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Cover Design	-----	M. Brundage	
<i>Illustrating a scene in "The Sapphire Goddess"</i>			
The Sapphire Goddess	-----	Nictzin Dyalhis	146
<i>A tale of terrific adventures in another dimension of space</i>			
The Virus of Hell	-----	William H. Pope	167
<i>A grim, prophetic story of fifty years hence, when Organized Crime rules the United States</i>			
The Valley of the Worm	-----	Robert E. Howard	193
<i>A hair-raising and fascinating weird story of the childhood of our race</i>			
Tarbis of the Lake	-----	E. Hoffmann Price	208
<i>She was a living, breathing woman with a living woman's passion—but what was the thing that lay in the mummy-case like a corpse within its coffin?</i>			
The Man Who Returned	-----	Edmond Hamilton	219
<i>The story of a man who was laid away in the tomb and returned to his friends</i>			
The Place of Hairy Death	-----	Anthony Rud	229
<i>A tale of a horde of poisonous spiders in a hidden treasure-room of the Mayas</i>			
To a Bullet-Pierced Skull	-----	Alfred I. Tooke	235
<i>Verse</i>			
The Solitary Hunters (part 2)	-----	David H. Keller	236
<i>A powerful novel of living death in the crater of an extinct volcano</i>			
The Witchcraft of Ulua	-----	Clark Ashton Smith	253
<i>A bizarre tale of the weird sendings of a wicked woman, and the luckless youth whom she entangled in her toils</i>			
Nocturne	-----	Herbert Kaufman, Jr.	259
<i>Verse</i>			
Weird Story Reprint:			
The Sixth Tree	-----	Edith Lichty Stewart	260
<i>A fascinating story from WEIRD TALES of ten years ago</i>			
The Star-Gazer Climbs	-----	Hazel Burden	263
<i>Verse</i>			
The Eyrle	-----		264
<i>A chat with the readers</i>			
The Lantern	-----	Hung Long Tom	272
<i>Verse</i>			

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

# The Virus of Hell

By WILLIAM H. POPE



"His hand lifted, and a thin sheet of flame leaped from the pistol."

*A grim, prophetic story of fifty years hence, when Organized Crime rules the United States, and a ghastly dew falls from the sky*

"ISN'T it about time for—for it to begin?"

The words fell hollowly on the air of the sealed chamber, like words dropped in the stagnant silence of a vault. My body jerked spasmodically and I shot a startled look toward the other four men entombed with me in this lead-walled room a score of feet underground.

Enloe and Ward had reacted to the

sudden stimulus as I had done; they were glaring resentfully at Fenwick, who had spoken. But Boothe was watching me as though he had not heard the doom-laden warning, his cold, tawny eyes appraising me sardonically. I flushed under his scrutiny and he turned away, a wraith of a smile on his thin lips.

I did not like Boothe, nor he me; some day there would be an accounting, but

this year of 1985, with the last pitiful remnant of Right suspended above a seething maelstrom of Evil, was no time for personal differences. I could not forget that in an adjoining chamber, lead-sheathed like this to guard against espionage by our enemies' vision-rays, a white-haired, devoted scientist was laboring day and night to release us from our crushing bondage, even eating and sleeping in his hastily equipped laboratory to save precious minutes and avoid the possibility of fatal discovery. So I swallowed my anger and watched Boothe as he rose with the springy grace of a great cat and crossed the room to a panel of translucent quartz. With his heavy hand on an inset switch he turned to us, his insolently accusing eyes fleeting over me as he spoke:

"Fenwick recalled us from morbid anticipation. Behold the latest victim!"

And he closed the switch, again letting his glance flit toward me with a trace of suggestiveness in it.

The blood started again to my face, to recede swiftly as the panel glowed with light, and leave my skin cold with the realization of this daily horror to which we could not grow accustomed. We leaned forward, nerves taut as violin strings, faces drawn with horror and impotent grief.

At first the panel pictured only a swirling confusion of shadows, incomplete and shifting rapidly. Boothe guided a tiny indicator on the illuminated globe beside the panel, and the scene blurred, then sprang into startling clearness when the needle stopped on one of the numbered squares. Through this televistic window we looked into the Public Square of Colony 4, situated more than five hundred miles from where we sat here in Colony 6 on the south Atlantic seaboard. So great was the magic of the reproducing electrical waves which picked up the light

vibrations and etched them on the six-foot square panel, that we could see the set features, the grim attitude of ghastly expectancy graven on the faces of the multitude which milled restlessly in the open square. But this was not the scene for which our nerves clamored. Boothe adjusted the indicator a minute fraction, and a gasp escaped from our dry throats.

The new view showed a raised platform in the middle of the Square, a huge cube of concrete above which a black, fan-shaped thing of metal was suspended between four slender columns of steel set in the concrete. The eyes of the waiting throng were glued to this platform with the terrible fascination which compels one to keep his gaze on the gibbet during an execution. And execution this was to be; even as we watched, a figure mounted the platform steps with a defiant stride and faced the multitude with proudly uplifted head.

"Whitmore!" croaked Ward. "Gad, what nerve!"

"And there comes Black George, damn him!" rasped Enloe.

A tall, slouching man in a brown uniform was following Whitmore up the wide steps. He was not a negro, but his skin was so swarthy as to have earned him the sobriquet of "Black" George. He was the official executioner of the International Council, and he smiled cruelly as he looked over the sea of hate-filled faces and jerked his thumb insinuatingly at the fan-shaped thing above. Whitmore's lips began to move; he was addressing the crowd, confirmed orator that he was, and Boothe swiftly closed another switch on the other side of the panel. Instantly the words became clearly audible:

"—neither myself nor any other of that determined band will let fall a hint of their whereabouts. Together they are the Damocletian sword held over the

heads of our cursed criminal masters by the thread of their labors, and when those labors are complete the sword will fall with crushing vengeance. Stand fast, friends. Die, if need be, as I shall die. But do nothing to jeopardize the safety of the two who will soon free you from the fetters of Organized Crime. The day of reckon——”

The brave speech was never completed. The International Council was not of a mind to allow such an inflammatory message to be broadcast. A half-dozen uniformed guards leaped to the platform under direction of the officer in charge. Swiftly they seized Whitmore, binding his hands and feet and forcibly bending his head, securing it in place with a metal band at the end of a spring. Black George raised his arm up one of the columns and from the slitted, fan-shaped muzzle of the machine came a sheet of crimson flame, thin as a knife-blade and infinitely swifter. Whitmore's head was sheared cleanly from its neck, quivering at the end of the spring, while the body stood erect for a moment, then slumped in a heap on the platform.

Black George leered mockingly at the spectators.

A deep murmur welled up from the multitude, a murmur that swelled into a booming roar. A wave of infuriated humanity surged toward the execution platform, but Black George and the guards quickly demounted the flame-projector and wheeled its menacing muzzle in a slow arc about them. The wave stopped before that deadly threat, and brown uniforms, brandishing flame-pistols, began to work through the milling mob, cutting out the leaders and hurrying them away. The riot was over.

**B**OOthe opened the switches. "Enough for today, gentlemen." We understood his slight emphasis upon "today."

Tomorrow, at this hour, the tragic scene would be repeated in a different Colony with a fresh victim, as it had been repeated now for ten days. As there were only ten Colonies, this was Number 4's second sacrifice, though the Council didn't always take them in exact rotation. Tomorrow it might be our turn again or one of the others'. We never knew until a short bit before the execution hour, the uncertainty being a part of the Council's punishment for our stubbornness.

Hence I knew the meaning of the glances cast at me by the sardonic Boothe; knew with sickening certainty what was in the minds of the men in that room, in the minds of all the oppressed colonists.

I was the one Whitmore and all these devoted people were shielding with their lives—I, and one other, Nathan Woodruff, the white-haired scientist, who was at this very moment absorbed with his chemical formulæ in the adjoining room, striving with might and brain to evolve that which would lift the curse from the harassed Colonies. We two were the ones mentioned by Whitmore in his last speech, the ones desired above all things by the International Council, and we could at any time stop the fearful slaughter which was decreed irrevocably for each and every day until we should be surrendered.

The thought was horrible. For ten days and nights I had suffered with the knowledge that a life was being given for mine with every rotation of the earth. I couldn't sleep without starting up from a grisly dream; even my waking hours were haunted by the look of agony on the faces of the victims of that hellish flame.

Victims of loyalty!

I got up from my chair, shaky but grimly determined. Boothe was watching me quizzically, but I gave him no heed.

"Men," I said steadily, "Whitmore was

like a father to me, and I feel a little groggy. I've got to have some fresh air——"

Enloe stepped in my path. "We all feel that way, son, but we would feel far worse if we permitted you to carry out what's in your mind. Sit down, Draughon."

He had read my design on my face, I suppose, but I was desperate. "I will not," I told him stubbornly. "Sit here and watch man after man give his life that I may live? God forbid that I should forget the principles for which we live! Let me out. I'm going to stop this butchery."

It was not bravado; I meant what I said. Even death was preferable to those grisly nightmares. But he pushed me back to my chair.

"God forbid," he said sternly, "that you should so have misinterpreted the principles for which we live! The Colonial Constitution is founded on Truth, Honor, Justice, and I should violate at least two of the cardinal principles if I allowed you to give yourself up."

"It would gain a few days' respite, save a few lives," I argued. "In the meantime Professor Woodruff will finish his work. And I am no longer of benefit to the Cause."

"Without you, Draughon, today there would be no Cause to die for. Two weeks ago when you and Woodruff were thrown into the glass prison at Washington, condemned to die under the Flame for conspiring against the Council, the Colonies lost all hope. And then the greed of Joroon De Berrie gave you your chance and you accomplished the death of De Berrie, his lieutenant, Muir, and the scoundrelly traitor Dured Akridge. Then you effected the release of Woodruff from prison, the first escape from its grim gates in its history. That is why a man willing-

ly dies each day to preserve your freedom; it is through you that they have been given new hope that the long reign of terror is doomed. If you surrender, Draughon, those men, including Whitmore, will have died in vain. Let's not render their sacrifice futile."

The others nodded their approval of Enloe's rebuking lecture. Seeing the matter in this new light made me feel better until Boothe heaved his bulk to the floor and spoke with maddening ambiguity.

"The Council's decree calling for a victim each day until you and the professor are delivered into their hands is merely revenge on their part, my dear quixotic fellow, and you could not add to your laurels by becoming a martyr."

He sat down, that fleeting, irritating smile on his lips. I was about to retort angrily, when the panel communicating with the laboratory slid back and the tall figure of Woodruff in a white chemist's robe stood framed in the opening. His eyes were alight with a glow of exultation, and a half-smile played about his lips.

"Gentlemen," he said with a quiet touch of pride, "the work is complete—and successfully so!"

A SIGH of relief escaped us. Fenwick sobbed emotionally. Mingled with my own gratification was a thrill of pride in my own small part in the triumph. Woodruff strode to the small table and placed on it a bottle filled with a milky fluid. Beside it he placed another of the same size containing a liquid slightly different in appearance. He stepped back and faced us.

"Those bottles of fluid, friends, are the result of years of theory and weeks of effort. Together they represent more potential force for good and evil than it

would be possible otherwise to concentrate in any given spot on the earth's surface. The one I have named simply the Serum of Right; the other, because of its malefic properties, I have called the Virus of Hell!"

We fidgeted uneasily in our chairs, memories of the great War of the Chemists of 1960 flooding into our minds. That murderously short conflict had shaken the world with horror. What new flood of destruction and agony had the professor developed in his crucibles and test-tubes?

Woodruff smiled reassuringly.

"There is no possibility of explosion, gentlemen; nor can the fluids generate a lethal gas. They are to be administered hypodermically."

I stared at him in astonishment. Ward, Fenwick, even Enloe, looked askance. Boothe grunted contemptuously.

"And is this what we have been waiting for—what men have been dying for each day—a mere sedative?" he asked raspily. "And when the effects of the potion wear off—saying our enemies can be induced to take it—what then?"

Woodruff let his eyes play over Boothe for long, flaying seconds; eyes that were at once pitying and disdainful. Boothe's aplomb was shaken by that scornful scrutiny and he subsided, flushing darkly. The chemist gave his attention to the rest of us, ignoring Boothe.

"An explanation is in order, gentlemen, lest you join with Boothe in believing that I have wasted my time at the expense of more valuable lives, but you must be content with a simple outline; details are too technical. First, I will summarize our situation, designating the two continental factions present in the calculation simply as Good and Evil, which, in the last analysis, and with a few exceptions, they really are. You are per-

fectly familiar, of course, with the gradual breakdown of the public moral fiber which permitted Evil to gain open control of the government, which they had directed *sub rosa* for many years, and of the refusal of a small but high-principled minority to accept that condition, and of the shambles which followed their rebellion. But it was not Evil's intention to eradicate the rebels, for they numbered in their ranks the brainiest and most talented men of the era; it is significant that the men selected by nature to make each forward step of civilization are men of honor, integrity, and sympathy. No worth-while contribution to life can be made by one of low principles.

"Evil, selfishly shrewd, recognized this, and instead of eliminating the type they segregated Good into colonies so that they could profit by Good's progress and yet not be hampered by its conscience."

This was old to us; I saw the sneering face of Boothe open in a wide yawn. Woodruff also noticed and resumed:

"Perhaps I am boring you, but this preamble is necessary to your understanding why I concentrated my efforts on developing the fluid in these bottles instead of perfecting a new lethal gas, a deadly ray, or a destructive rearrangement of atomic forces. Men, I ask a very pointed question to support my contention: Is it feasible for the twenty-odd thousand Good to engage the quarter-billion Evil in a battle for supremacy?"

Enloe, always seeing good in the worst of us, asked:

"But isn't your classification too rigid? Surely there must be countless millions of folk on the continent who are not evil. They simply follow the path of least resistance."

"A good gas would wipe them out, lock, stock, and barrel," interjected Boothe savagely. "But a soporific—my God!"

The sarcasm was serenely ignored by the gray-haired chemist.

"That indeed would be the obvious remedy. But Enloe brought out the objection to it. Our creed is Truth, Honor, Justice. We would be false to every principle should we attempt to slaughter our persecutors. We had a horrible example of wholesale murder in the late war when whole cities died as a single man."

There was no gainsaying this fact. But what was his plan?

"Friends," and his voice was solemn, yet ringing with conviction, as of a man who has stumbled upon a great truth and is awed by its majestic grandeur. "Friends, to us has been given the power to usher in the Millennium." Almost reverently he picked up one of the bottles, which I now saw was marked with a small blue label; the other one was red. "A few drops of this liquid injected near the spinal bulb will transform the most vicious creature of the cesspools of Evil into the man his Creator intended him to be!"

In a twinkling it all came to me, and I gasped at the sheer audacity of the idea. Ward, Fenwick, Enloe stared at the chemist with a tinge of awe as the meaning of his words dawned upon them. Even Boothe was impressed, but he picked the weak point of the plan.

"Granted the fluid will do as you say," he said heavily. "You will have to convert your sinner before he will consent to being a saint. None will consent to the injection willingly, and if we have to kill them to make them like it, how resurrect them afterward?"

Sarcasm had become insolence. The scientist looked at him coldly.

"An injection would do you no harm!" he said bluntly. "There will be men brave enough to start the thing, I'm sure, and once the leaders of Evil are reached

the rest will be easy. It grows in geometrical progression."

"How does it work?" this from Ward, who was a minor scientist.

"Through the autonomic nervous system. I won't tire you with a long technical exposition; it has taken me years of theorizing to work this matter out, and even then the basic idea was not original. Even back in the early 1900's scientists had a vague notion that major emotions were the result of physiological causations; part of their remarkable leniency toward proved criminals was prompted by a belief that the culprit was not wholly to blame for his crime, but was the victim of a diseased mind. In working on this theory I discovered a very minute bacillus which fed on certain of the nerve cells; a culture of this bacillus injected into animals makes them exceedingly vicious—two drops injected into a timid rabbit in thirty minutes will turn him into a ferocious carnivore, preferring mice and even his own offspring to his customary vegetable diet! My discovery of the bacilli was made possible by the atomoscope; they are not apparent under the most powerful microscope, and the finest porcelain filter passes them like open-mesh screening. This fluid, the Serum, is a perfect antitoxin; and with the nervous system free of the lurking devils, the subject's mind becomes as pure and innocent as that of a child."

"And the other bottle?" queried Boothe in a speculative tone.

"That is the virus. It was necessary to work the two out together."

Woodruff's face was grave as he picked up the red-labeled vial, and he spoke in a hushed voice like a man telling forbidden things.

"The Virus of Hell! Never was a substance better named. I hesitate to predict the result were a number of men in-

oculated with this fluid. Fiends from hell they would be in truth, with never a spark of mercy left for friend or foe; wanton cruelty would motivate their actions, and the strangling of helpless babes would be tame sport to their blood-lusting spirits!"

He shook the vial slightly and held it before our eyes in the glow from the light-cone in the ceiling.

"See! The bacilli of hell swirling hungrily in their culture, invisible but clouding the liquor as if the smoke-fumes of the pit itself were diffused in the bottle! But few of us are entirely free of this terrible microbe, men, much as it was with the tubercle bacilli a generation or so ago; but not even the lowest brute in the deepest dive is thoroughly inoculated. Knowing the cruelty of some of our oppressors, you may imagine what they would become with this."

**H**E REPLACED the vial on the table and regarded us seriously.

"It will be necessary to begin at the top—with Luigi Caldoni, say, and the rest of the Council. After that it should be simple."

Luigi Caldoni, supreme chief of the International Council! Caldoni's order it was which called for a death each day until we should be delivered to the Council. If the professor's serum could change that brute's nature it would be miraculous indeed.

"Shall we call for volunteers?" Woodruff's voice broke into my thoughts. I was rising when Boothe interrupted.

"Cast lots. It's the only fair way, and there's no need to leave this room. Remember Akridge."

I did remember the traitor and thought of his hideous death without remorse. Boothe was busily breaking toothpicks, which he always carried in his pockets.

He finished and showed us five uneven slivers.

"I omitted the professor," he stated. "He's done his bit. Short pick wins honors."

He arranged them in his cupped hand, exposed ends even, and passed them about.

Enloe drew, then Ward and Fenwick and I. We then compared sticks. Boothe chuckled grimly.

"Draughton it is. Are you satisfied, or shall it be a process of elimination?"

But to this I objected, and after some argument the others let me have my way. Woodruff then drew me into the laboratory with him and closed the door behind us. He seated me on a stool while he busied himself at his long table littered with test-tubes, beakers of liquids and other chemical paraphernalia.

"I must work while we talk, Garfield. It will be best for you to start tonight, and this amnesiac must be finished for you. Can you think of a way to contact with Caldoni and the Council?"

My effort to surrender myself an hour or so ago was still in my mind; so I outlined a sketchy plan. He shook his head decidedly, and measured a minute quantity of a colorless liquid in a graduated tube before he spoke.

"I don't like it. They're a suspicious crew, and their spies have doubtless told them we're working on some scheme; hence the willing sacrifice each day to protect you and me. You mustn't have too rigid a search, you know, when you get in their hands."

Right there the difficulty of the task struck me with full force, and I admitted my helplessness.

"There is the weak point," he said. "You must get before the Council with as little interference as possible. At best it's a hazardous job, and if it weren't for



the certain results to be obtained if successful I would abandon the whole scheme. But the future of the world is at stake, Garfield, and it must go through. That fool, Boothe, would rather fight, sating his hate with the blood of thousands rather than accomplishing his end by strategy."

He added a few white crystals to his liquid and watched them dissolve with a foaming action.

"It is almost complete. I will add the volatile agent later."

He turned to me and sat down on the edge of the table.

"I have a plan," he said slowly. "I would go myself, only for the fact that I would have no chance to accomplish my purpose. They will give you that chance because they desire information from you concerning De Berrie. My plan is to have the W-R drop you in Washington tonight. Seemingly you will be trying to avoid notice, but will be picked up. If you think best you can tell them you learned that the Colonists were about to betray you and you fled, believing the safest place was under their noses. That will be plausible and should lull their suspicion so that they will not search you closely for some engine of destruction. Besides, they will be eager to get you before the Council and claim the reward. Of course, if they become too inquisitive you may have to fight your way clear, but I hope not."

He studied for several minutes, then resumed: "Once before the Council, it will not be so difficult, if you undergo the same proceedings as when we faced them before. There will be only Caldoni, Wharton, and one or two others. You can approach them closely under some pretext and spray a quantity of this amnesiac"—he indicated the liquid in the tube—"into the air. In a moment they

will be unconscious and remain so for a period determined by the amount of fluid liberated—ample time for your purpose. Then inject the serum in the back of the neck, intramuscular. Afterward it would be best to conceal yourself for a bit to give the drug a chance to do its work. As I remember, the Council room has several filing-cabinets set in curtained alcoves that would offer a temporary refuge. When the drug gets in its action you will be perfectly safe and can explain the whole matter."

"It seems too fantastic to be true," I muttered. "There'll be a slip-up somewhere. Things so wonderful don't work out so smoothly."

"It *will* work," he stated positively. "I have proved it by exhaustive tests on animals; the reaction should be the same with any mammal. The only possibility of a slip-up, as you call it, lies in the application. Once you get the Council, they will bring the rest to heel. In a week there will be clinics in every city and hamlet where the serum will be administered, by force, if necessary."

"But the anesthetic and the hypo—how will I carry them to avoid discovery? And if the amnesiac is to be sprayed openly, how can I escape its effects myself?"

"You will be doctored," he smiled, "or, rather, show the effects of doctoring. On your left hand will grow a monstrous boil with a rubber core containing enough amnesiac for nearly any contingency. By squeezing the boil with thumb or finger the liquid will be discharged. The moustache which you will wear as a disguise will contain minute glass capsules containing a nullifying agent which a brush of your hand will liberate. It will protect you for the required time, as the amnesiac is very volatile and will soon dissipate. The syringe, containing half a

dozen injections of the Serum, can be concealed in a hollow shoe heel which can be fixed by the time you're ready to start."

"You think of everything," I said admiringly.

"I've been studying the matter for days. Now run along home for a few hours' rest. I'll get those fellows in yonder to help me shape things up and get the ship ready."

**A**SURLY, brown-uniformed guard conveyed me into the Council room and seated me in a chair facing the crescent-shaped desk behind which the Council would gather presently.

"Their Excellencies will be in when they see fit," he admonished me. "You'd better set tight. Curiosity in prisoners ain't healthy. But you've been here before and know it, I reckon." With that he left me and closed the door leading into the corridor.

As the sanctum of the High Tribunal under the Reorganization, the room had some of the features of the ordinary courtroom combined with fixtures of a great private office. Before me sat the desk already mentioned, a few feet out from the back wall which was bare save for the portraits of the gentry who had established the regime. In this wall immediately behind the desk was a small door, used, I knew, exclusively by the Council. Behind me were a number of chairs used during certain conclaves by lesser leaders of the Administration. To either side were huge filing-cabinets built in sections against the walls and extending the full length of the forty-foot room, broken only by a curtained alcove on either side, possibly for the use of clerks transcribing the proceedings. In the lofty ceiling was the great flaring light-cone for use during

night sessions of the Council. On the floor was a thick carpet.

It was the custom for prisoners to be left to their own devices for varying periods in this room, and I suspected that the ceiling contained peepholes through which the prisoner could be observed and notes made of his behavior when he fancied himself absolutely alone. So, while I had little belief that I would be subjected to espionage because my guilt was already established, I put on an anxious look as though I feared the worst, though in reality it was difficult to avoid an air of complacency and a chuckle of triumph.

So far everything had gone according to schedule. At midnight the professor's space-ship, the W-R, had landed in the garden of the secluded house where I had lived with friends since my escape from prison. Enloe had accompanied the pilot and brought with him another man who proceeded deftly to make me over in such fashion that I doubted my own identity after a look into a mirror. The boil on my hand was so realistic that it almost throbbed, and I easily fell into the habit of keeping the hand partly raised as though in a sling. I was also equipped with a pair of shoes with one screw-on heel in which Enloe had placed the precious syringe, loaded and ready for use. With my mustache firmly attached I climbed into the space-flyer for the first time since my return from the moon, and we shot into the sky.

An hour later I was sneaking along a motorway a short distance out of Washington, the Tower a lighted spire against the sky. In another hour I had been arrested and exultantly identified. In their eagerness they had swallowed my story without question, given me only the most superficial of searches, and had even joked about my sore hand. Now I was to face

the Council and endure a merciless grilling. I repressed a smile with difficulty.

Twice before I had been in this building; once at the farcical trial which had condemned Woodruff and me to death; a second time in another room from this, where I had undergone an inquisition which had led by devious means to the horrible death of the then guiding light of the Council and his most trusted aide, De Berrie, and the warden of the Glass Prison, Calvin Muir. Caldoni the ruler, Wharton, Papke, Hoffman—lesser lights of the evil regime—had not forgotten that blow, and if this desperate scheme fell flat I could expect the most horrible death inherently cruel minds could devise, and Caldoni was a genius at refined torture.

It must not fail. My own life was of small moment, but those trusting, sacrificing thousands in the Colonies must be freed from bondage and the shadow of dreadful doom lifted from their souls.

I stiffened in my chair as the private door behind the desk swung silently and four men filed solemnly into the chamber.

**I** THRILLED in every fiber as they took their seats inside the curve of the desk. These four men, Caldoni, Papke, Hoffman, Wharton, held the fate of the Colonies in their hands, and I held theirs in mine! But I maintained a sullen calm; these men were shrewd, and behavior out of character with my situation would arouse their suspicion. So I sat unmoved and returned their cold inspection with the defiant stare I knew they expected. Caldoni pressed a button on the desk, and a hidden loud-speaker filled the room with its blaring voice:

"Garfield Draughton, resident Colony 7; convicted jointly with Nathan Woodruff of conspiracy to revolt; responsible

for disappearance of Council-chief Joroon De Berrie, Warden Muir, and one other. Escaped from prison on eve of execution and delivered his accomplice, Woodruff. Arrested 4 a. m. by Inspectors Gregg and Peddy on Motorway 62-A en route to city. Prisoner was seeking refuge in city because of rumor that Colonists were about to surrender him to Council to stop daily executions. Prisoner alone and unarmed."

The facts stated briefly for the edification of the Council, the metallic voice hushed. Caldoni eyed me with stern disfavor, poorly concealing the triumph he felt at having me in his power.

"You have heard the charge. What is your answer?"

"Since I am already convicted, why plead innocence?"

Hoffman and Papke frowned. Caldoni's eyes smoldered. Here, I saw, was a human volcano, quick to erupt his deadly passion. Small wonder that even his associates stood in dread of him and underlings quaked in his presence. But the knowledge of the powerful amnesiac under my fingers gave me courage.

"Where are De Berrie and Muir?" he snapped.

"Where they can no longer harm the Colonies," I answered cheerfully. "Muir was sacrificed by the moon people in their underground temple; De Berrie and I escaped, but De Berrie was killed by a scorpion in the cavern leading from the mountain. Their own greed killed them, not I."

Caldoni's eyes burned as the devils of wrath stirred his temper. "Liar!" he snarled, leaning forward. "Give me the truth or I will have your tongue burned from your throat. Where have you hidden De Berrie and Muir?"

I jumped to my feet. Four flame-pistols flashed up to cover me and for a split

second I hesitated, minded to let them have it by pressing the bulb in my palm, but I was several feet away and to have full effect the amnesiac must be released at close range. If I could gain just four more short steps! So I appeared to be properly awed by their weapons and lifted my arms to show my harmlessness. But I vented my resentment of the insult in speech.

"Gangster methods and gangster odds," I said hotly. "Save your insults for your associates, Caldoni!"

I regretted the foolish bravado almost instantly. My hot temper was jeopardizing my mission, for Caldoni was as unstable as an explosive gas. If I watched my tongue I was fairly safe, for I felt sure they would not harm me while they believed I held information vital to them. Their refusal to accept the truth which I had given them had built a wall of security about me. Under cover of their amazement at my audacity I gained several inches.

Caldoni trembled with fury. His brown eyes grew murky with hate, and Hoffman on one side and Papke on the other laid restraining hands on his arms, speaking swiftly in an undertone.

Whatever they said had an effect, for I could see the tremendous effort the man made to control his passion. His voice shook.

"Come closer!" He beckoned with his pistol and I obeyed with alacrity, coming so near that he motioned me to stop. Then he fastened his hot gaze on my face as if trying to conquer my stubborn spirit with the very deadliness of his power. He raised himself erect, a more commanding position.

"You will tell me about De Berrie and Muir. You will also tell me the whereabouts of Woodruff. Or I will kill you in this room!"

W. T.—3

He lifted the flame-pistol menacingly.

He was at the breaking-point. I was cold with fear lest I stretch my bluff too far and spoil everything. But I was not yet in just the position I desired.

"I have told you the truth about De Berrie and Muir, Caldoni," I answered steadily. "I will tell nothing about Professor Woodruff. And you will not kill me here, for the people would not believe that you had captured me at all and your prestige with the masses would be shaken."

His face purpled. The other Councilors rose. I inched forward. Hoffman spoke, worriedly, I thought:

"Draughon, don't be a fool! We will deal leniently with you if you assist us. And if you don't, we will have our way and you will suffer ten thousand deaths for your refusal. We have the power, the wealth, and the might to crush your Colonies if they are not submissive—wipe them from very existence!"

I took a short step, lifting my arm in an apparently innocent dramatic gesture—that potent left arm!

"You, the representatives of organized Evil, have all that you say," I told them earnestly. "But your rule is built on sand. With all your resources you lack the one essential of success in any undertaking—brains! And the brains of civilization are concentrated in the ten Colonies. In the end they will conquer!"

Caldoni spoke softly, huskily, as if to himself.

"I may not kill, but I can maim!" I saw him stealthily lift his pistol. "You shall be carried through the streets of the Colonies a wretched, limbless cripple, the body of a man and nothing more, to show how Luigi Caldoni rewards those who make sport of him!"

The showdown had come. I read it instantly in his eyes. There was no mercy,

no bluff in those hot pools of hate, only malign cruelty swirling in their brown depths. He took quick aim at my up-lifted arm—and I clenched my fist!

Almost simultaneously with the ejection of the spray of amnesiac I swept my right hand across the mustache, crushing the capsules of antidote and removing the appendage. The four Councillors stiffened as they inhaled the powerful fumes; then they slumped heavily in the chairs beneath them, heads sagging on their breasts. Caldoni's pistol dropped from his nerveless fingers.

**W**ITH the pungent fumes of the antidote reeking in my head I acted swiftly. In a jiffy the detachable heel came off and the syringe dropped into my hand. I leaned over Caldoni and shot a heavy dose of the Serum into his neck muscles just at the edge of his hair. Hoffman, Papke, and Wharton got an injection in turn, and I stepped back, my work accomplished. Remained only to conceal myself until the drug had done its work. And then I distinctly heard a noise in the corridor!

I whirled, knocking my hand against the horn of the crescent desk and dropping the syringe which I had intended to put in my pocket. But there was no time to retrieve it; I leaped for the protection of the alcove curtains just as the door opened and a uniformed guard entered the room. Through a fold of the drapery I watched, wishing heartily that I had snatched up Caldoni's pistol.

The man came close to the desk, staring puzzled at the relaxed figures. "Your Excellency——" he began hesitantly, and then stopped.

Caldoni stirred, lifted his head sluggishly and stared vacantly at the guard. The fellow stood there goggling, his mouth open. He was tongue-tied with

fear that he had roused the tyrant from a nap and thereby incurred his displeasure. I watched the tableau from my covert with keen interest. In a few moments now Caldoni should react to the heavy dose of Serum. I grinned in happy excitement, and studied Caldoni, who seemed to be recovering more quickly than the others. The guard, afraid to speak until given permission, also waited.

And now if Woodruff's theories and painstaking experiments were accurate should begin the transmutation of the evil genius who held the Colonies under his iron thumb. The lines of cruelty about his mouth should disappear; the perpetual frown on his forehead should be effaced, and the evil cunning lurking always in his eyes should be succeeded by a look of gentleness and compassion. I waited, confident these things would happen.

Nothing of the sort took place.

But a change there was, one that I could not believe and could only stare at in incredulous amazement, stupefied like the craven guard who was watching open-mouthed. Caldoni's face was altering slowly and through no muscular action of his own. It was losing its human stamp and becoming a mask of consummate evil. Like a mirror it reflected the foul emotions, the malignant passions of the man-brute. Ferocity, rapacity, cunning, lust—in short a monster dwarfing the foul creation of Frankenstein was emerging from what had once been a man. And as the awful thing was a-borning there was growing upon me the numbing conviction that I was responsible for the horrible metamorphosis, because in some way, for some reason, *the syringe had been loaded with the Virus of Hell!*

Stark terror gripped me. My brain reeled as it comprehended the enormity of the thing that had happened. Before

we had lived in the shadow of fear and suffering, enduring much at the hands of our oppressors. But those oppressors had been human. Now they were devils, fiends from the Pit whose orgies of blood and rapine would shame the deeds of Lucifer himself in the reign of Hell they would inaugurate.

To this day I have regretted that I didn't rush Caldoni and try to get the pistol he had dropped and kill them all. If I had succeeded it would have saved many lives and incalculable agony. But I didn't, and the secret knowledge of my cowardice has shamed me cruelly. Yet most men would have been just as craven as I in the same situation. I was a score of feet from Caldoni, with a heavy desk intervening, and the pistol was on the floor by his feet. The man was alert now, fully recovered from the anesthetic, and endeavoring to readjust his mind to the new sensation he was doubtless experiencing. The other Councillors were stirring, reviving rapidly. Moreover, while the guard was seemingly petrified with wonderment and fright, he was fully armed and would regain his wits quickly enough at sight of a prisoner running amok.

I repeat that I am ashamed of my lack of courage to take the chance, small though it certainly was, in the light of what subsequently happened. My only consolation is that it was Destiny.

Caldoni spoke, his voice vibrant with menace.

"The prisoner—Draughton—where is he?"

The guard jerked tremblingly to attention and stammered:

"Your Excellency—I—I do not know. Isn't he here?"

"Fool! Do you see him? Where have you been? Answer, dog!"

The harsh words completed the fel-

low's demoralization. He pleaded abjectly for mercy.

"Your Excellency—I—have mercy on me! I have not left my post at the door save to bring Mr. Hoffman a message from his daughter saying she is coming——"

"You lie!" Caldoni stooped swiftly and recovered the pistol, pointing it at the guard. "Ten thousand hells shall you suffer for letting him escape!"

His voice rose to a scream. His hand lifted, a thin sheet of flame leaped from the pistol and the guard's half-lifted left arm dropped from its shoulder and thumped suddenly on the floor.

A scream of horror broke from the man's lips. It had happened so swiftly that he scarcely realized it. He stared stupidly at the thing by his feet, his lips working soundlessly.

But the end was not yet. Maddened by the scene before him, his new-born cruelty whetted by the act, Caldoni shifted his aim and lopped off the remaining arm. Then, as the man crumpled in a faint, the monster deliberately severed each leg at the hip and regarded the shambles with deep satisfaction. The other Councillors, now fully awake, applauded the deed.

Caldoni pressed a button. In a few moments another uniformed man appeared, who shrank back horrified from the thing on the floor, yet was quick-witted enough to save himself a like fate, perhaps, by saluting smartly and affecting to ignore that which had turned his face as gray as a corpse.

"The prisoner, Draughton, has escaped," Caldoni said coldly. "See that the building is searched and the exits guarded. If he is not returned in two hours, every attendant in the Tower shall become like that thing on the floor who failed in his duty. Send in clearers to remove this offal."

The attendant saluted again with a hand that trembled, and withdrew. After he had gone, Caldoni spoke to his confreres, and they rose and filed out the private door, leaving me alone with the luckless wretch who had been the first to reap the horror I had innocently sown.

He might live—the Flame cut cleanly with no loss of blood, cauterizing the stump; but far better should he never awake. I stared at the mess of arms and legs and shuddered numbly. I was the cause of that, and in a few minutes more I would suffer a like fate, or worse. Through the slightly open door I could hear footsteps hurriedly approaching, and from my slit in the curtains I watched with tense nerves. When the searchers came close enough I would take them by surprise, seize a pistol and at least take some of my enemies with me. I would never be taken alive, a plaything for Caldoni's fiendish torture.

**T**HE door was pushed wide and two men in the familiar brown suits entered with a stretcher and began to pick up the pieces of their luckless fellow. My taut nerves relaxed a little; these men were intent only on their clean-up job, with no thought of prisoners. So thorough indeed was their work that one of them, looking about him to make sure the task was done, spied the shiny barrel of the little syringe lying half buried in the deep pile of the carpet. With a muttered word to his companion he walked over to the desk and picked it up, scrutinized it closely, and dropped it into his pocket. Then they picked up their ghastly burden and hurried away, closing the door behind them. I cursed my awkwardness in dropping the syringe, which still held a couple of cubic centimeters, but in the stress of my predicament I thought little of it. My escape was already known; so the clue

amounted to nothing. Even if the fellow turned his find over to the Council they would think it had contained the amnesiac which I had used to put them to sleep.

But I could not stay in my hiding-place indefinitely; sooner or later the alcoves would be searched and I would be discovered—at a disadvantage. Better to be caught making a bid for freedom than be trapped like a rat. I stepped from behind the curtains, intent on investigating what lay behind the Council's private door, and had gained the middle of the room when I brought up with a jerk, an icy thrill coursing over me.

The corridor door behind me had opened!

I whirled, poised to leap and attack with the ferocity of a trapped animal fighting for its life. But the effort died a-borning, my lifted arms hung limply and I sheepishly muttered:

"I beg your pardon!"

The girl surveyed me coolly, critically. For my part I knew that I was facing the prettiest young woman I had ever seen. She was dressed in an aviator's costume of soft leather and she held her helmet crushed in one small, gauntleted hand. Her cheeks were abloom with health and the zest of youth sparkled in her blue eyes. Despite the desperate peril of my position I felt a thrill that most certainly was not prompted by danger; under other circumstances I should have enjoyed the meeting immensely, though I had always been rather shy in the company of women, but in this case she undoubtedly meant disaster. I tore my mind from the allure of her and wondered who she could be who thus boldly entered the Council room when the Council was presumably in session. It was a step not lightly taken. Then I remembered the

half-delivered message of the luckless guard. She was Hoffman's daughter.

The recognition effectually dampened my little thrill of admiration. Caldoni's torture would be rendered not one whit more endurable by my being delivered to it even by the prettiest of women. At the same time my whole nature revolted at the thought of being brutal to this beautiful girl, beating her into unconsciousness so that I could make my escape. No! A principle is a principle, even if foolish and quixotic.

"And you, I take it, are the prisoner, Draughon, whose supposed escape has turned every attendant in the Tower into a madman! You do not look dangerous."

She said it musingly; there was neither fright nor malice in the low, clear tones. A wild hope flared in my mind.

"I'm sure I'm not, Miss Hoffman," I smiled, putting every atom of winsomeness I possessed into my voice. "I'm just a badly frightened young man in the most desperate plight one could imagine, wondering how long you will postpone calling a guard."

"You know me?" she asked, surprized, ignoring my hint.

Swiftly I told her what had occurred, not omitting the fate of the wretch who had attempted to deliver her message to her father. When I concluded she frowned and her eyes darkened with anger.

"Caldoni is a brute!" she exclaimed bluntly with a fine disregard for possible consequences. "He controls the Council body and soul—including my father. I'm glad you thwarted him this once."

She studied for a bit, appraising me again with her eyes. I waited, hardly daring to hope, yet conscious that her very hesitation was a point in my favor. Would she leave me without giving the alarm?

Sudden determination showed in her

eyes and her small chin tilted stubbornly. She came to me and held out her ungloved right hand impulsively. I took it and, not without some grace, I hope, bent low, kissing it. The impulse had come to me spontaneously, this revival of a courtly custom almost forgotten by our generation. A faint flush deepened the pink in her cheeks, but she was not displeased.

"I like you, Mr. Draughon," she said frankly. "Come. I have decided to help you!"

**A**LITTLE dazed by the sudden turn of events, I followed her through the private door and up a spiraling stair which led us to the flat roof of the Tower. The landing-stage was bare, as a hasty glance proved, save for a slim stratosphere. Straight to the machine she led the way with never a glance to the side or behind to see if we were observed. With superb nerve she opened the door and motioned me into the snug, low cabin, as if she were taking an honored guest for an outing instead of conniving at the escape of the most badly wanted prisoner on the continent. She took her seat at the controls and headed the ship upward obliquely across the freight and passenger lanes until she slipped into the stratosphere, straightening out at forty thousand feet. Then she cut the speed to a mere coast, locked the controls and turned about.

"That was easy," she smiled, giving me her eyes freely. "But now that I have you, Mr. Draughon, I confess I don't know what to do with you!"

She pointed to the observation mirror on the instrument board.

"See those ships quartering the field of view? Those are military scouts investigating all pleasure and commercial craft. I caught the order going out just as I landed on the Tower. Were I to set



you down anywhere, you would be taken at once, and I should be obliged to explain to Caldoni why I had turned traitress." She sniffed her contempt of the Council chief. "So, what am I to do?"

Her words banished the sense of security which the removal from immediate danger had engendered in my mind. It began to look like a case of the frying-pan versus the fire. But I found it strangely difficult to concentrate on my own peril. My thoughts had strayed into channels new to them but alluringly sweet, and I found it hard to analyze my emotions. Was I falling in love with this enemy of my people, a daughter of the infamous Council? Reason told me that she was among them, but not of them; but was a girlish impulse, born of pity for my hopeless plight, a true indication of her real character?

And yet there was no ignoring the turmoil in my mind, no setting aside of the sweet thrill her presence and her interest in me afforded by cold logic. Why, I was realizing this minute that the peril she had got herself into was giving me more real concern than my own desperate plight!

"The best course is to get rid of me as soon as possible," I told her earnestly. "Land me anywhere and let me shift for myself. I couldn't enjoy freedom knowing that you had paid for it, and a plane may stop us any minute——"

She shook her small, helmeted head. "This ship has the insignia of the Council on wings and hull. They will never stop me unless I should make some blunder. But we can't cruise about for ever. I'm expecting a radio from dad any minute."

She looked apprehensively toward the small loud-speaker in a corner of the cabin, then fell to studying me searchingly.

"Miss Hoffman," I begged, "consider yourself. You probably do not realize just how badly wanted I am, and just how frenzied the Council is at this moment. I——" and then I hesitated, wondering how much it would be safe to tell her of myself and our plans. Surely I could not tell her that my scheme had miscarried and I had made a ravaging beast of her father! Swiftly I covered my confusion plausibly:

"Oh, well, I may as well make a clean breast of everything. I have been in hiding in Colony 6—you know, of course, where it is situated—and I came to Washington for the express purpose of winning the Council over to us by means of a wonderful drug, a discovery of Professor Woodruff, whom you have doubtless heard much of lately. The plan miscarried, but I managed to hide in an alcove, from which I had just emerged when you found me. Not even your father could save you from Caldoni's fury if he gets an inkling of this. Land me at once—signal one of those scouts—take me back to the Tower, anything, only wash your hands of me before they find out. Believe me, I'd rather die a thousand deaths than have you suffer one moment at the hands of that fiend!"

I hushed, realizing that I was speaking so warmly in the stress of my new emotion that it savored of melodrama. And my eyes must have been even more eloquent, for she colored hotly and her own eyes fell. The next moment they lifted, narrowed, and her voice was a little chilly.

"If I thought you believed I would do such a thing I would do it at once. I don't do things by halves, Mr. Draughton, and not all of us outside the Colonies approve of the International Council, or deserve the character that they merit."

I mumbled an apology, but she didn't even hear it. Her mobile features cleared

swiftly and a sunshiny smile broke out. She clapped her hands together delightfully.

"The very thing!" she exclaimed. "Safe; perfectly safe. And what a huge joke on Mr. Caldoni!"

She turned quickly to the controls, studying the compass and the observation mirror. I couldn't tell what course she selected, but I knew that we began a slow, descending spiral. Some time later we landed with a slight jar, and we climbed out onto the landing-stage atop a tall building.

For one unnerving moment I thought she had returned to the Tower, but she airily beckoned me to follow and led the way to a door which opened onto a narrow staircase. We descended two or three flights and passed into a corridor thickly carpeted and illuminated softly by subdued light-cones. Finally she opened a door and motioned me into a luxurious apartment.

"Not even Caldoni dares enter here, Mr. Draughton!" she cried triumphantly. "My home!"

I halted in consternation. "But—but —Miss Hoffman——" I stammered in confusion.

She drew herself up regally, her eyes flashing.

"Your hesitancy, sir, is not flattering! I said this was *my* home, not my father's!" She eyed me levelly. "I trust that was why you seemed to hesitate?"

Touchy! As proud as a queen, and, queen-like, her motives were not to be questioned. I was reared by grandparents who refused to accept the changing customs and my ideas of propriety had been obsolete for a generation. I made haste to regain lost ground.

"My thought was only of you," I mumbled.

She smiled quick forgiveness and rest-

ed her hand briefly on my arm. Then she fixed a satisfying lunch for the two of us, and we chatted for an hour. Then she rose, worriedly, and said:

"I must be gone for a while. I'm worried because I haven't had a radio from dad. In the library are books, the announcer, and the television mirror. I'll be back presently with the latest inside news and we'll map out a plan to get you away safely."

**B**UT it was night when she returned, struggling bravely against a terrible agitation, her eyes reddened with weeping.

"My father," she said in answer to my anxious question. "Dead!"

Her chin quivered, tears welled afresh from her eyes, and she buried her face child-like against my coat and cried unrestrainedly. I comforted her as best I could and patted her shoulder in a man's awkward attempt to soften a sorrow that only time can assuage. Curiosity, sympathy, and above all, a dark shadow of suspicion filled my mind. Presently she drew away and lifted her head, striving to regain control of herself.

"It happened hours ago," she said dully. "The Council were entering their private shuttle after a conference to go to the ground floor of the Tower. Dad was the last to enter and the shuttle started too soon. He stepped under the panel and into the open tube."

Suspicion ripened. "Was Caldoni in the shuttle?"

She flashed me a look of bitter understanding. "I think so, too. Yes, he was at the control."

Tragedy again. The Virus of Hell! I could see Caldoni starting the shuttle a split-second too quick, allowing his compatriot to step into the empty shuttle-tube for a thousand-foot fall. I could almost

hear the faint echo of sardonic laughter floating up the dark cylinder to meet the luckless man plunging to his death.

"I must be gone for two or three days. You will be safe, and there is ample food in the storage room. Under no circumstances try to get away from the apartment, for there is a tight cordon of guards about the city. Caldoni executed the Tower attendants this afternoon; so you may be sure of a sharp lookout. They are confident you are still in the city and are determined that you shall not get away. You will be here when I return?"

She looked at me mutely pleading. I promised.

**T**HE next three days were a nightmare of suspense. I paced those rooms until I nearly wore paths in the thick pile of the rugs. I turned over a thousand schemes in my mind and discarded them as fast as they formed. Without outside aid, escape was simply impossible. The prestige of the Council was at stake; the lives of countless guards depended upon my recapture, and there was no chance of a relaxing of their interest.

The announcer kept me abreast of current events. Through it I learned the details of Hoffman's funeral at his old home in Maryland; of the large number of planes which formed the cortege; and of the subsequent departure of Miss Merrilee Hoffman with her aunt for a brief visit to New York. But of the Colonies there was no mention, and the news service was strangely silent concerning my escape and Caldoni's activities. Censored, I decided with disappointment.

Nor was the television mirror more productive of information. The second and third days I kept the mirror charged and viewed the Colonies in rotation, a wearisome and monotonous task as the hours produced only the peaceful scenes

of small cities going about their daily affairs. It seemed ominously significant that the daily executions had ceased without apparent rime or reason.

Why? Because Caldoni was hatching some subtle, yet horrible, deviltry! Of this I was certain; and when, the morning of the fourth day, the girl hurriedly entered the apartment, the look of stark horror on her sweet face confirmed my forebodings. She threw herself into a chair and stared at me in such evident distress that I listened for the tread of Caldoni's men in the corridor.

"The Colonies!" she brought out at last. "Oh, those poor people!"

Little by little I got the story, a story so packed with horror and agony, with brutish lust and nameless evil, that I shall give none of the harrowing details here. A horde of murderous devils, five hundred strong, the very scum and riffraff of the cesspools of crime, had descended on Colony 7 last night. They had beaten down the resistance of the able-bodied men (possession of lethal weapons by Colonists was strictly forbidden) and staged a saturnalia of crime that beggars description. Murder and pillage and rapine were followed by the torch, and this morning the beautiful little city mourned over its ashes while the specter of death haunted hundreds of families. The foul horde had withdrawn from the ruins to a camp by the Potomac to which they had taken a number of young women and the spoil they had gathered, spoil which, it seemed, was disappointingly meager. I could well understand that last, for the Council had impoverished the Colonies by excessive taxation, a policy which was to be followed by a bitter sequel.

I was sick with horror. Colony 7 had been my home until I became a fugitive. I had no relatives, but all my friends,

save Professor Woodruff, had lived there. I asked thickly:

"And the Council took no action?"

She shook her head. "Caldoni is busy and refuses to be seen or disturbed. I was told confidentially that he is personally conducting some experiments in the National Laboratory, but I know he is no chemist; so the report must be false."

But I knew the report was true, damnable true! That sharp-eyed attendant had thought to curry favor with Caldoni by giving him that cursed syringe, and Caldoni in turn had taken it to the Federal chemists. And with the knowledge of the contents of the syringe, the devilish subtlety of the fiend had contrived a revenge that was diabolically perfect. No wonder the executions had ceased; there must be plenty of victims for this new torture, beside which the clean death of the Flame was a mercy. And once the Virus had been analyzed, it was simple for modern chemists to produce the stuff in quantities. Then Caldoni had gathered a motley crew of ruffians, inoculated them and turned them loose to wreak their raging cruelty on the helpless Colonies.

"I must go back," I told her. "Those are my people and my place is with them. There might be some way I could help in stopping this slaughter."

"I thought you would want to go," she said dully. "Do you know you are going to your death? I didn't tell you all of it. It is whispered that Caldoni means to annihilate the Colonies. Every hour is bringing men into Washington, men selected and summoned by Caldoni himself from all over the continent. And those of us who do not approve, dare not object."

"Good God!" I muttered aghast. "And the Colonies are weaponless! Surely there are enough high-minded people in the country to prevent such wholesale murder!"

"There are!" she defended with a flare of her old spirit. "But they are leaderless, and by the time they could be organized it would be too late. Caldoni rules by might and fear, and these men he is gathering around him are his trusted aides and supporters. They would quell a hasty rebellion at once. My father once told Caldoni he would bring about the downfall of the Administration by his wanton cruelty, and nearly lost his life for his plain talk. No, my friend, only Caldoni's death can avert national disaster!"

"All the more reason why I should not sit idly here and let him accomplish his hellish work! The Colonies must be warned!"

"Yes, but I can warn them without exposing you to danger."

"You?" I cried in astonishment. "Why should you risk yourself in such a way?"

"Because—because——" Her voice trembled and her eyes filled. A suspicion as sweet as it was incredible swept into my mind. I started toward her, but she eluded me, lifting her hand.

"I knew you would go," she said tremulously. "It is what I would want you to do, only—only—so I prepared a way. I have permission to go back to Maryland with some—some flowers. You can hide under them."

She went into her bedroom. When she came back she was in her jaunty aviator's costume of soft leather. But the glow and vivacity which I had associated with the garb was absent. She beckoned me to follow and we went out on the roof.

**T**HERE was no trouble. The aerial patrol stopped us in the passenger lane—I heard the thump of the magnetic grapnels as they shot a bridge across to us over a few feet of space. The door opened, letting in a wave of icy air followed by an officer's head, which I could

just get a peep of through my leafy bower. He saluted the girl respectfully, cast a perfunctory glance around and passed us on, never dreaming that the mass of loosely piled flowers and wreaths concealed the notorious Garfield Draughton. But the girl would not let me come out until she landed, some time later.

To my surprize I recognized the familiar pines of the Georgian landscape and in the near distance a small city which could only be Colony 6. I turned to her in astonished gratification.

"You could never have made it across country," she said. "Good luck and—good-bye!"

She held out both her hands, her eyes swimming. I took them—and her. And there in that old abandoned field whose barren sand streaks were hot under the glare of the Southern sun we forgot the smoke of burning homes, the cruelty of human beasts, and the dark shadow of nameless peril that was sweeping on to engulf us in its sinister gloom. We remembered only that we lived—and loved!

I watched until the tiny plane disappeared in the fathomless blue, my heart sick with longing and fear and gloomy forebodings. Then I tore myself away from the spot, and hurried on to the Colony with my ominous tidings.

**P**URELY by accident I ran into Enloe almost at once. I had long since shaved off my mustache, and he recognized me. But there was no welcome in his somber eyes as he jerked his head for me to follow him into a dim little restaurant, where he selected a table behind a screen.

"Spies are everywhere," he explained shortly. "It's death to be seen with you. Great God, Draughton, what did you do?"

I told him briefly, concluding with: "Who loaded that syringe?"

"I did myself. The bottle, however, was handed to me by Boothe. I've lain awake nights wondering if he could have done such a thing as—oh, it's possible; indeed, it's the only explanation. Queer fellow, Boothe, thinking of violence only as a means to an end. I believe it was he who instigated the attack on Woodruff a few days ago. He is now trying to organize a column to attack Washington and seize the Council!"

"Is he mad?"

"We are all mad, Draughton," he said despondently. "The tragedy of Number 7 infuriated the people. Some of them blame you and Woodruff, and it's fortunate that you met me before you were recognized. Let's go to the laboratory. I'm taking care of Woodruff there, and besides, it's too dangerous to remain here."

By devious ways and unfrequented streets he led the way to the vacant building, owned by him, which stood over our underground retreat. The city seemed unnaturally still, brooding somberly under threat of the approaching doom. Enloe opened the secret panel and I hurried down the ramp and into the dimly lighted chamber, where I saw a figure lying on a cot.

Woodruff caught my hand eagerly, looking up with pain-filled eyes. "I know what happened, Garfield, and who was responsible, but the populace hold it against you and me. They are not to be blamed, poor people. They have suffered deeply. But tell me what Caldoni is doing?"

The two listened horrified while I told them of the massing of gunmen from all parts of the continent, and of their transformation into raging fiends with the Virus of Hell. Woodruff's eyes glowed feverishly, while Enloe jumped up and began to pace the floor, muttering to himself.

"Twice we have been betrayed, Garfield," said the scientist, picking nervously at the sheet, "this time through mistaken zeal. Boothe is a hothead; he believed that the matter could be best settled by violence, so he forced the issue. He hates the Council so bitterly that he wants their death, not their reformation. The poison is as active in his system as in Caldoni's, only it seeks its outlet through slightly different channels. He is the Caldoni of the Colonies."

"When will the attack begin, Draughon?" Enloe stopped his pacing to ask the question. I knew he was thinking of his family.

"Within a few hours at most. Miss Hoffman remarked as she flew over their camp that planes were concentrating there in force, and there were other signs of activity. Of course, they may select some other——"

"A few hours! Ah, no one can predict the movements of madmen! They may be attacking even now——"

He rushed from the laboratory into the small conclave room.

"He has gone to watch the mirror," Woodruff explained. "For days we have lived under the shadow of doom. Since the tragedy of Number 7, the women and children are kept together ready to be rushed into the swamps at the first alarm, and a watchman has been stationed at the city mirror day and night. Until two days ago, when a half-crazed mob attacked me, I have worked day and night compounding the Serum——"

"Serum!" I echoed. Like Boothe I had seen enough of the cursed stuff.

"*Et tu, Brute?*" Woodruff smiled sadly. "We shall need it, son. We are on the eve of a new life, a new Jerusalem. But first shall come Armageddon——"

Prophetic words! He was interrupted by the shrill, mighty scream of a radio

siren which penetrated even this sealed room. Almost instantly came a shout from Enloe, a shout which was drowned at the last by the hoarse voice of the announcer blaring the alarm of the city watchman:

"They are coming—they are coming! Remember the women and children!"

The voice stopped short as the watcher at the mirror presumably rushed away to lend a hand in the frantic preparations.

"Garfield!" Woodruff's voice snapped me to attention. He had lifted himself to the side of the cot, and his eyes gleamed with a hot brilliance. "Hand me that square bottle on the shelf above the atomoscope. Quick!"

Swiftly I gave it him, and he shook from it two large black tablets, one of which he swallowed.

"Thenopolin," he said. "A marvelous stimulant, but dangerous. I keep it for emergencies. Now help me."

He got weakly to his feet and took a staggering step. I helped him into his clothes, and he strengthened rapidly. The tablet seemed to have poured vigor into his muscles and nerves, for when he was ready he hurried me to the exit panel. Enloe had disappeared.

**I**N THE street men were hurrying about, secreting their valuables, gathering what crude weapons they could muster, and routing out a few brave, stubborn women who had resolved to stay with their men. They paid no attention to us until we turned south at a fast trot down a narrow street and caught up with a large column of women and children under the convoy of a picked guard who were hurrying them along to shelter in the near-by swamp.

These men, seeing us fleeing, sought to halt us and began to throw stones and hiss when we ran on past. I was as puzzled

at Woodruff's behavior as the indignant guards, but to my panted questions he paid no attention until we reached the edge of a thin growth of scrub oak that marked the boundary of the swamp. Then he slowed to a fast walk.

"The W-R—is in—this swamp—ahead," he said jerkily. "It's—only hope!"

He swayed and would have fallen if I hadn't caught him. He sank to the ground and dug his fingers spasmodically into the sand while he fought against the pain of his broken ribs.

"We are not flying from the danger, Garfield. We are taking the only means of repairing the damage done by that hot-headed fool, Boothe. It means slaughter; God, what slaughter! And the innocent must die with the guilty. But it is the only way," he murmured to himself, a film of pain clouding the unnatural brilliance of his eyes. "I have prayed we could avoid it, but it must be. Come. We have no time to lose.

"We could not have helped them back there," he said suddenly as we pushed our way through the undergrowth. "We would only have been killed with the rest of them, and then would have come the end of civilization!"

He continued to talk half to himself, his voice vibrant with a strange excitement. I knew he was feverish, and thought he was uttering the wild fancies of irresponsibility.

"Strange that on two men should depend the fate of civilization, Garfield, after nature has labored on the race for a million years! That we two should be the instruments to end the reign of Evil on earth and usher in the dawn of a brighter day, christening it with the blood of thousands!"

He laughed wildly. "A figure of speech—blood. The Dew kills horribly, but bloodlessly."

My mind reeled at the import of his words. Memories came to me, memories of the tales I had heard in my childhood, blood-curdling stories of the War of the Chemists, and the vanishing of cities.

The Dew of Death! That dread chemical which brought such horror into the world that after the War its use was unanimously abolished by the nations, the formula destroyed, and experiments leading toward its re-discovery prohibited under pain of death! I felt certain now that the feverish chemist was raving, and I was sick at heart, but his next words shook my conviction.

"When those ravening wolves descended on Colony 7 they little dreamed that beneath their feet lay the agent that would avenge their crimes!" He was still talking half to himself, weaving through the undergrowth as he searched for landmarks, seemingly oblivious to my presence. "I stumbled on the formula accidentally and made a quantity of it before I realized the blackness of the deed I was planning against my fellow men. But against mad dogs, ah, it is different. It is legitimate. God himself sanctions its use as a weapon in the hands of the weak and oppressed. No one knew of the cylinders of death in our old laboratory, Garfield. Not Akridge, the traitor. Not even you. I had thought to let them lie buried for ever, but there came this mistake. Only they can now cope with the Virus of Hell. And who knows but that Boothe performed his act at the behest of Destiny? Ah, the ship!"

We had almost bumped into the W-R hidden in the dense undergrowth of the swamp. We fought our way around its tapering hull until we came to the lock. But I had to boost Woodruff into the opening, for he was too exhausted to climb in unaided.

I closed the lock and took the controls

while he lay down to rest. I lifted the ship gently out of the tangle of brush and above the tree-tops, where the vision mirror gave a clear field of observation.

The sky was dotted with planes. Like a swarm of dragon-flies they came zooming out of the north to drop in a swift spiral to the fields about the city. The mirror showed swarms of men leaping from them, converging from all sides upon the doomed Colony. Woodruff came up and peered over my shoulder at the grim scene.

"Altitude, Garfield." His voice was clear now, but tinged with pain. "We dare not risk a battle in the air. We can't help our friends, but we can avenge them. Make all speed to Number 7."

**W** E SHOT upward until the earth was but a dim panorama of blurred colors; then I straightened out at tremendous speed, the thin air of the stratosphere offering little resistance. Fifteen minutes later the mirror pictured our objective and I poised the ship and dropped like a plummet, snapping on the repulsion beam at a scant five hundred feet to float to an easy landing. Our descent had been so swift I was confident no chance patrol had observed it, and as the mirror showed the city to be deserted, we climbed out of the lock and stared about at the blackened ruins.

I swore deeply at the scene of desolation and destruction, shuddering as I glimpsed a blackened human hand, a woman's hand, lying in the street attracting a swarm of flies. The bodies had been removed, but the men had overlooked this mute reminder of that night of horror. The professor grasped my arm.

"Men die while we brood, Garfield. Back to the ship and land at the labora-

tory. We can not carry the cylinders far. I should have told you."

I took the controls again and lifted the ship over the ruins to the precipitous hillside near by, in which was the hidden workshop, a partly natural cavern which I had not seen since the night I took De Berrie, Muir, and Akridge on their fatal voyage to the moon. But the place had not been ravaged, due to the Council's ignorance of its existence.

The chemist led the way to the back, where the cave narrowed to a mere fissure, ending in a blank wall of earth.

He pushed a light bar into my hand. "I built that wall, Garfield. The cylinders are stored behind it. Take this bar and dig."

I worked desperately, and in a short while the crowbar broke through the packed earth. Soon the hole was large enough, and I crawled through, flashing on a light.

The fissure was packed with slim steel cylinders, tapering to a valve at one end on which there was a threaded snout. There were twenty of them, and we labored mightily getting them out of the narrow place and carrying them to the W-R, where we packed them in the stern convenient to a two-inch vent-pipe in the floor through which they could be discharged. Then we climbed aboard and turned south with our cargo of frightful death.

But it had taken time to load the cylinders, and a little more to encompass the thousand-mile round trip. Even before we reached the Colony I knew we were too late; the mirror was fogged with the blurry light rays reflected from weaving clouds of smoke, and far, far below us I began to see black specks of planes shooting swiftly into the north, their work of destruction finished.



Woodruff seemed to have steeled his heart.

"Don't take it so hard, son. We could have done nothing if we had got back sooner. The Dew doesn't discriminate between friend and foe. We must follow them to their base, where we can wipe them from the face of the earth they desecrate."

I shan't describe clearly the scenes and events following our arrival in what had once been Colony 6. Even now the memory nauseates me, and my dreams are filled with horrid phantoms that beckon me with blackened fingers and shake bloody heads when I try desperately to explain that I was not wholly to blame for the catastrophe precipitated by Denison Boothe.

But he paid the penalty for his deed. We found him in the street, mutilated beyond description. Only by his cold, tawny eyes did I recognize him, eyes which the agony of death had left wide and staring. The women and children were saved—ironic mercy, perhaps, since they were spared only to mourn the loss of husbands, sweethearts, and fathers. We found the bodies of a few devoted women who had killed themselves on the broken bodies of their loved ones. Others wandered aimlessly about, staring unseeingly at the heaps of the slain, dumb with a grief that seared their very souls. We labored with the yet alive until the sun rose next morning, flooding afresh the scene of horror with light that rendered the ruins and tragedies more starkly poignant. Then we climbed aboard the W-R and drove swiftly toward the source of the nameless evil which had wrought this havoc, the professor utterly exhausted, and myself buoyed up only by the grim determination to blast Caldoni and his horde of fiends back into the hell from which they had sprung.

As before, I trusted to altitude to screen us until we reached our objective. Then we could drop, discharge our dread cargo and climb swiftly back to heights impossible for a plane. But it was not danger of meeting the patrol which occupied my mind. I was thinking of Merrilee and our parting in that sun-drenched field. Was she also thinking of me? And would she mourn me as dead when the news of the massacre reached her city?

As if in answer to my thoughts the mirror in front of me pictured the Administration city miles below, and a cluster of white planes parked in a great field on the bank of the Potomac. I shut off speed and began to drop. Woodruff, I saw, had dragged himself to his post and was screwing a length of hose to the snout of a cylinder. While I watched, he removed the cap from the vent-pipe and lowered the hose so that it trailed a few feet below the hull. With his hand on the release-valve he waited for my signal, a white-haired Nemesis with death in his fingers.

I kept a sharp lookout for a patrol craft; the fact that we had sighted none so far was in itself suspicious, and I expected to be greeted by a swarm of them at any moment. But we fell to five hundred feet unmolested and I risked a survey of the ground below. This was more disquieting than the unnatural absence of patrol craft. The great encampment was deserted, save for the tents and the scores of planes. I shouted to Woodruff to stay his hand.

"There isn't a soul here! The camp is dead as a hammer. Where can they have gone?"

**T**HE scientist staggered forward and studied the mirror. Then he turned to me with a look on his face such as I had never seen, the look, I imagine, of

the Avenging Angel contemplating the destruction of the ungodly!

"Think, Garfield, think!" His voice was vibrant with exultation. "Does a mad dog respect his master? Caldoni changed slumbering brutes into ravening wolves who lusted for blood, loot, and women. In the two colonies they destroyed they got no loot, thanks to the Council's own avariciousness; in the last they got no women, due to our forethought!" His voice became hushed as he drove home his terrible point: "At the very door of their camp was the richest city in the world—a city famed for its beautiful women. The wolves have returned to the master who bred them!"

Appalled by his prediction, I shifted the direction-finder on the mirror until the city sprang into the field. Distance gave us a full, though minute, view of the whole terrain. And from the south came streams of tiny men who swarmed rapidly through the streets. The horde had fallen upon the Administration city!

"The well-spring of Evil will be dredged to its depths," murmured the professor, falling back into his strain of feverish but prophetic speech. "Caldoni the archfiend is falling at the hands of the monsters he created, and Organized Crime is reaping the whirlwind it sowed. The God of Justice caused Caldoni to gather the flower of the cohorts of Evil into one spot that they might be destroyed at the height of their triumph, and a new Jerusalem arise from the ashes of Babylon!"

He staggered back to his cylinder, still muttering. Here I may add that at the conclusion of our desperate venture Woodruff paid outraged nature the penalty by being confined to his bed for three months, recovering eventually to rank high in the councils of the new government.

I drove the great ship low over the house-tops of the city, and Death perched his grim skeleton on our stern and rode with us. We were not molested, since the aerial patrol had either joined the invaders or fled the city as thousands of the townfolk had done at the first warning, the mirror showing swarms of departing planes, and motorways choked with the fleeing columns of the poor. Had it not been that I felt certain Merilee had escaped in her plane, I confess, with some shame perhaps, that I could not have gone through with my part in what history now refers to as the end of the Crime Era. Nevertheless I kept a sharp eye on the roof-tops over which we skimmed, hoping to identify the landing-stage frequented by her dear self.

I began the first loop of a great flat spiral which would shorten with each lap, beginning at the outskirts of the city so that none might take alarm and escape retribution, until we should end our ghastly journey over the source of the foul corruption—the Tower building of the infamous International Council.

Behind us a faint, almost invisible fog was forming like one of the great ephemeral nebulae of space from which the worlds and the flaming suns are born. In truth, the simile is apt, for from this deadly man-made nebula a new world of Honor, Justice and Love was evolved. But the agony of its birth was awful.

Tiny golden crystals, propelled by a gas of its own generation, spewed from the trailing hose; crystals which combined with the oxygen in the air and formed the pale mist in our wake. This mist was invisible from below, for it melted rapidly, drifting down in a fine precipitation like an imperceptible drizzle out of an apparently clear sky. And the ravening horde below, intent on murder and looting and ravishment, tore at their throats

and bodies in throes of torture and knew not whence came their death. I would not turn on the audio attachment of the mirror, lest my purpose weaken, but I knew that the triumphant shouts of the destroying fiends were changing into yells of terror and pain, and then into choking gasps that were quickly stilled.

Incessantly trickled the golden crystals from the cylinders of death, replenished when emptied by one whose strength for the task was upheld only by the conviction that he was the instrument of God's vengeance. Steadily fell the ghastly precipitation, filming the city with the Dew—and death.

Thousands died, some innocent, no doubt, among the many guilty. They were martyrs to the cause, unwillingly, perchance, but unavoidably. But it was horrible.

And then I screamed and tore at the controls like a madman. Below and not a hundred yards ahead of the relentlessly advancing curtain of death was a tiny figure on a landing-stage, a figure that waved a white scarf and looked upward

at the great ship of metal soaring so near at hand.

Merrilee!

To this day I have no clear idea of what I did, or how. I only know that somehow I managed to land the spaceship on the stage and grasped her dear form just in time to save it from the pale mist of the condensing crystals, a few feet behind us. I believe that I threw her bodily through the lock! But the slightest touch of that damp nebula would have taken her from me for ever.

I would have followed her unhesitatingly.

And at last, poised over the iniquitous Tower, we looked shudderingly down on the city of the dead, Merrilee's hand fast clasped in my own. Professor Woodruff lurched forward, muttering:

"It is finished—man's bondage to Crime. The night was dark, but the dawn shall be glorious! Caldoni has perished, exhorting his evil spawn, and the Virus of Hell has burned a path for the Serum of Right to follow! God's in His heaven, all's well——"

He crumpled to the floor unconscious.

