was dazed, and without expression or emotion.

She looked—*gray!* With the exception of Thordon, all the people he had seen in this fortress had looked gray.

Occasionally their faces showed some animation and they seemed able to talk freely but all emotion was strictly on the surface. It did not come from the soul beneath. Like the gray man, these were gray people.

Patricia Holm showed the same grayness, the same lack of emotion as all the others.

The two men helped her away. They were not gone long.

"Your turn next," they said to Ward, unlocking and opening the door of his cell.

They led him into the laboratory where the white-haired surgeon was waiting. Before he realized what they were going to do, they had seized him, thrown him on an operating table, and were strapping him down. In the last moment, he fought desperately. The surgeon grunted something and four other men came from an adjoining room. The six men speedily strapped him down.

"You may go now," the surgeon said to them.

"Okay, doc," one of them answered. "The boss says to give this guy the works." He jerked a thumb toward Ward.

"I will handle the situation," the surgeon said. "You may be sure of that. Move along now. This is a delicate operation and I must not be disturbed while it is in progress."

The men left the operating room. Ward had overheard the conversation. He bit his lips to keep from screaming. He was helpless, unable to move, and some sort of an operation was going to be performed on him. He saw the face of the surgeon bend down over him.

"Sh—" the doctor whispered.

Was the man mad, Ward wondered wildly.

"Don't become excited," the doctor whispered. "Don't cry out. Are you

really John Ward, the son of Richard Ward?"

Dumbly, Ward nodded. He didn't in the least understand the meaning of the question. Vehemently he wished the doctor would get on with what he had to do. Being tied down and waiting like a dog for the knife of a vivisectionist was enough to drive a man crazy. "Get on with your damned operation," he gritted. "Whatever it is, I can stand it."

"I'm not going to perform an operation on you," the surgeon said.

"You're not! Why have you got me tied down?"

"Sh—" The doctor glanced quickly toward the door. "You must be quiet. *They* mustn't overhear you."

"What kind of a trick is this?" Ward husked.

"It's no trick," the doctor said. "Do you know who I am?"

"Hell, no."

"I am Judson Holm," came the astounding answer. "I am the father of Patricia Holm!"

"**YOU** are what?" Ward gasped. He did not, could not believe his ears. His dazed impression was that he was out of his mind.

"I am Judson Holm," the surgeon repeated, his voice a tense whisper. "I am the man who hid you in Los Angeles and who hid Patricia in New York!"

"This is an illusion," Ward thought firmly. "They have already given me an anaesthetic. I am hearing things that aren't true."

Once, as the result of a broken arm, he had been given ether by the doctors who were to set the bone. He still vividly remembered the nightmares he had had during the seconds when he was first going under the influence of the drug. So far as he knew, he had been given no drug here, but he knew from experience that it was difficult to re-

member that you had taken an anaesthetic after you had taken it. He tried to sit up. The straps jerked him back, reminding him where he was.

"This is nonsense," he whispered.

"No."

"Then one of us is crazy. You can't be the man who concealed me in Los Angeles." "Please, John—. I am telling you the truth. You *must* believe me."

"I don't believe you," Ward said. "You are not Patricia's father."

"But I am," the doctor insisted.

"That's a lie," Ward said. "I saw her when she came out of this room. She could barely walk. She looked drugged and she didn't recognize me. I don't know what you did to her, but I know that no father would do that to his daughter."

"Please," the doctor begged. "Nothing was done to her."

"I saw her," Ward challenged.

"She was acting," the doctor answered. "I pretended to put her under hypnosis but I didn't do it. Instead I spent the time she was in here teaching her how she must act to deceive Thordon. Of course she couldn't show that she recognized you. That might have given her away. For several days after being put under the special type of hypnosis Thordon uses a person remembers little or nothing of his past life. Consequently she could not recognize you."

"Hypnosis," Ward whispered. "That's impossible."

"It isn't impossible," the doctor insisted. "You, yourself, have been hypnotized all your life."

"Now I know you're lying," Ward said. "I never saw a hypnotist in my life, and as for letting one get close enough to me to put me into a trance, I would not be likely to let that happen if I could prevent it."

HE WAS convinced that for some reason this doctor was trying to deceive him. There was little reason for such an effort, he admitted, for he was strapped to an operating table and the surgeon could work his will with him. Under those circumstances, when his victim was helpless, there was no reason why the doctor should attempt an elaborate deception, but apparently he was trying it anyhow.

"I see I shocked you by telling you too much too soon," the surgeon said. "The mind will accept only so much information at one time. If given more than that, it rebels. When you have time to think, you will realize I am telling the truth. You were, and still are, under hypnosis, and I can prove it."

He seemed very sure of himself. Ward was completely bewildered. "Prove it," he said. "I'm listening."

"All right," the doctor answered. "Here is the first proof. All your life you have been hearing a voice that told you to be on the alert, that something was after you."

Ward stared in astonishment at this man. Was the doctor superhuman? How did he know about the voice?

"When you were less than a year old, I helped implant that voice in your mind," the doctor said. "It was put there by hypnosis. We knew you would be hunted, we knew you would be in danger. This voice was intended to warn you always to be on the alert."

Ward tried to speak and choked. The voice that had spoken to him from the back of his mind, this surgeon had helped put there! Or was the man lying? Was he, for some reason of his own, trying to trick his helpless victim?

"Not so long ago, you received a present, a wrist watch," the surgeon continued. "When you strapped it on your wrist, a voice began to speak to you. You thought the voice came out

of the watch, or, by some ingenious system of radio, was transmitted through the watch. You didn't examine the watch. You weren't supposed to examine it, but if you had, you would have found it to be quite an ordinary time-piece. However it was a trigger that released into your mind the post-hypnotic commands impressed there twenty years previously. There was no radio in the watch. There was no tiny record similar to a phonograph. The watch itself was a signal that without your knowing what was happening, or being at all conscious of the process, would release into your mind the post-hypnotic commands that would take you back to the Knoll of the Three Pines, in the swamps of Florida."*

There was conviction in the surgeon's whisper. He spoke like a man who knew what he was talking about. And, there was no questioning his facts. He knew about the voice that had spoken to Ward, he knew about the watch, the three pines on the island in Big Cypress swamp. Was it possible that his story was true?

* Hypnosis, though an old and legendary art that has fallen into disrepute through use by stage magicians and quacks who tried to take advantage of the potential powers it offered, has been under re-investigation by science recently, with results that promise to be startling. Post-hypnotic commands are orders given to a subject while he is under hypnosis, the commands to be obeyed after the hypnosis has been terminated. If the hypnotist so desires, the subject may be made to retain no knowledge of the orders, until the time comes for them to take effect, when the orders will be executed whether the subject desires it or not and without his knowing what is happening. There are well authenticated instances of such commands being executed after the lapse of a year. In one case, a patient was instructed while under hypnosis to return to the office of the doctor on a day and at an hour over a year away. The patient did not know the command had been given but at the appointed time, he obeyed it. It is probably unnecessary to point out here but it can do no harm to say that hypnotic experiments should never under any circumstances be attempted by those who lack a full understanding of the science.—Ed.

"But why—why did you go to all that trouble?" Ward questioned. "Why did you use so elaborate a scheme when something simpler might have served."

"Something simpler would not have served!" the doctor vehemently insisted. "There was no other way we could be sure the information would reach you. Remember, we had to wait twenty years, we had to wait until you grew into a man, to tell you what you had to know. Too much could happen in twenty years for a simpler method to serve. You had to be protected through infancy, which meant that you had to be hidden. The manuscript that was to provide you with information must also be hidden. It must be perfectly concealed. The sharpest, keenest, most savagely warped mind on earth knew that you and the manuscript existed. No effort would be spared to find and destroy both. Yet in spite of the enemy that was seeking you, you and the manuscript must be brought together when you were old enough to act on the information you would receive. It was no simple problem that we faced in that cursed swamp so long ago and no simple solution was possible. Now, John, do you believe me?"

WARD was aware that the surgeon was bending over him. He could see the man's face, cut and grooved with lines that could only have come from suffering. "I do not know whether or not I believe you," Ward said slowly. "You have used the word 'we' several times. What do you mean by that 'we'?"

"Your father and myself. I was your father's assistant in his laboratory in Big Cypress swamp."

"And—" Ward tensed himself to ask this question. "—what about my father?"

"He was one of the greatest men who

ever lived."

Ward felt a glow at the words. "And where is he now?"

"Dead," the doctor simply said. "He and your mother are buried under the tombstone on the knoll. They were killed—" Anger lit the doctor's eyes and his gaze went toward the door—"by the beast that rules here, by Thordon!"

Ward lay very still. Subconsciously he knew that his parents were dead, but in spite of that, always there had been the hope that somehow, sometime, he would find them. Now he knew that he would never find them. Anger in a red flood of helpless fury rolled through him.

"I must pretend to hypnotize you," the surgeon continued. "I must go through the motions of injecting a drug into your blood, and all the rest of the procedure that Thordon has developed. We never know here when eyes are watching us so I must go through with the operation. That is how Thordon controls all of the thousands who do his bidding. But you will not be hypnotized. You will be left with your will intact. And while I am going through the necessary motions, I will tell you the whole story back of Thordon, the menace that we are trying to fight. Do you understand, John?"

Ward nodded. Relaxing, he closed his eyes. It took a strong effort of will to keep from screaming when he felt a hypodermic needle prick his skin. However, he knew he had no choice except to trust this physician. He was completely in the man's power.

Told in jerky whispers, with the surgeon's eyes constantly darting apprehensively to the door, it was an amazing story that Ward heard. It was over an hour in the telling. While the doctor deftly worked, Ward heard the whole story of his life. Then the surgeon told

him about Thordon, and what Thordon really was. It was all Ward could do to maintain silence when he learned the secret of Thordon's identity.

"That—that's impossible!" he almost shouted.

"Sh— It isn't impossible. It's the hideous truth. And his purpose is even more hideous. I returned to the Knoll of the Three Pines, to make one final effort to capture or destroy him. Instead, he captured me. For twenty years he has held me prisoner. For the same length of time he has been planning his campaign, gathering strength, kidnaping men and bringing them here where they can be made into creatures with but one thought—to do his will. He built this fortress here where no one would ever look for it. Hundreds of men worked for years building it. It is almost impregnable. From this place, he will launch a campaign that will make him master of the earth, unless we can stop him. He *must* be stopped. No matter what the cost, he must be stopped. Do you understand, John?"

"YES," said Ward slowly. "I even understand why you planned to have your daughter try to destroy him."

"We hated pitting a girl against his evil genius," the doctor almost sobbed. "But we had no choice. We had to use every possible tool that might help to remove him. Richard Ward was sacrificing his son. I could do no less than offer my daughter for the same sacrifice. And when she heard my story she agreed that I had done the right thing." His voice was hoarse with anger.

Ward nodded in sympathy. "I have one final question," he stated. "You said that everyone here, with the exception of Thordon, was under the influence of hypnosis. Does that include you?"

"Yes. I was hypnotized, but this is no longer true."

"How did you break your hypnosis?"

"I didn't break it. No one can break his own mental bonds, or can even realize that they exist. A profound mental and emotional shock is needed to break the effect of hypnosis."

"Then how was your hypnosis broken?"

"Because Thordon made a mistake!" the doctor hissed. "He thought the type of hypnosis he was using was unbreakable. It wasn't. I have been performing his operations for him. He thought it would be a clever and exceedingly funny joke to send me my own daughter to be made into a plaything for him. Instead, the shock of hearing you call her Patricia Holm, of realizing that this girl was my daughter, *brought me out of my hypnosis*. Thordon, after all these years, has finally made one mistake. And that mistake will destroy him."

Holm's eyes were blazing. For years, he had been beaten, he had seen no chance of ever striking against his enemy. Like John Ward, he had been helpless. Now he saw a chance to strike back. The surge of renewed hope was strong in his voice.

"I am going to release the straps that hold you and call the guards to take you away," he said to Ward. "If they ask you questions, pretend you understand nothing. Act, as Patricia is acting, knowing that your life, and the lives of uncounted others, depends on it. I have already been making plans for action. We will destroy this evil monster in his own lair."

After Holm released the straps, Ward sat up. Within his mind was the intoxicating knowledge that he was free, that his will was his own. He had found the monster that had been seeking his life. In secrecy, he and Patricia

and Holm could prepare complete plans for attacking Thordon.

Holm rang for the guards to take Ward away. The door opened.

"Did you call?" a derisive voice said.

Neither Ward nor Holm had been looking at the door when it opened. At the sound of the voice the surgeon seemed to freeze. His face was suddenly drained of all color. Ward jerked startled eyes to the door.

It wasn't a guard who stood there.

It was Thordon!

"You will no doubt be interested to know that for years I have had a microphone pick-up planted in this laboratory," Thordon said. "I found your conversation very interesting. You ought to know by now, Doctor Holm, that I never make mistakes!"

CHAPTER VII

The Weakness of Thordon

THORDON was not much over five feet tall, not a big man. Physically he looked immature, the completely bald head and the smile on his face giving him an impish appearance something like that of a benevolent gnome. But there was nothing benevolent about his eyes. Cold, chilled hatred looked out of them.

"Hello," Ward said.

There was no point in his attempting to act like he was under hypnosis. Thordon knew better. There was only one possible course of action—stall. No guards had entered with Thordon. He was carrying no weapon. Lying on the table beside Thordon was a metal bar, a part of the equipment of the laboratory. If Ward could stall long enough to get his hands on that bar!

Thordon's eyes glittered as he looked at Ward. "You're a cool customer," he said.

"Thank you."

"You have nothing to thank me for," Thordon asserted. "Do you know what I am going to do?"

"I'm afraid I don't."

"I am going to complete the operation that Holm failed to do!" Thordon said. "I am going to give you a double dose of drug and put you into a hypnosis that you will never break. How will you like that?"

"I'm afraid I won't like it," Ward answered, shrugging indifferently. "But I am afraid there is nothing I can do about it—*except this!*"

He had been moving toward Thordon. Now he took one single step and the bar was in his hands.

"Don't, John!" he heard the old surgeon scream.

Ward swung the bar. Years of accumulated hate went into the blow. This monstrosity had hunted him around the world. This super-evil genius, who had built the incredible airship that had brought them here, who had designed this fortress hidden where no one would ever find it, who had thought to rule the world, had fallen a victim to his own over-powering sense of superiority. Because he was in his own stronghold, Thordon had felt completely secure. He had fallen into the simplest possible trap, over-confidence.

Thordon saw the bar coming. A surprised glint appeared in his eyes. Oddly he did not try to dodge. Hands on hips, he stood without moving.

In the last final split second before the blow landed Ward sensed that something was wrong. Thordon showed too little surprise. He didn't try to dodge.

A foot away from Thordon's head the bar hit something. The jar almost wrenched Ward's arms from their sockets. He lost his balance and almost fell, the bar clattering to the floor.

Thordon stood unharmed.

"There is a vibration field surrounding me," he said coldly. "No material object, and especially nothing that is made of metal, will penetrate it. I control it from here." He patted a small flat box that, attached to his belt, rested on his right hip. "Do you suppose I would be fool enough to come near you without protection? You can't touch me. Nothing can touch me, not even the discharge of one of my own electron guns, without my permission. *You old fool, what are you doing?*"

THORDON looked across the laboratory at the old doctor. A startled note had appeared in his voice.

Dr. Holm as coming toward him. The surgeon held a plain glass beaker filled with some colorless liquid in his hands. The sight of the liquid seemed to drive Thordon frantic. With the speed of a cornered rat, he turned, jerked the door open, and dashed from the room.

Dr. Holm quickly locked the door.

"What have you got in that beaker?" Ward almost shouted. "An acid that will eat through the vibration field that protects him?"

He was almost as startled as Thordon had been. What had the surgeon used to scare the would-be world master so badly?

"No acid," Holm answered. "Water. Just plain water."

"Water!" You mean he was scared of nothing but a little water?"

"If I had doused the contents of this beaker on him, it would have shorted his vibration shield. The results might not have been fatal but he would certainly have been badly burned as the high-frequency energies were shorted into his body. He didn't know that I knew the defect of his shield, which is one mistake he made anyhow," the doctor triumphantly finished.

A few drops of water had routed Thordon! It seemed impossible but there was no doubt that it was true. The invisible shield on which he relied for defense was a mass of inter-woven high-frequency electrical vibrations. Water would short electricity.

"A little H₂O may make Thordon tuck his tail between his legs and head for a hole but you can bet it won't affect those guards of his!" Ward said grimly. "They'll be after us hot and heavy. Doc, do you know any way out of here?"

As he spoke, alarm bells began ringing through the fortress. In the hall outside the laboratory, a clatter sounded—guards coming on the double-quick.

"There is no way out of here," Holm answered. "And if there was, we could not use it." He stepped to a window, shoved aside a metal lattice.

Outside, stretching away for miles under a sullen sky, was an ice field. Even through the heavy glass of the window, it looked bitterly cold. Ward had never seen what lay around the fortress. At no time during the flight of the ship had he been permitted to look out. The flier had gone directly into a hangar-on landing. Now, for the first time, he saw the tortuous fields of ice that surrounded the place.

"You don't escape from here," Doctor Holm said. "A few, on whom the effect of the hypnosis had faded, tried it. The wolves got them. There are hundreds of miles of ice caps around this fortress. The only way to escape from here is by the ship."

"What chance do we have of getting that ship?"

"No chance at all," Holm answered. "It's guarded twenty-four hours a day."

WARD shook his head. "Well, I wasn't exactly thinking of escaping from the fortress, not while Pat is

here anyhow. I was wondering if there isn't some place where we can hide for a while. You ought to know your way around here. Isn't there some place where they can't find us?"

"I'm afraid there isn't. No, John, there is no way to escape. I hate to say it, but I think the trail ends here."

"Hey, what are you doing?" Ward demanded.

Holm had picked up a hypodermic syringe and was carefully filling it with a liquid from a tiny bottle. "I'm going to cheat Thordon," he said. He bared his left arm.

"You're going to kill yourself!" Ward gasped. He snatched the syringe away. "What the hell has come over you, Doc? Not two minutes ago you were willing to face Thordon. Now you're trying to knock yourself off."

The surgeon wiped sweat from his face. "I can't face being hypnotized again," he said. "I won't do Thordon's dirty work for him any more. I won't. I would rather be dead. You don't understand—"

Ward understood all right. It had taken tremendous courage for the surgeon to defy Thordon. When the effort had failed, reaction had set in. Holm could no longer face the future. He preferred to die.

"Never give up until they pat you in the face with a spade," Ward said. "We're not dead yet."

"What are we going to do?" the surgeon whispered. "They're—"

A heavy thud sounded as the door was assaulted. Ward had been making a quick survey of the room. On one side was a large closet, across the room was a second door that led to another part of the fortress.

"We're going to hide in that closet," Ward said.

"But they'll find us—"

"Maybe." He shoved the frightened

and panicky doctor into the closet, raced across the lab and jerked open the second door, then ran back and dived into the narrow space where Holm was hiding. "We'll see what happens," he said, closing the closet.

With a crash, the main door fell. Heavy footsteps sounded as the guards lunged into the room. Ward held his breath and waited.

"Where are they?" he heard one guard say.

"The boss said they were here," another one answered, doubt in his voice.

"Maybe they're hiding here. Search the joint," a third ordered.

"They wouldn't be dumb enough to try to hide here," someone protested. "Hey. That door is open. They went that way. Get 'em. The boss promised a big reward if we took those babies alive."

YELPING like dogs closing in for the kill, the guards went piling through the door. Ward sighed in vast relief. "They're like Thordon," he whispered. "Anything that looks simple, is not worth thinking about."

"Yes," the surgeon faltered. "But—"

"I know they will be back," Ward answered. "We're not done yet. Tell me: if I can catch one of these guards for you, can you hypnotize him so he will obey you?"

"Yes. I think so. But—"

"I'll get the guard," Ward said. "You handle your end, Doc, and I'll handle mine." Opening the door a crack, he looked over the lab. It was deserted. He stepped out.

Footsteps sounded in the hall outside as a single guard came hurrying to join his comrades. Ward crouched beside the door. He let the man enter. Then he came up from behind him. One hand seized the stubby weapon, the other arm went around the guard's

throat in a lock that effectively prevented any outcry.

The guard did not realize he was attacked until the fierce grip was clamped around his throat. He tried to jerk himself free. The grip tightened. It was not only preventing him from calling for help, it was shutting off his wind. And try as he might, he could not shake off the man on his back. His face began to turn purple and his eyes to glaze. His struggles only made the end come quicker. Unconscious, he slumped to the floor.

Ward swiftly stripped the gray uniform from the man and jerked off his own clothes. Working as fast as possible, he made a complete change. Then he lifted the guard to the operating table.

"Get busy, Doc," he said huskily. "I'll try to hold the fort while you put the fixer on him."

Doctor Holm had been preparing his instruments. Ward picked up the guard's weapon, closed both doors, and prepared to try to stand off the attack he was expecting at any moment.

"What will I impress on his mind?" the surgeon asked, slipping a hypodermis under the guard's skin.

"Tell him he's badly scared, tell him everybody is after him, tell him he has to run—"

He heard the doctor begin a chant in a sing-song voice.

"You are badly frightened. The men in the gray uniforms are after you. You must run from them. You must not let them catch you. You must hide. If they catch you, they will kill you—"

The chant continued with growing intensity. Watching, Ward saw the guard begin to recover consciousness. The man was not strapped to the table. He sat up and looked around. "Where are they?" he gulped.

The pound of running feet sounded

in the hall outside.

"Go that way," Ward said, pointing to the second door. "Quickly. There is not a moment to lose."

When the second set of guards came rushing into the laboratory they were just in time to see a man dressed in civilian clothes running madly away. There was no one else in sight.

"There he goes!" a guard shouted.

"Get him!" a second added.

THEY raced through the laboratory on the heels of the fleeing man.

"It's Ward all right," one of them shouted. "I know him by the clothes. Nobody here wears a suit like that."

When they were gone, Ward and Holm came out of the closet. Ward was wiping perspiration from his face. "That was close," he said. "Thirty seconds either way and it would have failed."

"That was fast thinking," the doctor said admiringly. "You did a marvelous job of tricking them. By the time they discover they are chasing one of their own comrades dressed in your clothes—"

"By that time, we'll have Pat and be on our way to grab the ship. Where will she be held prisoner?"

"In the harem, which adjoins the office where Thordon interviewed you when you were first brought here."

"Then that's where we're going!"

"We're almost certain to be seen," the surgeon protested. "Not that I object to taking the chance, now that we *have* a chance, but we must not get caught now."

"If anybody tries to stop us, I still have *this!*" Ward answered, patting the weapon nestled in the crook of his arm. "I won't hesitate to use it. As for anybody challenging us, you walk in front of me and I'll keep you covered. If anybody asks questions, you are my

captive and I'm taking you to Thordon. Got it?"

"Got it, John," Doctor Holm said. Cringing, hands in air, looking as if he expected to be blown to bits at any moment, he walked out of the laboratory.

"Please don't shoot," he begged, looking over his shoulder. "I didn't mean to do it. Ward forced me—"

"I don't want to listen to any of your damned whining," Ward said gruffly. "Move along, before I burn you to a cinder."

His face blank and impersonal, he prodded the surgeon before him.

In the hall outside two guards came toward them.

"I got one of 'em," Ward said. "The other is back there." He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "I think he's trying to reach the ship. You better help cut him off. I'll take this one to the boss."

"Good!" one of the gray-faced men said. "Thordon is raising hell. He's mad as the devil."

Ward sighed with relief as they went past him. They were tools that obeyed Thordon's will without question, but they were blunt tools. The trouble with hypnosis was that it did not leave a man free to act on his own initiative. If the guards had been alert, they would have recognized him. But they saw the uniform, the gun, and the captive, which was enough for them. They weren't free to think for themselves.

AS HE marched the cringing surgeon before him, Ward caught a glimpse through a window of the long building in which the ship was housed. It stood apart from the main fortress, a tunnel at the end connecting it with a larger building. The enclosure formed a sort of court, which was banked deep with snow.

Ahead was Thordon's office, the lair from which he directed the activities of

this little mad world he had created. With each step that took him nearer to the door, Ward felt his heart beating harder. If they could rescue Pat!

There could be no ifs about that. They had to rescue her. Then they had to capture the ship. Ward was hoping that his uniform would enable him to take both the girl and her father to the vessel, under the pretext, if questioned, that he was taking them to Thordon. There was a desperate chance that this plan might work. All his life he had been making desperate chances work. They approached the door.

"Drop the gun!" a voice said behind them.

Ward and the surgeon froze in their tracks. Ward did not drop the weapon. His mind was working like lightning. Should he try to turn, shooting as he whirled? Or should he surrender? It was Thordon's voice that had spoken to them. He had been lurking in a side door and had waited until they passed, after which he had come up behind them. He was probably protected by a door, he was certainly protected by the vibration shield. And there was no water handy with which to short out the field.

"If you hesitate five seconds longer, I'll burn a hole in both of you," Thordon said. His voice was as cold as the wind that blows down from the north pole.

Ward dropped the gun. He had no choice.

"That's better," Thordon said. "If I didn't need men, I would take no further chances with you."

"How—how did you find us?" Ward whispered. "Your men—"

"My men are fools," Thordon said. "They are chasing somebody dressed in your clothes."

"How—how—"

"You forgot that I told you I had a

microphone pickup hidden in that laboratory," Thordon gloated. "You tricked my men but I heard every word of your plans. As soon as I can recall the fools, I will escort you to my office. That was where you were going, wasn't it?"

Under his breath, Ward cursed himself. He had completely forgotten about the microphone. Thordon had overheard their whole conversation.

CHAPTER VIII

In Thordon's Office

CLANGING alarm bells recalled the guards. One group brought with them a prisoner.

"Here he is, boss," they said. "We caught him. We got him for you, boss."

The prisoner was badly mussed. Both eyes were puffy, there was a long gash on the side of his head, and one arm hung limp at his side.

Thordon took one look at him. His eyes glinted. He brought up the weapon he carried. The fury of a blasting electrical discharge lashed through the corridor. The prisoner screamed, choked. Smoke boiling from a hole in his body, he fell.

"I hate bunglers," Thordon icily said, lowering his weapon. "I hate fools. Also I have no use for a man with a broken arm."

"His arm would have healed," Ward said.

Thordon looked at him. "One more word out of you," he said, "and you will get the same treatment."

Ward shut up. Thordon would not hesitate to carry out his threat. The guards also relapsed into sudden silence. They seemed less awed by the killing of their comrade than by Thordon's anger.

"Cover them," Thordon said. "If they attempt to escape, blast them. You two," he looked at Ward and Holm, "march ahead of me to my office. There I will personally handle the necessary injections and put you into hypnosis."

They had no choice but to obey. As they started forward, Ward saw the surgeon's face. Doctor Holm had aged years within the past few minutes. The muscles of his face had sagged and a gray perspiration was oozing from his skin. All hope had fled. They had never had much of a chance. Now even that chance was gone.

"No regrets, Doc," Ward whispered. "We tried and failed. That's all there is to it."

"I'm sorry, John," the surgeon answered. "I'm terribly sorry. I had hoped—"

"Some day Thordon *will make* a mistake," Ward said. "He will forget something, pull a boner, and somebody will pay him off. Where ever we are then, I have a hunch we'll know it has happened."

"I hope so, John," Holm sighed. "But I fear it will never happen."

The door of Thordon's hideaway was closed.

"Open it," the dictator said. "And go right on in."

Ward opened the door. He and the surgeon walked through side by side. Doctor Holm took one look inside the room and hesitated in his stride.

"What—" he gulped.

Ward did not hesitate. He saw the same thing that Holm saw but he did not have to stop to think before he acted. He bent over, smashed his body into the surgeon, shoving Holm to one side.

PATRICIA HOLM was seated at Thordon's desk. Her hands were

on the bank of buttons that controlled the powers the dictator had built into that seemingly innocent piece of furniture. Thordon's view of her was cut off by the two captives he was herding in front of him. Ward leaped to one side in order to permit free play of the forces that could, as he knew from experience, lash out from that desk.

"Blast—" Thordon started to shout to his men as his prisoners leaped to one side. He thought they were trying to escape. Then he saw the girl. The words froze in his throat. If he had been frozen instantaneously he could not have stopped quicker. His face went green with sudden, terrible fright.

There was silence in the room. Not a man moved.

"What'll we do, boss?" one of the guards whispered. "Shall we turn the heat on her?"

"No, you damned fool!" Thordon gritted.

The girl spoke for the first time. "Send them away," she said.

Thordon licked his lips. The vein in his throat was throbbing madly and the green color on his face was growing greener.

"Send them away!" Patricia Holm said. In her voice were the same grim tones that Ward had heard there when she had told him to drop the manuscript back on the Knoll of the Three Pines. Her fingers pressed lightly on the buttons.

"Go away!" Thordon shrieked at his men. Only too well did he know the terrible powers hidden within his desk.

"But, boss—"

"I said to go away!" the dictator screamed. He was growing frantic for fear the girl would press the button.

The men hesitantly started to obey.

"Before you leave, lay your guns on the floor," Patricia Holm said. "All

of you except Thordon. If you—" she looked at the dictator—"move a finger, you know what will happen. You have a gun. Hold it until I tell you to lay it down."

"Good girl!" Ward thought. She was taking no chances of Thordon shooting while he pretended to lay down his weapon. He was the key to the situation. As long as she controlled him, she had the whole fortress in her power.

"Do what she says," Thordon gritted to his men.

The dictator did not move a muscle. Held in the crook of his left arm was a gun but he didn't attempt to raise it. His men began to lay their guns on the floor.

"Go completely outside the fortress," the girl said to them.

"Out in the snow?" one of them protested. "We'll freeze."

"You won't freeze within an hour or two. As soon as everything is under control here, you will be permitted to return. Move along, now."

THERE was authority in her voice and the guards had been instructed to obey authority. They began to leave the room. Down the hall, Ward could hear a door opening as they went outside. They were obeying her. If they had been normal men, once they were out of her power, they would have defied her. But their freedom of thought and action had been removed by the hypnosis that held them.

The four of them, Thordon and the girl, Judson Holm and John Ward, were left alone in the room.

"When you secure recruits for your harem," Patricia Holm said, "you must make certain they are under hypnosis. You overlooked the fact that I was not in your power, with the result that I found my way here at

a very inconvenient time for you. Now you may lay down your gun."

"What are you going to do with me?" Thordon whispered.

"Lay down your gun!" was the answer. No cat ever watched a mouse with greater concentration than that showed by Patricia Holm at that moment. Her fingers over the bank of buttons, her eyes followed every move he made.

"Lay it down slowly," she said.

Thordon knew better than to disobey her. Chagrin and humiliation on his face, he bent and slowly laid the weapon on the floor.

Patricia Holm expelled her breath in a panting sigh. The tension was over. Thordon had given up his gun. She could relax for a second.

"Watch out!" John Ward shouted.

He saw what was happening. He had not attempted to speak to Patricia for fear he might distract her attention. As Thordon straightened up, his hands came past the flat box worn on his hip. One fast jab of his fingers was all that was necessary. Instantly the vibration web was around him, protecting him like a glove.

"Even the power concealed in the instruments in my desk will not penetrate this shield!" he said. "Now what are you going to do?"

Dimly visible around him, like an aura of evil, the vibration web glittered in the air.

For a split second, Patricia Holm looked startled. Then her fingers stabbed down on the buttons on the desk. A wave of force leaped out. It struck the dictator and the protecting shield flamed with intolerable brilliance as the fighting frequencies canceled each other. Energies blasted themselves into incandescence. Thordon stood unharmed.

Then he turned and ran.

"He knows if we can't destroy him here, he can't destroy us either," Doctor Holm snapped. "He's gone to organize an attack. John—"

But Ward was already moving. Scooping a gun from the plentiful supply of weapons on the floor, he followed Thordon. "You two stay here," he flung over his shoulder.

Thordon was half way down the corridor when Ward caught a glimpse of him. He brought the weapon up, then saw that it was useless. The dictator was still protected by the vibration web.

"If he gets out of sight in this rat-hole, I'll never be able to find him!" Ward thought.

THORDON obviously knew every corner in the fortress. He had designed it, supervised its construction. But he had never planned for an attack from within and he had constructed no defenses to meet such an attack. If his men had not been sent away, he would have been able to meet the situation that now faced him. The catch was, his men had been sent completely out of the fortress. Although Ward didn't know it, there was only one thing left that Thordon could do—reach the ship and escape. Once away from the fortress, he could pick up his men and organize an attack.

Ward was greatly surprised when Thordon, instead of attempting to hide somewhere in the interior of the grim pile, opened a door that led outside.

"Has he lost his head?" Ward wondered. "If he goes outside, he won't have a chance."

When he reached the door, he found it locked. Grimly he backed off and released a bolt from the stubby weapon of aluminum and glass that he carried. A lightning flash would not have shattered the door more effectively.

Ward got outside just in time to see Thordon running across a court toward a large building on the opposite side. He recognized that building. It was the hangar where the ship was kept. Set in the outer wall was a small door.

Thordon could have gone around and been under cover all the way. Instead, protected by his web shield, he was taking a short cut directly across the open court. Snow was piled in the court, but the wind had gathered it into drifts. Thordon was running around the drifts.

Off to the right, at a distance of several hundred yards, was a group of black dots—the guards.

“Move back,” Thordon was shouting at them. “I’ll pick you up in the ship.”

Ward took a quick shot at the fleeing dictator. A snow drift exploded into steam. Unharmed Thordon ran on. He vanished into the hangar.

Ward stopped long enough in the courtyard to do one thing. Anyone watching him would have thought he had lost his mind. He made a snowball. Then he blasted the door aside and dived into the hangar. Already the roof was swinging aside overhead. Thordon, after operating the mechanism that released the huge doors overhead, was just entering the ship. He was going in the door at the nose that led straight to the control room. The door slammed shut in Ward’s face.

A soft throbbing came from the vessel as the titanic energies that lifted it were set in motion. Minutes were needed to warm up the motors. The ship began to rise.

WITH a complete disregard for safety, Thordon kicked the ship upward. He was in the control room. Down below him he could see the fortress dwindle in size as the vessel

rose. He shook his fist at it.

“I’ve licked you, damn you!” he shouted.

A click sounded behind him. Thordon turned. John Ward stood in the door. But cuddled in the crook of his left arm was the weapon he had picked from the floor before he left the fortress. His right hand was behind him.

“I came in the middle lock as the ship was taking off,” he said.

“So what?” Thordon jeered. “I’m still the winner. That electron rifle you hold is worthless against my screen.”

Ward nodded. “Yes, I believe that is true,” he said. “But—” he nodded toward the complex control board “—is it also worthless against the mechanisms of this ship?”

A startled look appeared on Thordon’s face. “If you smash the controls, both of us will be killed in the crash,” he pointed out.

“That, I believe, is also true,” Ward admitted. His voice was calm and there was no trace of emotion in it. “From my viewpoint, death is of little importance—if *I take you with me.*”

Thordon’s eyes glinted as he realized what the other had said. “You—you won’t do that?” he faltered.

“Won’t I?” Ward answered.

“No. You’re bluffing. You wouldn’t dare—”

“You seem to forget that for years you have sent men to try to kill me,” Ward interrupted. “Do you think I am likely to forget the years when I was hunted like an animal?”

“That won’t happen again. I promise you that you will be safe, forever, from me.”

“Could I trust your promise?” Ward asked.

“Yes. Of course you can trust it,” Thordon said hastily.

"I could—like hell!" Ward answered. "Now that I know what you are, now that I know that you plan to become the supreme power on earth, and especially since I am probably the only person who knows enough about you to oppose you, would you let me go free? Not in a thousand years you wouldn't, Thordon, and I know it."

The master of the gray men had been lying and he knew it. Thordon could lie to his slaves and they would believe him. Ward did not believe him.

"All right," Thordon admitted. "But you can't destroy me, and I know it. I can't harm you when I have no weapons, and you know that. This is a stalemate, Ward. Neither of us can win."

THERE was a note of triumph in his voice. In a stalemate, Thordon could win. Ward could not harm him. He could wait for hours, days, if need be. Ward would have to relax his vigilance sometime. Human endurance could last only so long and no longer. Ward would have to sleep, to rest. And when he did—

"A stalemate such as this means you lose!" Thordon said. "The weapon you have cannot penetrate my shield. Other weapons are stored in the locker in this control room. I have only to walk across the room and select one. You will be powerless to stop me."

"Will I?" said Ward.

"Yes," Thordon answered savagely.

"I think not," Ward said. He took his right hand from behind his back, held it, palm up, toward Thordon.

"Look at that," he said.

In his hand was the snowball he had made in the courtyard.

Thordon looked at it. The greenish tinge had vanished from his face. It began to return.

"Odd, isn't it, that a simple little thing like a snowball should be power-

ful enough to destroy you and your grandiose schemes?" Ward said. "But that is exactly what it will do. Snow is simply frozen water vapor. When it strikes your shield it will turn to water. Water will short out the high frequency defense screen that protects you. Ah—"

Thordon had leaped across the room toward the locker that held the electron rifles. Ward hurled the snowball. It struck the web screen of high frequency energy that protected Thordon.

Hell broke loose where that snowball struck. A searing circle of fire leaped into existence. Thordon screamed. Then his flashing fingers cut off the shield. He leaped straight at Ward, knocking the stubby electron gun from the latter's hands.

Ward tried to strike at him. He felt Thordon's arms wrap around his neck. The would-be dictator was scratching and clawing like some gigantic and maniacal cat. Wrestling, they struggled across the control room. Ward tripped and fell, Thordon landing on top of him.

There was a clank, and a blast of frigid air surged into the room. Out of the corner of his eyes, Ward saw that the door of the control room had opened. In falling they had stumbled against the level that released it.

Ward struggled to his feet. Thordon was clawing at him. He felt a knee gouge into his groin and he almost doubled over with the pain. He mustn't lose this fight. He couldn't lose this fight. He shook himself free. His left, moving in a short jabbing arc that had all his weight behind it, connected solidly with Thordon's chin.

The dictator staggered backward. He didn't see the open lock, until he was in it. He tried to grab the edges of the door. His eyes almost popped from their sockets with the strain. His fingers slipped, caught, slipped again.

A scream on his lips, Thordon fell through the port.

The ship was miles high by now. The scream was choked off in the thin air of the lower reaches of the stratosphere. The ground was miles away. Thordon was a black dot that fell and fell and fell.

"THE truth about him is that he wasn't human at all," Ward said. He had succeeded in landing the ship and had joined Patricia and her father in the office that Thordon once had occupied.

"Then what was he?" the girl questioned.

"Your father told me," Ward answered, nodding toward the surgeon. "He was a synthetic."

"A what?" the girl gasped. She looked toward her father for an explanation.

The old man sighed. He looked like a person who has received a last-minute reprieve from hanging and can scarcely believe the good news. "Richard Ward and myself, after a series of elaborate experiments, created him in a test tube. That was our old laboratory that you saw in ruins on the Knoll of the Three Pines. We naturally sought a secluded place to carry on our experiments. And Thordon—although we didn't call him that—was a synthetic creation. We raised him in a nutrient bath that was constantly under the influence of X-rays. We were hoping to produce a person of exceptional intelligence who could solve problems for which we humans, with our limited brains, can as yet find no solution. Unfortunately, we succeeded too well. Our creation was smarter than we were. He was also possessed of no moral code of any kind, nor could we teach him one. He had

no respect for the bill of rights or the Ten Commandments and he sneered at us for believing in them. Eventually we discovered that he was planning to kill us and set out on his own. This discovery was made when Richard Ward found that he had already been infected with a subtle poison that was slowly killing him. Thordon escaped to the swamps and we couldn't find him. Under those circumstances, we did the only possible thing—dedicated the lives of our own children to his destruction, for which—" he looked at the two of them—"I hope we may be forgiven."

"There is nothing to be forgiven for," Ward said. "He had to be destroyed. You did the right thing."

"I am glad you can say so, John," the old man said. "We were young men in those days and we dreamed great dreams of benefiting the human race by creating a super-intelligence to help them solve their problems. My crown of sorrow is that we failed."

"But you haven't failed," Ward objected.

"How can you say that?"

"First, tell me if it is possible to restore Thordon's men to their normal selves."

"Of course it is. It will take a few weeks to treat them all but it is entirely possible."

"Then you haven't failed," Ward said. "When the secrets of Thordon's airship, and the secrets of his fortress, are fully investigated and given to the world, all mankind will receive inestimable benefits. No, Doctor Holm, although things did not work out the way you had planned them, you certainly have not failed. Has he, Pat?"

"I should say not," the girl answered. Her eyes smiled at him unafraid.

THE END.