

FANTASTIC STORY MAGAZINE

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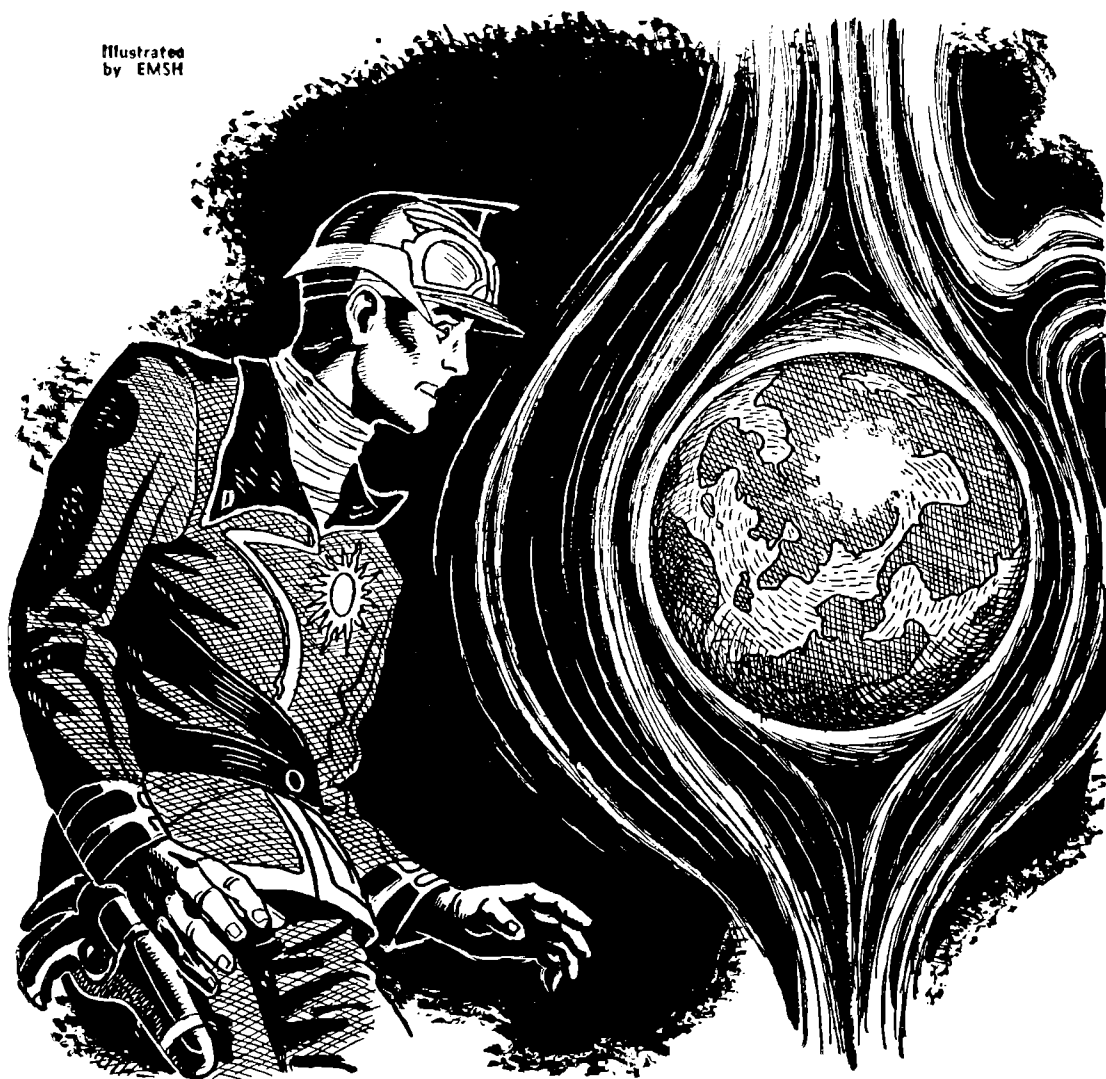
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In front of Lanarck's eyes, space quivered and wrenched

Planetary secret agent Lanarck had to

get the atom equations — but first he

had to catch the dangerous young lady

THE WORLD-THINKER



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I

THROUGH the open window came the myriad sounds of the city—the swish of passing air-traffic, the soft clank of the pedestrian belt on the ramp below, hoarse undertones from the lower levels. Cardale sat by the window, inattentive to both the noise and the ocean breeze which cooled his face. His eyes stared unseeingly over the ebony desk at the wall opposite. His fingers twitched a sheet of paper, bearing a photograph and a few lines of type.

For the twentieth time, he turned his gaze on it.

FUGITIVE!

Kenna Parker—Age 21; height 5 feet 5 inches; hair, black; eyes, blue; distinguishing characteristics—

He shifted his eyes to the photograph, and looked for the twentieth time at the young face with its incongruously angry eyes. A placard over her head read "94E-627." Cardale returned to the printed words.

Sentenced April 18, 2073, to three years at the Manning, Nevada, Federal Women's Camp. In the first six months of her incarceration Kenna Parker accumulated 22 months of additional punitive confinement. Caution is urged in her apprehension.

a complete novelet by JACK VANCE

Cardale mused upon the face in the photograph. It hardly seemed the face of an incorrigible criminal. A reckless glint in the blue eyes, a whimsical tilt to the eyebrows, a set to the lips—otherwise it was the face of a pretty girl.

He pressed a button. The telescreen plumed into sharp life.

"Lunar Observatory," Cardale said, without looking up.

The view in the ground glass, shifting from the secretary's desk through a whirling many-colored by-play, coagulated to a dim interior view of the Moon Observatory—skeleton trusswork and wide viridian panes. The white-bearded superintendent appeared.

"Good morning, Commissioner," he said.

"Morning, Professor," Cardale replied. "What news?"

"We've lined her out, all right. A nuisance, too. Half a dozen freighters were crossing the sector and blurred up her light trail."

"Well, that's fine. Just keep your sights on her. I'll send an operative out to take over immediately." Cardale clicked off the telescreen.

He ruminated a moment, then once more summoned the image of his secretary. "Major Detering at the Tellurian Corps of Investigation." The polychrome whirl of color rose and fell to reveal Detering's ruddy well-kept face.

"Hello, Cardale," said Detering. "What can I do for you?"

CARDALE leaned back in his chair. "Major, I'd like to borrow one of your men for a few weeks."

"I think we can arrange it," said Detering. He pulled a card index toward him and flicked through it. "Who would you like?"

"Anybody, so long as he's a human wildcat."

"I'll come myself, Commissioner," said Detering.

"Fine, Major," Cardale answered. "Bring your space-gear. You're going out in a one-man space-boat."

Detering winced. Cardale smiled. "I thought you'd change your mind."

"Tell me, Cardale," Detering asked, "do you think I keep a staff of paragons waiting around in the halls?"

Cardale said nothing. The major drummed his fingers a moment, then smiled faintly.

"I've got a good man for you, Cardale. His name's Lanarck, former lieutenant in the Navy Intelligence—a one-man trouble twister. But—" The major paused.

"But what?"

"You may have to humor him. He's a little eccentric."

Cardale leaned back in alarm. "Crazy? Good heavens, man! I can't use a lunatic."

The major laughed. "Oh, don't worry, Cardale. He's a good man and he'll get you results."

"Well, what's wrong with him?"

"Nothing serious, really. He's just a little headstrong, and his ideas of justice aren't always those of the law courts. He's driven me frantic busting into things on his own initiative. He's the fellow who chased the Martian ghee-growers off of Io, and nearly got himself court-martialed."

Cardale was doubtful. "Does it mean that I have to argue and plead with him to carry out my orders?"

The major laughed. "I'll send him over and you can find out for yourself." The telescreen dimmed, leaving Cardale non-plussed and doubtful.

Lieutenant Lanarck arrived almost immediately. The secretary ushered him into Cardale's office.

"Sit down, Lieutenant," Cardale said.

After Lanarck had complied with the request, Cardale inspected him cautiously. He was a bit disappointed to find that Lanarck's reputation was belied by his appearance. He was neither tall nor heavy, and swaggered not at all. His features, deeply darkened by the hard waves of space, were regular almost to unobtrusiveness. Indeed, if it were not for a certain cold directness of the gray

eyes and a bold, jutting nose, Cardale might have thought him plain.

He wore battered and shiny space-harness, undistinguished but for a black and gold sunburst on his helmet—the Tellurian naval insignia. Cardale received a further surprise when Lanarck spoke, for his voice was pleasant and soft.

“Major Detering assigned me to you for orders, sir.”

“Yes, he recommended you rather highly,” said Cardale. “I have a ticklish job for you, Lieutenant. Here, look at this.”

He passed Lanarck the sheet with the photograph of Kenna Parker. Lanarck scrutinized it without comment and handed it back.

“This girl was imprisoned six months ago for assault with a deadly weapon. She escaped the day before yesterday into space, which is more or less trivial in itself. But she had with her documents of the gravest importance. In fact, if they were to fall into the hands of an enemy of the Tellurian Empire, we should be hard put to defend ourselves.”

“How is that, sir?” asked Lanarck.

“You’re familiar with the techniques of atomic power?”

Lanarck nodded.

“Well, I’m not,” Cardale said. “So I can only give you a layman’s explanation. But as I understand it, atomic power, destroying ordinary matter, is controlled by four meshing planes of space-warp. That right?”

Lanarck nodded again.

“Now these documents contain equations describing an utterly strange form of energy,” Cardale went on. “It is a vibration of the abstract dimension planes themselves. These vibrations, among other things, could shatter the controlling planes of our power generators. So if they were broadcast by an enemy, every power plant in the empire would instantly explode.”

“Where, sir, did she obtain these equations?”

“They were a legacy from her father,

who evolved them after long research. The Praesidium offered to purchase them from her, which offer she refused. She claimed that she was planning to destroy them. The Praesidium, however, ordered the seizure of the equations and during the process she wounded three men with a needle-beam. Meanwhile she had hidden the equations, but since her escape, she’s had opportunity to regain them.”

“What is it you wish me to do?” asked Lanarck in cold tones.

CARDALE glanced at him with the uneasy feeling that Lanarck was weighing the rights and wrongs of the matter.

“Capture the girl, if possible,” he told the lieutenant. “But get those equations by hook or crook or any way you like, so long as you get them.”

Lanarck stared off through the window for a moment.

“Very well, sir.” He arose. “I’ll do my best.”

Cardale sighed with an irrational relief. At once he became irritated with himself. After all he, Cardale, was the commissioner, and Lanarck the lieutenant.

He told Lanarck what he knew of the girl’s whereabouts.

“Well, good luck,” he said, as he shook hands with Lanarck. “Be careful. This girl, by all accounts, is a reckless devil.”

“Very well, sir,” Lanarck replied. He replaced his helmet on his head and took his departure.

Six hours later a 45-G model space-boat slid like a silver tear-drop from the black sky of the Moon. The runway down the Sea of Tears was lighted by white and yellow flood lamps and the nearby hawk-crest of Mount Pelios showed a red and green beacon.

The boat wheeled up to the diaphanous bubble which was the Lunar Observatory. They were awaiting him. The iris expanded, and the boat, with a blue gout of power, lurched through.

Inside the dome, Lanarck unclamped

the port, stepped out. The white-bearded master astronomer approached him. Behind came three mechanics, one of whom bore a small hooded instrument. This they began to weld to the hull of the space-boat. The master astronomer intercepted Lanarck's questioning glance.

"It's a detective cell, and right now it's holding a line on the ship you're to follow. We wire it into your landing beam dial. When the indicator's in the neutral zone, you're on her track. Like landing blind on a radar beam."

Lanarck nodded. "Where does the ship I'm to follow seem to be headed?"

The astronomer shrugged. "Nowhere in Tellurian space," he said. "She's way past Fomalhaut and lining straight out."

Lanarck stood silent and grim. The girl either must be a fool or desperate. This was a hostile space she was entering. In another day or so she'd be slicing the fringe of the Clantlalan System, where the far-flung space patrol of a dark and inimical empire blasted without warning all approaching vessels. Further on opened a region of black stars, inhabited by nondescript peoples little better than pirates. Still farther beyond lay unexplored and consequently dangerous regions.

The mechanics finished. Lanarck climbed back into the boat. The out-iris opened, and with a wave of his hand, he drove the boat through, down the tarp, and off into space.

A slow week followed, a week of unsensed annihilation of distances. The empire fell far astern, a small waning cluster of stars. To one side the Clantlalan System grew ever brighter, and as Lanarck passed by, the sinister Clantlalan space-spheres tried to close with him. But he threw in the emergency bank of generators and whisked the little warboat far ahead.

Some day, Lanarck knew, he would slip down past the guard ships to the home planet by the twin red suns, to see what secret was held so dear. But now he kept the detector centered in the dial.

And day by day, the incoming signals from his quarry grew stronger.

They passed through the out-law-ridden belt of dark stars, and into a region of space unknown but for tales let slip by drunken Clantlalan renegades—tales of planets covered with mighty ruins, legends of a lost asteroid bearing a thousand wrecked space-ships. Other tales, too, wilder and more incredible. A dragon which tore space-ships open in its jaws purportedly wandered through this region, and it was said that alone on a desolate planet dwelt a god-like being who created worlds and civilizations at his pleasure.

Lanarck knew well enough of these tales but was only slightly impressed. Should the dragon pursue him, he would take steps to elude it. His present concern was merely to apprehend a girl.

The signals in the detector cell presently grew so strong that he slackened speed for fear that, overshooting his quarry, the cell would lose its thread of radiation. Now the girl had begun to swerve out toward the star-systems which drifted past like fireflies, as if she sought a landmark. Always the signals in the detector cell grew stronger.

As a great yellow star waxed mighty ahead, Lanarck knew that the ship of Kenna Parker was close at hand. Into that yellow star's system he followed her, and lined out the trail toward the single planet. Presently, as the planet globed out before him, the signals ceased entirely.

LANARCK realized the girl had landed and had cut her blasts. Hastily he lined his telescope at the point the detective cell had last indicated.

The high clear atmosphere braked his motion, and he found below him a dun, sun-baked landscape. Through the telescope, the surface appeared to be uniformly stony and flat, and to be beaten by a high wind.

He had no trouble finding the girl's ship. In the field of his telescope lay a cubical white building, the only land-



Supporting both girls, he continued on toward the temple

mark visible from windy horizon to windy horizon. Beside the building, as he dropped lower, he found Kenna's fluted silver space-boat. He swooped to a landing, half-expecting a bolt from her needle-beam. The port of the space-boat hung open, but she did not show herself as he ground to a halt on his crash-keel close by.

The air, he found, was breathable. Buckling on his needle-beam, he stepped out on the stony ground. The hot gale tore at him, buffeting his face, whipping

tears from his eyes. Wind-flung pebbles bounding along the ground stung his legs. The light from the great sun burned his shoulders.

He inspected the terrain warily. There was no sign of life, either from the white building or from Kenna's space-boat. As he surmised, the girl was not inside her ship. The ground stretched away, utterly bare and sun-drenched, far out into the dusty distances.

Lanarek looked to the lonely white structure. She must be within. **Here**

was the end of the chase which had brought him across the galaxy.

Watchfully he advanced upon the building. Constructed of concrete it was, polished glassy-smooth by the wind. No openings of any sort were visible. Expecting death at any moment, he started to advance.

II

LANARCK circled the building, and on the leeward side found a low, dark archway. From within came the heavy smell of life, but no sound.

If the girl were desperate, for him to enter would be as much as his life was worth. Furthermore there was a half-animal, half-reptilian odor coming from within that kept his finger taut on the trigger—although nothing that could issue through that arch, whether roaring, hissing, or breathing flames, could have surprised Lanarck. He walked forward.

"Kenna Parker!" he called out, and listened.

The wind whistled by the corner of the building and little stones clicked past, blowing down the endless sun-dazzled waste. There was no other sound.

A sonorous voice resounded—but from inside his brain. At least it seemed to emanate from within.

"The one you seek, Earthman, is gone."

Lanarck stood stock-still.

"You may come in, Earthman. We are not enemies."

The archway loomed dark before him and step by step he entered, almost in spite of himself. After the glare of the white sun, the cool dimness of the room was like darkness. Lanarck blinked.

Slowly objects about him assumed form. Before him two enormous eyes peered owlishly through the gloom, while behind loomed a tremendous domelike bulk. Lanarck instinctively leveled his needle-beam at them while the fish-bowl eyes continued to blink at him quizzically. Thought surged into

Lanarck's brain again.

"You are unnecessarily truculent, Earthman. Here there is no occasion for violence."

Lanarck relaxed, slightly at a loss. Telepathy was not often practiced upon Earth, and although the creature's messages sounded in the brain like a clear but paradoxically silent voice, he had no knowledge of how to send forth his own. He hazarded the experiment.

"Where is the Earth-girl?"

"In a place inaccessible to you," presently came the response.

"How did she go? Her space-boat is outside, and she landed but a half-hour ago."

"I sent her."

Lanarck pondered a moment. Then, ostentatiously keeping his needle-beam ready, he searched the building. At last he had to admit that the girl was not in the building. Seized by a sudden fearful thought, he ran to the entrance and peered out. But the two space-boats were still where he had left them. Somewhat self-consciously he shoved the needle-beam back into the holster, and turned to the leviathan in whom he sensed a benign amusement.

"Well, then—who are you, and where is the girl?" Lanarck snapped.

"I am Laoome," came the answer. "Laoome, the one-time Third of Narfilhet—Laoome the World-Thinker, the Final Sage of the Fifth Universe." Laoome rolled his titles off his mental tongue with but half-concealed satisfaction. "As for the girl, I have placed her, at her own request, upon a pleasant but inaccessible planet of my own creation."

Lanarck stood perplexed, tense, suspicious.

"One of the multitude of worlds which I create for my amusement."

Lanarck still could not comprehend.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Look!" Laoome said.

In front of Lanarck's eyes, space quivered and wrenched. A dark aperture appeared in midair. Lanarck, looking through, saw hanging apparently

but a yard before his eyes a lambent sphere—a miniature world. As he watched, it expanded like a toy balloon.

Its horizons vanished past the confines of the opening. Continents and oceans assumed shape, flecked with cloud-wisps. Polar ice-caps glinted blue-white in the light of an unseen sun. Yet all the time the world still seemed to be but a yard distant. A reddish plain appeared, rimmed by flinty black mountains. The color of the plain, a ruddy ocher, he saw presently was due to a forest-carpet of rust-colored foliage. The expansion ceased.

LANARCK shrugged. "Hynotism," he said. Little tendrils of thought probed his mind, as if eager to savor the wonder and awe which should be flooding Lanarck's mind.

"No, no!" the World-Thinker cried. "That which you see before you is matter as real and as tangible as you yourself are. I have indeed created it through my mind. Until I dissolve it in the same manner, it exists—very material indeed. Reach out and touch it."

Lanarck did. It was actually only a yard from his face, and the red forest crushed like dry moss under his fingertip.

"You destroyed a village," commented Laoome.

The world expanded once more at a breathtaking rate, until the perspectives were as if Lanarck hung a hundred feet above the surface. He was looking into the devastation which his fingertip, like some macrocosmic instrument of doom, had wrought a moment before. The trees, far larger than he had supposed, with boles thirty or forty feet through, lay tossed and shattered. Visible were the ruins of rude huts, from which issued curses and screams of pain, thinly audible. Bodies of men and women lay limp and crushed. Others tore frantically at the wreckage.

"Life! Men!"

"Certainly," replied Laoome. "Without life, a world is uninteresting, a lump

of rock. Men, like yourself, I often use. They have infinite capacity for emotion and initiative, a flexibility to the varied environments which I introduce."

"But these men," muttered Lanarck, gazing at the tip of his finger, and back to the shattered village, "they are—alive?"

"Certainly. As alive as you are. And you would find, should you converse with one of them, that they possess a past, a racial heritage of folklore, and a culture well-adapted to their environment."

"But how can one brain conceive the infinite detail of a world? The leaves of each tree, the features of each man—"

"As you imply, that would be tedious," Laoome agreed. "My mind only broadly conceives, introduces the determinate roots into the hypostatic equations. Detail then evolves automatically, in accordance with the natural laws which operate upon these worlds of mine as they do upon your own."

Lanarck was silent, and the muscles of his face were taut.

"Then it would seem that I unwittingly have destroyed hundreds of fellow-beings," he said at last.

Again curious feelers searched his brain.

"So the idea is unpleasant?" asked Laoome, and Lanarck again sensed amusement. "It need not be, for in a moment I shall dissolve the entire world. Still if it pleases you, I can restore it as it was. See!"

As Lanarck looked, the forest was as before, and the village whole again, secure and peaceful in a small clearing.

But Lanarck shook his head, thinking that nothing could obliterate the cataclysm and pain of those few moments.

But now a frightful thing happened. Lanarck first became aware of a curious rigidity in the rapport he had established with the World-Thinker. Looking about, he saw that the great eyes had glazed, that the tremendous black body was twitching and jerking. He took a step backward, and Laoome's dream-planet caught his eye.

Fascinated, he leaned forward. For the noble red trees had become gray rotten stalks, and were swaying drunkenly. Others had slumped and folded like columns of putty.

On the ground balls of black slime rolled about with a vicious life, pursuing the villagers, who in an insane ecstasy of terror fled madly anywhere, everywhere. Lanarck could hear their screams plainly.

Then from the heavens came a rain of blazing white-hot pellets. The men soon were killed, but the black slime-things seemed only agonized. Blindly, furiously, they lashed about, burrowing futilely into the heaving ground to escape the torturing impacts. Suddenly the world vanished. Lanarck slowly tore his fascinated gaze away from the spot where the world had been. He looked about and found Laoome normal once more.

"Don't be alarmed." The thoughts came quietly. "The seizure is over. It occurs once in a great while. Just why it should be I am uncertain myself. I imagine that my brain, under the strain of continuous exact thought, lapses into these spasms of temporary indiscipline as an automatic reflex for the sake of relaxation. This was a mild attack. The world on which I am concentrating is usually totally destroyed."

THE flow of the soundless words were cut off. Laoome seemed to be rearranging his disrupted neuron paths. Lanarck watched curiously. Then, a little hurriedly, as if Laoome were embarrassed, thoughts gushed once more into Lanarck's brain.

"Let me show you another planet—one of the most interesting I have ever conceived. For almost a million Earth years it has been developing in my mind."

The space before Lanarck's eyes quivered open again. Out in the black imaginary void hung another planet.

As before, it expanded until the features of the terrain assumed an earthly

perspective. Hardly a mile in diameter, the world was divided around the equator by a belt of sandy desert. At one pole glimmered a lake, at the other was a jungle of lush vegetation.

From this jungle now, as Lanarck watched, crept a semi-human shape. A travesty upon man, its face was long, chinless, and furtive, its eyes beady and quick. The legs were unnaturally long, but the shoulders and arms were undeveloped. It slunk toward the edge of the desert, paused a moment, looking carefully in both directions, then began a mad dash across.

Halfway over, a terrible roar was heard and, scuttling swiftly over the strangely close horizon, bounded a dragon-like monster. With frightful speed it pursued the fleeing manlike thing who outdistanced it, however, and gained the edge of the desert by two hundred feet. At the limit of the sand, the dragon paused, bellowing an eerily mournful note which sent shivers along Lanarck's spine. Casually now, the man-thing loped to the pond. Throwing himself prone, he drank deeply.

"An experiment in evolution," came Laoome's thought. "A million years ago those creates were men like you. This world is oddly designed. At one end is food, at the other, drink. In order to exist, the creatures must cross the desert every day or so. The dragon living upon the desert is prevented by a radioactive strip at the boundaries from leaving it. Hence, if the men can cross the desert, they are safe.

"You can see how admirably they have responded to their environment. The women are particularly fleet, for they had to adjust themselves to the handicap of caring for their young. Sooner or later, of course, age overtakes them, and their speed gradually decreases until finally they are caught and devoured.

"They have evolved a curious religion and set of tabus. I am worshiped as the primary god of Life, and Shillal, as they call the dragon, is the diety of Death.

He, of course, is the immediate concern of their lives and colors all their thoughts. They are close to elementals, these people. Food, drink, and death are intertwined for them into almost one concept.

"Their world is not endowed with metals, so they can build no weapons against Shillal. Once, many hundred thousand years ago, one of their chiefs contrived a great catapult, to hurl a sharp tree trunk at Shillal. Unluckily, the fibers of the draw-cord snapped and the chief was killed by the recoil. The priests interpreted this as a negative sign and—

"Look! Watch! There Shillal catches an old woman, returning to the jungle sodden with water!"

Lanarck witnessed the beast's great gulping.

"To continue," Laoome went on, "a tabu was created, and no further weapons were ever built."

"But why do you force upon men a million years of this wretched existence?" asked Lanarck.

Laoome gave an untranslatable mental shrug.

"I am just, and indeed benevolent," he said. "These men worship me as a god. Upon a certain hillock, which they hold sacred, they bring their sick and wounded. There, if the whim takes me, I restore them to health. So far as their existence is concerned, they relish the span of their life as much as you do yours."

"Yet in creating these worlds, you are responsible for the happiness of the inhabitants. If you were truly benevolent, why should you permit disease and terror to exist?"

Laoome again gave his mental shrug. "I might say that I have this universe of our own as a model. Perhaps there is another Laoome dreaming out the worlds we ourselves live on. When man dies of sickness, bacteria lives. When dragon lives by eating, man dies. When man eats, plants and animals and sea-life die."

LANARCK shook his head. "You, yourself, admit that man is of higher sensitivity. An accident merely inconvenient to an insect is disaster to man. One of Earth's ancients said, 'Far better that pins prick a million than that a sword be thrust into one.'"

Laoome was amused. "The eternal contest with Shillal adds zest to their lives. It makes their food and drink, when they attain it safely, more desirable."

Lanarck was silent, studiously preventing his thoughts from rising to the surface of his mind.

"I take it that the Earth-girl is upon neither of these planets?" he finally said.

"That is correct."

"Then I ask that you make it possible for me to communicate with her."

"But I put her upon this world expressly to assure her safety from any such molestation," came the quizzical thoughts of Laoome.

Lanarck moved impatiently. "I represent the justice of the Tellurian Empire. This is a power more cogent than the wishes of an individual."

"The justice of the Tellurian Empire is not the justice of Laoome—and Earth is farther away," the World-Thinker pointed out. "I see no reason to annoy this girl merely to gratify you and the justice of Earth. A moment ago you made use of the aphorism, 'Better that pins prick a million than that a sword be thrust into one.' The appeasement of Earth justice would be nothing compared to the acuteness of the girl's distress should she be taken back to Earth."

"She wounded three men who were doing their duty," answered Lanarck. "More important, she is in a position to destroy the civilization of Earth. But my mission is not primarily to punish her or liquidate her menace violently. I believe that the girl would profit by hearing me."

For a moment Laoome hesitated, his saucer eyes staring fixedly.

"Very well then," he said then. "In justice I should accord to you as an individual, the same privileges that I did her. You may proceed to this world. You will be upon your own resources, however, exactly as she is. If you perish upon Markavvel, you are as thoroughly dead as you would be upon Earth. I will not play Destiny to influence either one of you."

There was a hiatus in Laoome's thoughts, a whirl of ideas too rapid for Lanarck to grasp.

Lanarck stood watching, half-suspiciously. At last Laoome's eyes focused upon him again. They seemed to glare. An instant of faintness passed over Lanarck. He felt knowledge forced into his brain.

Laoome silently and thoughtfully regarded him. It occurred to Lanarck that Laoome's body, a great dome of black flesh, was singularly ill-adapted to life on the planet where he dwelt.

"No," softly came the thoughts of Laoome. "From a Beyond unknown to you I came, banished from the dark planet Narfilhet, in whose fathomless black waters I swam. This was long ago, but even now I may not return." Laoome absently-mindedly lapsed once more into introspection.

Lanarck moved restlessly. Outside the wind tore past the building, pushed fiercely across the endless desert. Laoome lay inert, dreaming perhaps of the dark oceans of mighty Narfilhet. Lanarck lost patience and launched a thought.

"How do I reach Markavvel? And how do I return?"

Laoome came back to the present. His eyes settled upon a point beside Lanarck. The aperture which led into his various imaginary spaces was now wrenched open for the third time. A little distance off in the void, a space-boat floated. Lanarck's eyes narrowed with sudden interest.

"That's a forty-five-G—my own ship!" he exclaimed.

"No, not yours. One like it. Yours is

still outside."

The ship drifted closer, gradually floated within reach.

"Climb in," said Laoome. "At present the girl you seek is in the city which lies at the apex of the triangular continent."

"But how do I get back?" demanded the practical Lanarck.

"Aim your ship, when you leave Markavvel, at the brightest star visible. You will then break through the mental dimensions into this universe."

Lanarck reached his arm into the imaginary universe and pulled the imagined space-boat close to the aperture. He opened the port and gingerly stepped in. Laoome's last thoughts reached him.

"Remember should you fall into danger, I can not modify the natural course of events. On the other hand, I will not intentionally place dangers in your way. If such befall you, it will be due purely to circumstances."

III

AS LANARCK slammed shut the port, he half-expected the ship to dissolve below him. But it was solid enough. He looked back. The gap into his own universe had disappeared, leaving in its place a brilliant blue star. He found himself in space. Below him glittered the lucent disk of Markavvel, seemingly like the other planets he had approached from the void. His mind paused, reluctant to believe that this universe was but a dream in another's imagination.

Then he shrugged. He knew where his work lay. Let the abstracts care for themselves. He tugged at the throttle, threw the nose hard over and down. Gushing atoms, the boat hurtled down at Markavvel.

It seemed a pleasant world. A hot white sun hung off in space and blue oceans covered a large part of the surface. Among the scattered land masses he quickly found the triangular continent to which Laoome had referred.

It was not large. A plateau jutted up

in the interior, with mountains whose upper slopes were covered with green forests. It was a very Earthlike sight, and Lanark did not feel the alien aura which surrounded most extra-terrestrial planets.

He found the city through his telescope, sprawling and white at the mouth of a wide river. He pointed his ship downward, sending it streaking through the upper atmosphere. Then he slowed up and leveled off thirty miles to sea. Barely skimming the sparkling blue waves now, he flew in toward the city.

A few miles distant to his left, an island raised basalt bulwarks against the ocean, and in his line of sight, as he looked, there heaved up on the crest of a swell, a floating black object. After an instant it disappeared into the trough, but Lanarck had flung his ship about, and already was almost there.

It was a ramshackle raft. Upon it a girl with wild golden hair was desperately battling things, vaguely human, which were seeking to climb aboard.

Lanarck breasted the ship into the water beside the raft. The wash caught under, threw the raft up and over, then down on the girl.

Lanarck cursed, hurriedly slipped through the port and dived into the clear green water. For an instant he glimpsed sub-human figures paddling down into the indistinctness below. Then he bobbed at the surface. Quick strokes took him to the raft.

Ducking under, he grasped the limp form of the girl and pulled her free into the air.

For a moment he clung to the raft to catch his breath, as he held the girl's head clear of the bright green water. Soon he sensed the return of the creatures in the water. Dark forms rose in the shadow cast by the raft, and a clammy, long-fingered hand wound around his ankle. He kicked and felt his foot thud into something like a face. Other dark forms were rising from the depths below. He measured the distance to the floating space-boat. Forty

feet. Too far. He crawled up on the raft, and pulled the girl after him.

Her rude paddle bobbed in the water close by. Leaning far out, he recovered it, and prepared to smash the first sea-thing that dared to push above water. But none rose. Instead, some of them swam in tireless circles, twenty feet below.

The blade of the paddle had broken, and to Lanarck's disgust, he found that he could not move the unwieldy bulk of the raft. The breeze, meanwhile, was easing the space-boat ever farther from him. Lanarck redoubled his efforts, but the distance widened. After fifteen minutes of ineffectual struggle with the splintered paddle, he cast it down, and gazed sourly across at his space boat, now two hundred feet away.

He turned to the girl, who was sitting cross-legged, regarding him thoughtfully. Lanarck, as he faced the girl on the raft, for no conceivable reason, thought of Laoome in the dimness of his white building on the windy world. All this, thought Lanarck, looking from the clear-eyed girl to heaving sun-lighted sea and highlands of the continent ahead, was an idea in that inscrutable brain.

He looked back at the girl. She had bright wheat-colored hair, pulled back from her brow and frothing behind her head in ringlets. Her face was beautiful and she had honest blue eyes. She stared at him for a moment, then stood up, rising with a jaunty face.

STILL smiling, she spoke to Lanarck in an alien tongue. Her voice was low and pleasant. It amazed Lanarck to find that he understood her, until he remembered how Lagoome's eyes had seemed to pierce him, taking things away from his brain, and putting things back.

"I thank you, my friend," she said. "But now, as you see, we're both in the plight I was in before you rescued me."

Lanarck said nothing. He knelt and began to remove his sandals.

"What will you do?" she asked.

"Swim," he answered. The language seemed natural to him.

"That's suicide. The Bottom-people would pull you under before you covered twenty feet. See?"

She pointed into the water, and there Lanarck saw enough dark shapes circling below, gazing upward with vague gray faces to show he had best heed her advice.

"You are of Earth also?" she asked, inspecting him carefully.

"Yes," he answered, giving her a curious look. "Who are you, and what do you know of Earth?"

"I'm Norji, of Nathol, the city yonder. Earth is the home of Kenna Parker, who came in a ship such as yours."

Lanarck sat still in amazement. "But Kenna Parker arrived here not more than an hour ago. How could you know about her?"

"Hour?" replied the girl, puzzled in her turn. "She has been there three months." This last a little bitterly.

Lanarck scratched his head in perplexity. Laoome apparently controlled the time coordinates in his universes as arbitrarily as he did the spatial.

"How did you get out here on this raft?" he asked.

She shuddered and grimaced toward the island.

"The priests," she said. "The Ordained Ones. They live on the island and take people from the mainland— young women mostly; sometimes men. They took me, but I fled last night."

Lanarck looked from the island to the great towered city on the mainland.

"Why doesn't the city send an armed force and destroy them?"

"No." Her red lips rounded to an O. "They are sacred, sacred to Almighty Laoome."

"Laoome! And what do you know of Laoome?"

"Laoome? Laoome is the All-Powerful, the Creator."

"So!" said Lanarck. He smiled grimly. "And these island marauders are sacred, eh?"

"They are priests—inviolate."

"Why is that?" asked Lanarck. Sardonically he was wondering what novel type of evolutionary process Laoome had in progress here. Her words confirmed his suspicions.

"I don't know," she said, slightly puzzled. "I don't believe anyone knows. It's a tradition from the ancient times. However, mortals who are taken to the island are henceforth tabu and may not again become members of ordinary human society."

"What do they do, then?" he wanted to know.

"Very few ever return to the mainland. Those who do win free from the Ordained Ones and escape the Bottom-people usually live in the wilderness. If they return to Nathol they are sometimes molested by fanatics, sometimes recaptured by the priests."

Lanarck fell silent. After all, it concerned him little how these people fared, being of sheerest fantasy, inhabiting an imaginary planet. And yet—

He looked at Norji, and shook his dark head.

"And Kenna Parker, then, is in Nathol?"

Norji's lips tightened. "No," she answered. "She lives on the island. She is the Thrice-Adept, the High Priestess."

Lanarck was genuinely startled. "High Priestess? Kenna Parker?"

Norji looked at him gloomily.

"Why is that so strange?" she asked, and Lanarck recalled Cardale and Kenna Parker's record in the Woman's Camp at Manning.

"But why did they make her High Priestess?"

"A month after she arrived, the Hierarch, learning of the woman whose hair was the color of night, even as yours, tried to take her to Drefteli, the Sacred Isle, as a slave. She slew him with her hand-weapon. Then when the lightnings of Laoome did not descend and consume her, it was known that Laoome

approved, and so she was made High Priestess in place of the riven Hierarch."

LANARCK grinned at the naive philosophy. Yet, he reflected, it would have sounded much more primitive on Earth, where the gods were more covert in their supervision of mundane affairs.

"Is Kenna perhaps a friend of yours—or you her lover?" asked Norji softly.

"Hardly," replied Lanarck, smiling in his stern way.

"Then what do you want with her?"

"I've come to take her back to Earth," he answered, looking dubiously across the ever-widening gap between the tossing raft and his space-boat. "Her presence is—desired."

"She may not wish to go," said Norji.

Lanarck shrugged, which might mean anything. Norji scowled, but Lanarck's dark, impassive face remained uncommunicative.

"You shall see your—Kenna Parker—shortly," said Norji, finally breaking the silence.

Lanarck, looking about, saw approaching them from the island a long black galley.

"The Ordained Ones," said Norji. "I am once more a slave."

"Not yet," said Lanarck, feeling for the bulk of his needle-beam.

The galley, swirled forward by twenty long oars, lunged toward them, and now the features of a woman standing in the stern were plain to see. She was young, with an intrepid poise of her head.

Long black hair played behind her in the wind. In his mind's eyes, Lanarck contrasted her features with the angry, defiant face of Cardale's photograph. Now Kenna Parker, looking from the silent two on the raft to the wallowing space-boat a quarter-mile distant, laughed joyously.

The galley, manned by tall, golden-haired men, drew alongside.

"So the Tellurian Corps of Investiga-

tion pays me a visit?" she said in English. "You've found me, all right. How you did it, I don't know." She looked at Lanarck's somber visage curiously. "How?"

"Detective cell, and an explanation of the situation to Laoome."

"Just what is the situation?"

"The Council offers you amnesty and the cash sum previously mentioned in exchange for the documents which you possess."

"Yes?"

"The alternative is unpleasant, but quick."

Kenna laughed again. Lanarck knit his brows. Something about her which he could not identify was familiar to him. It was not the photograph. Lanarck considered the women he had encountered in his life, and still was at a loss.

Kenna composed herself.

"Well, anyway, you're not dull, Lieutenant," she said, noting the insignia on his helmet. "What's your name?"

"Lanarck."

She lifted her black eyebrows. "Lanarck? I've heard of you. The maniac of Arminzd, wasn't it? The great Lanarck. I'm flattered." She gazed about the horizon. "Well, Lieutenant, I hardly know what to do with you. I'm not vindictive, and I'd hate to—well, handicap your career. But ferrying you to your space-boat would be rather quixotic. I'm comfortable here, and I haven't the slightest intention of turning my property over to you."

Lanarck woodenly reached for his needle-beam.

She watched him mockingly.

"It's quite wet, Lieutenant, and we both know that wet needle-beams don't work well for several days."

Lanarck permitted himself to grin as he blasted the figurehead from the galley. Kenna's expression changed suddenly.

"Well," she said, "I shoved in the wrong relay that time. How do you do it?"

"A personal device," replied Lanarck. "Now I'll have to request you to take me to my space-boat."

Kenna stared at him enigmatically a moment, and in those blue eyes Lanarck again detected something familiar. Where had he seen eyes with that expression? On Fan, the Pleasure Planet? In the Magic Groves of Hycithil? During the raids on the slave-pens of Starlen? In Earth's own macropolis Tran?

She turned and muttered rapidly to her steward, who was standing beside her. He bowed and moved away. He was a bronzed giant, his golden hair bound back by a copper band.

"Very well," she called. "Come aboard."

NORJI and Lanarck clambered over the carven gunwale. The galley swept ahead, foaming up white wake behind.

"And who, may I ask, is this girl?" Kenna asked and observed, "You make friends quickly and in good taste, Lieutenant."

"She's one of your escaped slaves," Lanarck replied sardonically. "I suppose you'll wish to throw her in chains?"

"Oh, no. You can have her. As a matter of fact, I'm gradually instituting reforms. Although why, I don't know. This is Laoome's world, not mine."

"I'll have to ask you to turn over those equations," said Lanarck.

"In the first place," replied Kenna, "I don't carry them with me. In the second place you couldn't have them if I did."

Lanarck reached out long arms and methodically searched her, unsuccessfully.

"I suppose you haven't swallowed them?"

Kenna flushed. "No."

"Well I won't look," said Lanarck, with a sour grin.

This girl was exceptionally attractive and he found it difficult to take his eyes from her. But as he settled himself on the bench beside Norji, he felt a surge

of a different and stranger feeling. It irritated him, and he tried to put it aside.

IV

WALLOWING heavily in the swells, the space-boat now lay dead ahead. The galley scudded through the water at a great rate, and the oarsmen did not slacken speed as they approached. Lanarck's eyes narrowed, and he jumped upright shouting orders. But, unswerving, the galley on the next instant plowed into the space-boat, grinding it under the metal-shod keel.

Water gushed in through the open port. The space-boat shuddered and sank, a dark shadow plummeting into green depths.

"I'm sincerely sorry," remarked Kenna evenly. "But this puts us more on an equal footing. You have a needle-beam. I have a space-boat."

Lanarck silently seated himself. After a moment he spoke.

"Where is your own needle-beam?"

"Blew the pulsator line recharging it from the space-boat generators."

Lanarck moved his shoulders.

"You're an intelligent woman," he said. "Eventually you'll wish to return to Earth. You'll never have a better opportunity than right now. Place those equations in my custody—I'll show you my credentials—and the manslaughter and jailbreak charges will be lifted. Then you'll find yourself a rich woman."

"And if I don't?" Kenna asked softly.

Lanarck remained silent a moment. "You will return to Earth anyway, dead or alive."

Kenna looked away to the horizon.

"Laoome would not permit violence to me."

Lanarck shrugged.

The galley, meanwhile, had swung about and was making toward the island.

"Where, by the way, is your space-boat?" asked Lanarck.

Kenna laughed. "Do you expect me

to tell you?"

"Why not? I have no reason to maroon you here."

"Nevertheless, I don't think I'll tell you."

"Norji, where is Kenna Parker's space-boat?" Lanarck asked.

"Norji," Kenna snapped. "As the High Pritestess to Almighty Laoome, I command you to be silent!"

The blond girl of Nathol looked in bewilderment from one to the other. She made up her mind.

"It's on the plaza of the Malachite Temple in Nathol," she said, with fatalistic philosophy.

Kenna was silent, obviously angry. "Laoome plays tricks," she said at last. "This girl likes you. You like her."

"Laoome will not interfere," said Lanarck.

She laughed bitterly. "That's what he told me—and look! I'm High Priestess. He also told me he wouldn't let anyone come to Markavvel from the outside to molest me. The next thing, you show up!"

"I don't intend to molest you," Lanarck told her curtly. "Allow me to do my duty and I'll gladly depart. We can as easily be friends as enemies."

"But I don't care to be a friend of yours, and as an enemy, you're no serious problem." The tall bronzed steward was then passing. "Now!" said Kenna.

Like a tiger the steward whirled on Lanarck. But Lanarck was not caught unaware. The man of Markavvel was six inches taller and fifty pounds heavier than he, but Lanarck resignedly twisted and squirmed until he secured a grip he had learned in the rough-and-tumble experience of a naval investigator. He heaved, and the golden-haired steward sprawled back, thudded into the boat's black-ribbed bilge, where he lay still.

But a soft hand brushed Lanarck's thigh, and he found himself bereft of his needle-beam. He looked up, smoothing his lank black hair, and found Kenna smiling into his face. The needle-beam

dangled from her finger.

Norji arose from the bench where she had been watching, wide-eyed. Before Kenna quite understood, Norji put a hand flat on her face and pushed, seizing the needle-beam with the other hand. She pointed the weapon at Kenna.

"Sit down," Norji said.

Kenna fell back upon the bench, almost weeping with rage. Norji, her young face flushed and happy, backed over to the thwart, the needle-beam leveled.

Lanarck stood still.

"I'll take charge for awhile now," remarked Norji. "Everyone else seems to have tried it, and all we did was row in circles. I'm not going to be polite either. You—Kenna Parker! Tell your men to row toward Nathol!"

SULLENLY Kenna gave the signal. Water swirled under the oars and the long black galley turned its bow toward Nathol.

"This may be sacrilege," Norji observed delightedly to Lanarck. "She's the High Priestess, you know. But then I was already sacrilegious for escaping from Drefteli."

"What are your plans, in this new capacity of yours?" Lanarck inquired, moving the smallest bit closer.

"First, to try this weapon on whoever thinks he can take it away from me." Lanarck moved back again. "Second—but you'll see soon enough."

White-tiered Nathol was rapidly drawing closer across the water.

Kenna sulked on the bench. Lanarck, letting matters move on their own momentum for the while, since each oar-stroke was taking him closer to Kenna's space-boat, relaxed in the sun against a thwart, watching Norji from the corner of his eye.

Norji stood erect, behind the bench where Kenna sat, her clear blue eyes looking over the leaping blue sparkles of the ocean. The breeze whipped her hair behind and pressed the tunic against her slim body. Lanarck shook his head.

This vital girl with the windy, wheat-colored hair—she was unreal. She would vanish into nothingness as soon as Laoome willed. She was less than a shadow, less than a mirage, less than a dream. She was mind-stuff. Lanarck looked over at Kenna, the Earth-girl, but with her angry red lips and sullen eyes she gave him no help.

They were plowing up the wide river, and the long white docks of Nathol were close at hand. Lanarck stretched and stood up. Perhaps Norji would be unable to handle Kenna and the entire crew in the confusion of warping the galley in. He looked over the city a moment, surveyed the crowds on the dock, clad in white and red and blue tunics. Soon he turned to Norji.

"I'll have to take the needle-beam now, Norji," he said quietly. "It's my duty—both to you and my job."

"You stand back or I'll—" Norji muttered between clenched teeth.

Lanarck walked over to her, sardonically expressionless. She let her arms fall. Unresisted, he took the needle-beam. He put an arm about her and squeezed.

"You're safe," he said. "I'll make Kenna restore you to your position in the city." She only wept softly against his arm.

Lanarck moved uneasily. His brain whirled through wild thoughts—thoughts of Earth, thoughts of Laoome, but mostly thoughts of Norji. His arm squeezed her warm young shoulders. Unreal, he muttered, fantasy. He cursed Laoome.

"Norji." The words came hard from his tight lips, and his dark face flushed. "As long as you need any help, I'll stay on Markavvel. I'll give Kenna a dose of somnol and the Council can wait for its equations. Heaven knows you're more human and more real than she is, in spite of Laoome."

Norji stopped crying, and began to laugh. Lanarck sighed and dropped his arm. She put a hand on his shoulder and modestly kissed his cheek.

Kenna was watching amusedly, obviously planning a tart comment. But Lanarck's attention had been distracted. He moved away, and very alert, scanned the sky. He listened.

A dull enormous throbbing, like the pulse of a tremendous heart, came down from the heavens. At the horizon appeared a strange cloud, like a band of white-gleaming metal, swelling in rhythm to the celestial throbbing. It lengthened with miraculous speed until in all directions the horizon was encircled. The throb became a vast booming.

A terrible idea startled Lanarck. The air itself seemed heavy, taut. He turned and yelled to the awestruck oarsmen who aghast, were trailing their oars in the river.

"Quick—into shore!"

They jerked at their oars, straining frantically with every ounce of their magnificent golden bodies. Yet the galley, to Lanarck's appraising eyes, seemed to move no faster. The sea had become oily smooth, and the water seemed syrupy. The boat began to lose headway.

The docks, however, were close at hand, great concrete piers bulking sturdily into the water. Lanarck, grim on the afterdeck, became aware of the terrified Kenna on one side of him, and Norji on the other.

"What is happening?" Kenna whispered hoarsely.

Lanarck was watching the sky. The cincturing cloud-band of bright metal quivered and split into another which wobbled, bouncing, just above.

"I hope—I hope I'm wrong," muttered Lanarck.

"How?" breathed Norji.

NOW Lanarck saw his shadow. He turned his head to the sun and knew that his worst fears were realized. The sun was jerking unbelievably, vibrating through aimless arcs.

"It's Laoome," he said. "Laoome has gone mad."

"It can't be!" cried Kenna. "What

will happen?"

Cleaving the thickened water, plowing up furrows of white froth-jelly, the galley lurched against a wharf. Lanarck tossed Kenna and Norji up on shore and followed.

They hesitated. Into the lordly avenue, stretching away through the city, milled panicky masses of tall, golden-haired people. The booming from the sky increased the rapidity of its world-spanning beat.

"Where is the space-boat?" Lanarck had to raise his voice to make himself heard over the tumult. But his mind was frozen by a shocking thought. What would happen to Norji? Made of dream-stuff, she'd—

He pushed the thought down. Kenna was pulling at him urgently.

Grabbing Norji's hand, he helped her off after Kenna, who was making for the black-porticoed temple at the far end of the avenue.

Lanarck still watched the sky. Why, he could not have told. The sky perhaps seemed closest to Laoome, the hemisphere least protected. Then from the sky came Laoome's next mad creation. A sudden constriction in the air, a soundless pulse, and floating down came rains of warm red globules, like small crimson jellyfish, stinging naked flesh like nettles. The din from the city, hoarse shouts and screams, grew frightening.

The red plasms increased their numbers in a fury, became an opaque cloud of pink slime until the ground was ankle-deep with squirming red ooze.

Wherever one turned, there was no escaping the flood of red things. They were underfoot and underhand everywhere. Walking was now a perilous effort. The sticky, noisesome mess covered everything in sight, dripping, sliding.

Kenna slipped and fell headlong. She struggled, and slid futilely until Lanarck helped her up. Supporting both girls, he continued toward the temple. Upon the structures of Nathol to either side,

he kept an anxious eye, dreading lest Markavvel itself begin to break down before they reached the space-boat.

The rain of red things ceased, but the streets were buried under a foot of carmine ooze. Now the sky was a different color, a new color which had no place in any spectrum. It was a color only a mad god could invent.

Suddenly the red slime curdled, then fell apart like spilt quicksilver, to jell in an instant to million upon millions of bright blue manikins three inches high. They ran, they scuttled, they hopped, and the streets were a quaking blue carpet of faceless little baroques. The Natholians trod them under, unheeding. They clung to Lanarck's garments, they ran up his legs like mice.

The sun, still jerking aimlessly in small spasmodic motions, slowed, seemed to lose its glare, then seemed to become oblate. It developed striations and, as the stricken population of Nathol quieted in awe, the sun changed to a segmented white slug.

"What next? Lanarck thought, shaking blue manlets into the street.

The sky-slug, as long as five suns, as wide as one, writhed its head about with a horribly blind, yet somehow purposeful motion.

Then it wormed down the strange-colored sky at Markavvel.

In the delirium of utter panic, the people of Nathol careened through their wide white avenues. Indeed, as Lanarck and the two girls fought past a cross street, the crazed mob almost trod them under.

Beside a marble fountain the three found refuge. Lanarck's brain relaxed into a state of detachment, a conviction that this experience was but a fantasy, a nightmare. It was too grotesque, too unnatural that he, Lanarck, lieutenant of the Tellurian Corps of Investigation, should be battling a way through frenzied dream-people for two girls, one herself a phantom. All this he was doing in order to win clear of a disrupting thought in an insane brain.

A BLUE man-thing pulled itself into his hair. It was singing in a small clear baritone. Lanarck dashed it to the ground. No! His mind grew calmer. This was reality. Also there was need for haste. He saw that the frantic surge of people had passed and that the streets were again relatively open.

"Let's go," he muttered to the two girls who, silent but pale, had been watching the Titanic slug which hung monstrously across the sky.

But as they started off, there came the metamorphosis Lanarck had been dreading. The matter of Nathol, of all Markavvel, altered into insane unnatural substances.

Up to now, Lanarck had been hoping against hope. But at last he was realizing no hope remained but the space-boat. The stately buildings of Nathol, crisp white marble, had become putty, slumped beneath their own weight. Lanarck had fixed well in mind the situation of Malachite Temple while it still existed as an airy dome on green malachite pillars. Now it was a sodden lump.

Lanarck pulled the stumbling girls to even greater speed.

V

HORRIFIED, the people of Nathol stood staring up, frozen in fascinated horror by the glittering slug in the sky. Lanarck was keeping an anxious eye on these people, dreading lest they also, as dream-creatures, alter to shocking half-things. For should they change, so also would Norji change, he knew.

His ideas for taking her to the space-boat were confused. He had no reason to believe that she could exist outside her native dream-universe, even if the space-boat already had not altered to anomalous pulp.

Still the face of Markavvel continued to remold itself. Horny black pyramids sprouted through the ground and, lengthening tremendously, darted far up to become vicious black spikes, miles high.

Lanarck could see the space-boat. Apparently it was still sound and whole. It had been formed from more durable mind-stuff, perhaps, than Markavvel itself.

He sensed tremendous processes transpiring beneath his feet, as if the core of the planet itself were degenerating into inchoate stickiness. Anxiously he eyed the hundred yards to the space-boat and, by an effort, withdrew his gaze. "Faster!" he panted.

The two girls, already sobbing for breath, desperately struggled forward. All the while Lanarck watched the Natholians. At last, like a cold wind blowing on his brain, he knew the change had come. His eyes had not told him. It was something deeper. He almost slowed his steps in despair. The Natholians themselves knew. They staggered in wild and unbelieving surmise, regarding their hands, feeling their faces.

Too late! Lanarck cursed passionately. Unreasonably he had believed that once in space, away from Markavvel, the girl would be safe. But the space-boat was still far off.

Too late it was indeed. A blight had fallen upon the Natholians. Frantically they clawed their shriveling faces, tottered and fell, screeching thinly, their shrunken legs unable to support them.

Simultaneously, Lanarck in strange anguish felt one of the hands he was holding become hard and wrinkled. As Norji's legs withered, he felt her sag into the muck. He paused and, drawn against his will, turned to look upon what had been Norji.

Now the ground beneath his feet was lurching, around him groveled dying Natholians, and above, dropping through the weird sky, came the colossal slug. Black chitinous spikes towered tremendously over his head. Lanarck heeded none of these. Before him stood Norji—a Norji gasping and reeling in exhaustion, but a Norji lithe and golden still! Dying in the slime was the shriveled

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dream-thing he had known as Kenna Parker.

Lanarck's eyes suddenly narrowed. He ripped the tunic away from Norji's shoulder. One glance was enough. Tattooed in blue-black on the bareness were the symbols 94E-627. An instant he stood there, his lips hard and tight. Then, seizing her hand once more, he turned and made for the space-boat.

Halfway there, the air congealed into thin swirling liquid, and their way was made much more difficult. Finally, however, they attained the space-boat, Lanarck himself gasping.

Hauling back the port, he pushed the dazed girl inside and followed. But as his hands touched the hull, he realized with a dull feeling of helplessness that the space-boat was changing also. The cold metal had acquired a palpitant life of its own.

They were doomed—doomed to suffocate in a collapsing universe!

Lanarck brushed the idea aside. He slammed shut the port and, heedless of fracturing cold thrust-tubes, gushed power astern.

Off careened the space-boat, away from Markavvel, Lanarck with clenched jaw, weaving the ship madly through the forest of glittering black spines, now hundreds of miles tall.

They flung out into free space. Plunging down almost upon them was the great white sky-slug, and Lanarck frantically swerved a thousand miles to escape. Once, when he looked back, he saw the slug descending upon the planet, sprawling its tremendous bulk over half a hemisphere. The tall black spikes pierced it. In helpless pain it writhed, impaled on hundreds of mighty black shafts.

THEY were in space. Lanarck found his landmark star and blasted at it full speed. Blue and luminous it shone, the only steadfast object in the heavens. All else, stars, nebulae, poured in turbulent streams through black space, like motes eddying in a pool of ink—a thing

of frenzy in a normal universe, but Lanarck now would have been surprised by nothing.

He looked briefly at Norji and spoke in curt tones.

"She who appeared to be Kenna was a dream-thing and you, the dream-thing, live."

The girl bowed her head. Her clean, light hair dropped forward. She raised her head.

"I am Kenna Parker. You knew already."

Lanarck had known already. But he had known it only since he had seen the prison identification tattooed on her shoulder.

"What are you going to do with me?" she asked quietly.

Lanarck did not answer immediately. It required almost hypnotic attention to keep the space-boat at the one steadfast star in this sky of weaving constellations.

"If we escape from this mess, it'll be a miracle," he said shortly.

He put his hand speculatively against the hull. All of the impersonal metallic feel was gone. It was warm. He sensed a vitality.

Inside the ship changes were going on. The controls atrophied completely and the ports became dull and opaque, like cartilage. The engines and fittings became whitish, voluted organs, while the walls were pink moist flesh, pulsing regularly. From outside came a distinct and steady booming like gigantic flapping pinions, and about their feet, oozing from the floor, swirled a dark viscous liquid.

Lanarck, pale, shook his head. The girl pressed close to him.

"Lost—we're lost," he muttered. "We are in the stomach of some reptile."

She made no answer. She only pressed her forehead mutely against his shoulder. Silent, enveloped in utter darkness, they stood together, the ichor lapping their knees.

A sound like a cork snapped from a bottle, a gush of gray light. Lanarck

had guided the space-boat aright, and as a living weir-thing, it had continued dumbly into the sane universe and its own destruction.

The two bewildered Earth-creatures found themselves stumbling on the floor of Laoome's dwelling. At first they could not comprehend. So habitual had become madness that their apparent deliverance seemed but another miasmatic shifting of scenes.

Lanarck regained his mental equilibrium. He helped the girl, who had fallen, to rise, but now there was little gentleness in his grip. As abruptly as their escape from chaos, he was again Lieutenant Lanarck, of the Tellurian Corps of Investigation, on special duty. The girl darted a quick comprehending glance at him.

Together they surveyed Laoome, who was still in the midst of his spasm. Rippling tremors ran along his shiny black hide, and his saucer eyes were blank and glazed.

"Let's go!" the girl whispered urgently.

Lanarck paused a moment, then silently took her arm and they stepped out on the glaring wind-whipped flat. The girl's tunic fluttered fiercely and her long hair blew out.

On the hot barrenness, as they had left them, were the two space-boats. Lanarck put the girl into the 45-G, but did not follow.

"I'm going back to see Laoome for a minute," he said, unobtrusively reaching in and locking the power-arm.

She said nothing but, a little hurt, watched him battling the wind across the flat to the white concrete structure. She listened, but the moaning of the wind drowned out all else.

What was that? The chatter of a needle-beam? She could not be sure.

Presently Lanarck emerged once more. He strode over to the boat, climbed in and slammed the port. They sat in silence as the thrust-tubes warmed, nor did they speak as he threw hard over the power-arm, and the ship

lashed down the waste and off on a slant. Not until they were far off in space did either of them speak. Then Lanarck turned his head to the girl.

"How did you know of Laoome?"

"Through my father," Kenna Parker said. "Twenty years ago Father did Laoome some trifling favor—killed an insect which had been annoying Laoome, I think."

LANARCK LAUGHED. Eagerly the girl smiled, hoping his mood would become less stern.

"And that's why Laoome shielded you from me by creating the dream Kenna Parker?"

"Yes. He told me you were coming down looking for me, not as a fugitive from justice, but as a—well, anyway, he arranged that you should meet this false Kenna in my presence, that I might judge you."

"Why don't you look more like the photograph?"

"When Laoome told me you were coming down, he created a surgeon who changed my face a little."

"And your hair?" he asked.

"Out of a bottle. Like it?"

Lanarck eyed her quizzically. "Kenna with the dark hair was attractive."

Her lips tightened at the corners.

"She seemed to find you fetching, too," Kenna replied, and there was an odd overtone in her voice. "I could tell."

Lanarck chuckled and unbent a little. "Don't fret. She's only yourself." Another thought struck him. "Did she know who you were?"

"I don't think so. No, I know she didn't. Laoome equipped her with my brain, and all its memories. She actually was I."

Lanarck nodded. It had become clear to him where those inklings of quasi-recognition in his brain had originated.

For a period they continued to race through space in silence back toward Earth. Finally Lanarck spoke again.

"I'd better take those equations."

He felt her tighten, then suddenly re-

lax. She reached into a pocket in her tunic, withdrew a packet. Then, before Lanarck could intervene she burnt them to crisp ashes with his needle-beam.

He had flung his arm out, but not in time. He looked at her, expressionless except for a dull smolder in his eyes. She laughed.

"I'd have done that years ago, if the Council hadn't been so—so smug. I was merely tantalizing them."

"Did that six months at Manning tantalize them?" Lanarck jeered.

She flushed. "You'd be annoyed, too, if three drunken old ward-healers came to arrest you at six o'clock in the morning." She paused. "Although I was sorry afterward."

"How do I know that those were the equations?" Lanarck asked.

"I give you my word they were."

Lanarck shrugged. He was not overly concerned. If she had destroyed the equations, as he believed she had, well enough. If not, and she hoped to deceive him, he would find out before they returned to Earth.

So again they rode in silence. Black space swirled astern, cut only by shearing energy-trails from the thrust-tubes. A star to one side grew larger, a lighthouse in trackless black oceans of space. It brightened, glared as they flashed past, and dwindled dim astern as they surged on.

Slowly Kenna turned her head to look into Larnack's dark, sardonic features.

"Lanarck." He turned and looked

down at her. "What happened to Laoome?"

He didn't speak. His face was like a copper mask. Kenna suddenly grew frightened and a little pulse throbbed in her throat as she watched him. This was no man! This was an instrument, a machine, a passionless cool thing of calculated action, micrometer reflexes. His eyes saw into her brain. Unconsciously she shrank away from him.

When he did speak, it was quietly.

"Laoome is dead."

"How?" she heard her voice say.

"I destroyed him."

There came a pause. It felt taut in her brain. Her voice broke it.

"Why?" her voice said, and she knew it only from far back in her consciousness. It seemed as if her tongue had spoken of itself.

Lanarck replied in the same distant tones.

"Laoome should not live. Of justice he knew nothing, cared nothing. He brought terror and misery and pain to untold millions." He stopped, as if in rumination. Then he added more slowly, "They were his own brain-things, true enough, but they were also live, thinking beings. The Galaxy is a cleaner place without Laoome."

Kenna regained control of her voice.

"Lanarck, is that—is that—" She stopped, at a loss for a word. "Is that right? Aren't you placing a great responsibility on your conscience?"

Lanarck shrugged.