

Weird Tales

The Unique Magazine



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THROUGH
the VORTEX

DONALD
EDWARD
KEYHOE

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Weird Tales

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THROUGH *the* VORTEX

by DONALD
EDWARD
KEYHOE



"Seeing the mad, malignant grin which spread over the other man's face, the flyer made no attempt to move, knowing that it would but result in his death."

THE silence of tropical midnight had descended upon Tenjo, the rugged little peak which crowns the island of Guam. Far below its steep slopes flickered the crude torches of a few Chamorran fishermen, where the lazy Pacific merged obscurely under the moonless sky with the jutting coral reefs. Near the tip of the peak stood the tent of an outpost commander, where two men sat conversing in low tones.

"Kent, I'll swear it's not my imagination!" muttered the smaller of the two, a thin-faced, nervous man wearing the bars of a lieutenant. "I know—you think I've gone mad, as Tyn-

dall and Haines did up here. But you're wrong; it isn't Tenjo, this time at least. The sound I've heard is real. My blood runs cold every time I hear it—it's not human!"

Captain Richard Kent, the young commanding officer of the Marine Air Station, laid his hand soothingly on the lieutenant's shoulder.

"I don't doubt your sanity, Alcott," he replied in a calm, self-possessed manner which was in strong contrast to the other's apprehension. "I believe you have heard something strange, but I don't understand its coming from the sky. You say it has

happened at the same hour every night?"

"Yes, just about at this time," returned Alcott with a shudder. "I heard it the first night I pitched my tent here. That was two weeks ago. I haven't asked the sentries if they've heard anything, for I don't want them to think I'm crazy already. Besides, I don't believe it can be heard down there, for the only night I've missed it was last Saturday when I was inspecting the returning liberty party. But the thing has got on my nerves so much that I had to tell somebody."

Kent lit a cigarette, the flare of the match throwing his clear-cut features into relief against the darkness of the night.

"I'm glad you picked me," he observed. "There's seldom any excitement here, and if a mystery comes up I want to—what's the matter?"

Alcott had leaped to his feet.

"Listen!" he whispered in an awed voice, staring up into the starlit, tropical sky. "There it is now. Don't you hear it, Kent? That awful, wailing sound?"

The cigarette dropped from Kent's fingers as there came to his ears a faint shriek, indescribably weird and mournful, from some point above him in the heavens. In the instant it changed to a horrible, discordant frenzy that sent a nameless dread surging through him, though in volume the sound had not increased. Then the cry was gone, to be succeeded by an odd, rushing noise. In a moment this also died out and the night was as silent as before.

Kent stood paralyzed for a second, the memory of that sinister cry still numbing his faculties. Then he shook himself impatiently and began a swift search of the purple dome above. But in vain, for there was not an object in sight large enough to blot out even the tiniest star. He turned in silent

wonder to his companion, whose eyes seemed about to bulge from his head.

"You heard it?" demanded Alcott hoarsely. "Then I'm not going mad. Thank God for that!"

"You're sane enough," said Kent. "But what could it have been? Alcott, you're right. There was nothing human in that sound."

"It's uncanny," agreed Alcott in a fearful tone. "I thought at first it might be some super-airship which we hadn't heard about over here, but it's not likely to be passing every night at the same time."

"No airship ever sounded like that," stated Kent positively. "Besides, we could have seen it easily. No, whatever made that shriek was not connected with man."

"What do you mean?" asked the other tersely. "You don't mean anything supernatural?"

The flyer stared out into the darkness a full minute before replying, his eyes roaming across the hollow which separated them from the cliff.

"Not supernatural," he responded at last, "but unnatural. The superstitious Chamorros would chalk it up to *Tatamora*, their 'devil of the night'. But we must look for a logical explanation, even though one seems utterly impossible. *Something* happened up there tonight, that's certain; and I'm going to find out what it was!"

Alcott opened his lips to speak and then broke off abruptly, jabbing his finger over Kent's shoulder.

"What's that?" he exclaimed breathlessly. "Behind you . . . look!"

Considerably startled, Kent whirled about. A shapeless white object floated slowly to earth a few feet away. He took a hurried step forward and bent over, flooding the ground with light from an electric flash. Then he laughed in sudden relief.

"It's just part of an old newspaper, probably carried up from your

camp by a gust of wind. I thought—Good Lord! Come here, Alcott! Quick!"

The lieutenant knelt hastily. As his eyes rested on the point indicated by Kent's outstretched finger he gasped and a look of absolute amazement spread over his pinched face.

"*New York Times*, March 5, 1925," he whispered to himself. "But it can't be . . . it's impossible, Kent! That's today and New York is eight thousand miles from here!"

"There's a difference of a day in longitude," Kent reminded him, "but even at that, this paper was printed less than forty-eight hours ago. Read this."

He spread the battered sheet upon the ground.

"'Inaugural ceremonies broadcast over entire continent,'" he quoted rapidly. "The inaugural was held two days ago, so this paper was printed within that time."

"But how could it get here?" cried Alcott in bewilderment. "How could such a thing happen? That sound tonight—do you think it could be connected in some way?"

Kent seemed not to have heard him. His face was turned upward with a curious expression, as though he sought to wrest the secret from the far-off stars. When he glanced back there was a peculiar gleam in his eyes.

"Don't mention this to anyone," he directed in a firm voice. "I want to compare this paper with the cable and radio news. I'll call you the day after tomorrow unless something occurs sooner."

"What do you think might happen?" queried Alcott eagerly, as Kent started down the rocky incline.

The flyer paused.

"Perhaps anything—probably nothing," he replied enigmatically, and then went on down the trail to his motorcycle, leaving Alcott staring after him.

CLAD in an electrically heated flying suit, Kent climbed into the special high-altitude VR which had been hauled out under the floodlights of the seaplane hangar. After a careful inspection of the supercharger, his oxygen tank and mask, and the connections to his suit, he nodded to the waiting mechanics. The propeller jerked through a quarter-turn, caught the spark and then spun dizzily as the powerful motor roared into life.

Beyond the ring of bustling mechanics stood four officers, their faces extremely grave. A minute after Kent had opened the throttle for warming up, the youngest officer ran to the side of the plane.

"Captain," he pleaded earnestly, "give up this dangerous flight, or else wait until daylight so that we can look out for you. The westerly winds higher up are almost certain to carry you away from the island."

Kent smiled, but shook his head in quiet determination.

"I appreciate your interest, Henderson," he said kindly, "but I have a particular reason for this 'hop', and daylight will not do. So stand clear, old man, for it's 10:30 and I'll have to be getting under way."

Henderson stepped back reluctantly. The VR slid into the channel with a splash, rode free of its truck, and after reaching open water hurtled into the night under Kent's skilful hands. Once clear of the surface, Kent jerked the releasing handle he had ordered rigged for the pontoons. The plane lunged upward as the two heavy floats dropped into the bay. The flyer settled back with a grim smile. The VR would go higher than ever before without that weight. As to the hazard of alighting without that gear—well, time enough to worry when that moment came.

The plane climbed with incredible speed. In eight minutes the altimeter showed ten thousand feet. The night was cloudless, so that flying was com-

paratively easy. Kent glanced at the dash clock. It was ten minutes to 11. Guam was still in sight, though the searchlights of the Air Station were now only points of light. He was circling in wide upward spirals, holding the nose of the plane to its maximum climb. At this rate he would be higher than forty thousand feet by 12 o'clock. Loss in weight from used gasoline would compensate for the slower rise in thin air.

At the thought of attaining such a height a thrill shot over him. Even now he hardly knew what he expected to find in the blackness above. However, in another hour he would be close enough to learn the explanation of the amazing events on Tenjo.

The island was now invisible and he was forced to depend on skilful piloting to remain within gliding distance of that tiny dot in the Pacific. As the rare air began to affect him he adjusted the oxygen mask and turned on the tank. Though the altitude brought a bitter cold, he was not uncomfortable, for the heated suit was quite efficient.

Half an hour dragged by, bringing a slight nausea from the artificial air and the growing strain. Kent's eyes began to ache dully from the constant inspection of temperature and pressure gages. The VR performed faithfully, its variable pitch propeller biting steadily into the thinning air.

At thirty-five thousand feet Kent felt a sudden desolation sweep over him, a belief that he had overestimated his ability to find the island he had left. At this altitude he was in the high wind belt; even now treacherous currents might be carrying him silently, relentlessly over the open sea. He headed the plane east to counteract such a drift, the VR moving sluggishly under his cramped fingers.

Twelve o'clock. Half dazed, Kent stared from the clock to the altimeter. Forty-three thousand feet! No man had ever before reached that height.

But his triumph was short-lived, for an odd sensation quickly claimed his attention. The VR was rising swiftly on a vertical air current. He shook his head dazedly. At this altitude there should be no such currents. Then a numbing dread seized him as his eyes fell again on the altimeter. The hand of the dial now stood at forty-four thousand—and it was moving rapidly! As he stared, horror-struck, it reached forty-five . . . forty-six . . .

Something was drawing him upward into space!

With shaking hands he attempted a steep dive, but though he tilted the plane with motor full on it still rose. Gravity had ceased to attract him! Lost to all human control, the VR continued to hurtle upward at a speed beyond his power to estimate. Through the heated suit swept a grim, pitiless cold, penetrating to the very marrow of his bones. Though he opened the oxygen valve wide, breathing became an agony. As a last resort he switched off the motor, but it was useless. Spinning dizzily, the plane continued upward, while he elung futilely to the control stick.

Suddenly on his tortured ears struck a new sound, drowning the shriek of the wires in a flash—a frenzied, awful moan which grew with startling rapidity into a fiendish din, utterly unlike anything he had ever heard . . . but *was it?* The night before on Tenjo—that sound!

To his fast-failing consciousness came one thought. The force which drew the VR upward was a tremendous suction, the suction of some colossal maelstrom, in the center of which the tiny plane whirled helplessly, like a storm-tossed leaf.

THE blanket of darkness lifted abruptly and a lurid, ugly glow appeared directly above. Terrified, Kent beheld a vast, ring-shaped opening in some strange formless land ap-

parently suspended in the air—an opening fringed completely with smoldering, sullen fires. As he gazed in stupefaction the whole ring flared angrily to white heat, a million tongues of flame leaping toward the middle of that great red circle. Then, as quickly, the fires died to their ominous, somber glow.

The air, which had been incredibly cold, grew warm and thick. The discordant din became even louder, sending stabs of pain through Kent's eardrums. He wondered dully, why he had no power to move, to escape the stupor which enveloped him. Was this some mad dream? But in the instant his wonder was forgotten; there came a blistering, hellish heat, heat that crumpled him to the floor of the cockpit, searing his lungs, starting his eyes from their sockets in mortal agony. The VR had plunged headlong into the center of the fiery abyss!

A single muffled cry burst from Kent's scorched throat, past his cracking lips, as a new idea forced itself upon him. That upward flight had been but madness—in truth he must have fallen back upon the earth, and was now being hurled to an awful death in the crater of some unknown volcano!

He caught the smell of heated metal, as the blistered paint exposed the duralumin wings of the plane to the inferno. His flesh seemed about to shrivel on his bones. There came an instant of stark, raving fear . . . of pain beyond human endurance, and then the torturing heat was gone as swiftly as it had come.

Half fainting, Kent hauled himself to the level of the fuselage and thrust his face over the side. What new madness was this? The smoldering fires lay far below, and on all sides were steep cliffs that completely enclosed the space through which the VR still rose. From the walls yawned great caves, their dark recesses hid-

den from the ring of fires by wide ledges which protruded outward a hundred feet. A shadowy *something* moving on the nearest ledge took Kent's eye. Then an incoherent cry left his lips as he saw that every ledge was alive with hideous monsters, creatures of a forgotten age, from whose mighty throats came the horrible sounds he had heard. Misshapen heads reared upward from loathsome bodies as the plane passed and the maddening, tremendous chorus lessened in volume for the moment.

Soul-sick, Kent shudderingly broke the spell of gruesome fascination that held him and raised his eyes to the region above the caves. The VR, which had slowed perceptibly, was nearing the rim of this gigantic, bottomless pit. As he drew level, Kent saw that outside the rim lay inky blackness. Yet there was land below, he knew, for the pit must have a base of some kind, and in addition he remembered having seen something extending away from the vortex into which he had been sucked.

The VR, apparently free from the strange force which had caused its ascent, ceased to rise at three hundred yards above the rim. Seeing that the plane was about to fall back into the pit, Kent drove his exhausted body into action. Shoving the stick forward, he kicked the rudder to the right, hoping to gain speed either by a dive or by falling off to the side. For several seconds there was no result, then there came a welcome rush of air on the controls. With a sigh of relief, he neutralized the rudder and sent the VR into a glide over the rim into the darkness. As he descended he became aware of an odd, clammy mist, which obscured his goggles and made his nostrils smart. He had pulled the oxygen tube from his mask on realizing that good air lay at the top of the rim. Now he replaced it hurriedly. Through the thickening haze he saw a few pinpoints of light

beneath. Releasing his safety belt, he stood erect, hoping to sight a cleared spot near the lights. Failing this, he reached for his rocket pistol, in which were two white star rockets. With a pull at one trigger he sent the first rocket hissing out from the plane. It burst with a lingering flare, illuminating an irregular surface covered with shrubbery.

Kent saw that a hard landing was inevitable and pulled the VR up into a stalling glide, the plane settling slowly. Then he started in alarm, as he recalled the dropped pontoons. Even they would have been better than the wings for that first contact with the ground.

Off to one side he saw a peculiar structure, raised above the ground by some kind of framework, but before he could look farther there came a sharp crack as the starboard wing struck some obstacle. The VR swung about violently. Forgetting the open safety belt, Kent hauled back on the stick with one hand and then placed the other before his eyes. There was a splintering crash as the propeller dug into the ground, a jolting bump, and then the plane pitched over on its back, catapulting Kent into the air. He had a confused sense of falling . . . a stunning blow . . . and then a merciful, soothing oblivion.

"Two o'clock!" exclaimed Henderson anxiously. "Something's happened, that's certain. He'd be back now if he were all right, for he must be out of gas. I'm going to get out all the boats."

But though every officer and man joined in the frantic search for the missing plane, there was no trace found of Captain Richard Kent. Headquarters officially listed him as lost at sea. As the days passed there was no one who did not admit his death, except perhaps a lonely man on Tenjo, who sat silently at his tent . . . wondering . . .

AS CONSCIOUSNESS returned, Kent struggled to a sitting position. His body was bruised painfully and his head throbbed from the blow it had received, though it did not seem to be cut. The mist which he had noticed in descending was even thicker, and an experimental sniff caused him to replace his mask and goggles. The noise of the pit was now barely audible, and the walls of that singular place were hidden by the gloom. He was about to strip off his clumsy flying suit when a strange, husky voice sounded a few yards away. Turning cautiously, he peered through the hedgelike shrubbery over which he had been tossed. Then he sat paralyzed with astonishment.

Around the wrecked VR crept a score of squat, powerful figures, their long arms holding torches of some luminous substance which gave off no flame. Kent saw that the continual mist was green, and that the apelike features of these queer beings were crusted with a greenish crystal layer. Heavy, matted beards accentuated their weird appearance. They were chattering to themselves in some fantastic tongue unknown to Kent, but he guessed that they were intensely excited over their mysterious find, and were equally fearful of getting too close to it. At last one who towered a foot above his fellows motioned the others to follow, adding a wrathful imprecation as they hesitated, and advanced with upraised club as though fearful that the VR might spring to life.

Kent considered hastily. The plane was not entirely beyond repair, and if it were to serve him further it must not be damaged by these ape-men. Yet he feared to face them without a weapon, for there was a fierceness about them which was far from reassuring. Seeing that a slight depression hidden by the shrubs offered concealment, he crawled as close to the

VR as possible without being seen. There was an automatic pistol in the cockpit which would make him master of the situation if he could reach it. As he lay watching the ape-men through a gap in the tangled growth he saw a flash of light on some shiny object a yard away. Then he recognized the rocket pistol and almost shouted in exultation. The ape-men were grouped about the plane, their backs toward him, so that he was able to secure the pistol without being seen. Snapping back the trigger on the single remaining charge, he leaped to his feet just as the leader of the group thrust his club cautiously into the side of the plane.

"Stop!" he shouted, more for the effect he knew it would produce than with any intention of being understood. With hoarse cries of astonishment, the ape-men whirled about, and with the exception of the leader fled into the undergrowth. Their swift retreat puzzled Kent for a moment. Then it dawned upon him that the grotesque mask with its huge goggles probably gave him an extremely startling appearance. Pressing this advantage, he strode majestically toward the powerful brute glaring at him from the side of the VR. The ape-man swung back his club with a ferocious cry, and stepped into a clearer space as though ready to give battle. A stream of unintelligible sounds flowed from his snarling lips, and Kent caught a swift side glance. He guessed that the leader was ordering his frightened comrades to close in. If he were to succeed he must work rapidly. Raising the rocket pistol menacingly, he dashed toward the ape-man, who gave back a few feet as he had expected. Then he whirled about and flung himself under the overturned plane, searching hurriedly for the holster holding the automatic. For an instant the creature opposite him stood bewildered, then with a bellow of rage he ran forward,

followed by several of his band who had regained their courage. Without hesitation Kent leveled the rocket pistol straight at the ape-man's face and squeezed the trigger. With a loud report the rocket struck full in the mouth of the infuriated brute, and before he could claw the hissing thing from his throat it exploded its second charge, sending a sheet of yellow flame belching from between his tortured jaws. Falling to the ground, the stricken creature writhed for a moment in his death-throes and then was still.

Kent had by this time secured the .45 automatic, but it was not needed, for at the spectacular destruction of their leader the rest of the ape-men hastily disappeared. The crackling of shrubbery testified to their complete rout. Working quickly, the flyer now secured the remaining rockets and cartridges, stuffing them into his flying suit. By the light of a torch the ape-men had dropped, he removed the tool kit, the radio set and batteries, hiding them carefully under a particularly dense bit of undergrowth.

This done, he set off toward the structure he had seen in landing. Though he kept a close watch for lurking ape-men, he was unmolested and in a few minutes he came out upon a clearing bordered by an irregular fissure in the earth. In the center of this clearing stood the most unusual building he had ever seen. Sixty feet above the ground, and supported by the cross girders of what appeared to be the skeleton of a great dirigible, was a house shaped somewhat like a boat, with portholes for windows, and a wide platform or balcony running completely about it. The framework had been cut in two parts so that a gap existed between the portion supporting the house and the portion which trailed off into the shadows. Soft light streamed through the green-crested ports, and once a figure passed before one of these openings.

Though Kent looked closely there was no apparent method of reaching this astonishing building. Even had he not been weakened by the ordeal he had been through, he could not have climbed the girders, for the intermediate sections had been removed, and those remaining had been filed to a razorlike sharpness.

While he stood there he heard a tumult in the darkness behind him. Recognizing the voices of the apemen, he abandoned caution and shouted toward the platform above him. Almost at once a door was flung open and three figures rushed out. He saw an elderly man, whose hair shone white under his torchlight, a second man of his own age, and a young girl whose beauty in those bizarre surroundings was startling.

"In God's name!" gasped the elder man in good English, leaning down to stare at the flyer. "Who are you—and how did you get here?"

A great wave of thankfulness swept over Kent. At least he was not isolated from his own kind.

"Let me come up there away from these green devils," he replied, pulling aside the breathing mask, "and I'll tell you anything. But if I don't make it in a minute I'll collapse."

THERE was a hurried exchange of words above and then the younger man appeared with a long rope ladder, which he hastily lowered. Kent made the ascent with difficulty, for he was almost at the breaking point. He was quickly escorted into the main room of the building, which, he saw, had once been an airship cabin. It was comfortably furnished, to his surprise, though part of the material was evidently the result of days of labor. Other doors led to smaller cabins, joined together by roughly built passages. The girl, under direction of the white-haired man, set about relieving Kent's fatigue and sponging off the greenish deposit which had

seeped in about his face. Refreshed by a drink of cool, clear water, and a dish of strange but delicious food which his host called *kornu*, the flyer then briefly explained the events which had ended in such a disastrous manner. The girl showed an unrestrained interest in Kent's story, but the younger of the two men displayed a sullen indifference which Kent was unable to fathom. The elder man listened thoughtfully, with a start of excitement at his mention of the newspaper which had been found on Tenjo.

"And now," said Kent, when he had concluded his story, "tell me where I am, for I'll admit I am lost for an explanation."

The old man raised his head and looked with compassion on him.

"If it would serve any good purpose I would spare you that knowledge," he answered sorrowfully. "My son, there is not the slightest chance that you will ever return to that place which we call the earth."

Stunned by these amazing words, Kent sank back in his chair, gazing at the speaker in consternation.

"So that you will not doubt what I say," went on the other, "I shall explain who we are. As you are an aviator you will probably remember the airship *Fidelis*."

"Not the dirigible that was lost in 1919?" stammered Kent. "You mean this—"

"Is that ill-fated craft," finished the old man calmly. "Or rather, what is left of it. You perhaps recall that there were several American passengers on board when it left England for Berlin? Well, we are the survivors—we three Americans. I am Alexander Faire and this is my daughter, Madeline. And this is Hugh Fletcher; Hugh was traveling with us as my secretary when we made that unfortunate voyage."

"But the *Fidelis* crashed at sea," protested Kent. "The wreckage of

the control car was found off the coast of Spain. You are all supposed to be dead."

"The control car was wrenched off in the hurricane," admitted Faire. "That is how the officers and crew lost their lives. Then some of the passengers jumped in parachutes. From what you say none of them escaped death. I suppose they were drowned. At any rate, the airship rose to a great height because of its decreased weight. Had it not been for the first officer of the *Fidelis*, who was in the passenger cabin when the storm struck us, we should have perished. He made the cabin airtight and released oxygen from the emergency kit so that we were able to breathe. Even then the cold almost finished us. At last we were caught in just such an eddy as drew you here, and were wrecked upon this spot. We did not pass through the pit, however; I think some counter-current carried us here. There were five of us alive when we landed, but since then one has died from illness and another at the hands of the *Tortas*."

"*Tortas*?" repeated Kent.

"You called them ape-men," explained Faire. "There are several hundred of them here. They have the instincts of animals but human intelligence of a low order. Probably they would be pounced on as the 'missing links' were they back on the earth."

"You have not told me where I am," Kent reminded him. "What is this terrible place?"

"It is the Sargasso of the air," stated Faire solemnly. "You have been dropped upon a small aerial island, which we call *Suferno*, an island formed in countless centuries by bits of matter carried into this meeting-place of the winds. Forced into a compact mass by the perpetual pressure of the whirlpool, and buoyed up by terrific forces of the winds, it actu-

ally withstands the earth's power of gravity. Oh, I know it is incredible! But it is true. As you know, the easterly movement of the earth results in a constant westerly wind, the speed of that wind increasing with the distance above the earth. At some point the rotation of the globe ceases to drag the surrounding air after it, and the winds may be said to stand still. Yet in relation to the earth that point is speeding by at about nine hundred miles an hour. We are at that point, in the center of that mighty vortex, where the winds of the world spend their force."

"I can not believe it!" cried Kent, when Faire had concluded. "No power of winds could uphold such a great mass as this. And even so we should die from cold and rarefied air. Surely you are mistaken—we must be in some forsaken spot on the earth."

Faire smiled pityingly.

"You are wasting your time in fighting the truth, Captain Kent. Do not think this is a haphazard opinion. While on the earth I spent years in the pursuit of scientific knowledge, and I am the last one to accept a theory which is not clearly proved. I can answer any objection you make—though God knows I would be glad to believe I am in error. The force you deprecate is an almost vertical one, as you know by the rapid rise of your plane. Remember, it is the reaction of currents moving at nine hundred miles an hour and meeting counter currents with such speed as to create an everlasting eddy. The compression of air by those winds makes it denser than on earth, and the heat is supplied by the friction of scouring currents under the base of this strange place. That heat is sufficient to keep the base of the pit in a state resembling that of molten metal. I wonder that you escaped with your life."

"But why has this formation never

been seen on earth?" questioned Kent. "At most it can not be more than twenty-five miles above the higher observatories."

"You have answered yourself," replied Faire. "Its very closeness causes it to pass with such speed that it is but a fleeting shadow across the lens of any telescope. It is like an airplane speeding at three hundred miles an hour a few yards above your head. Your eye could not catch its passage. No, there is no mistake, nor do I believe that we shall ever regain our lost world. Your coming has created a tiny hope, however. Until this time I have thought that nothing ever escaped the suction of Suferno. The finding of that newspaper would seem to indicate otherwise. Though we can not be certain, there was probably a cyclone, or similar disturbance, near New York or at a spot where that paper had been discarded. It was evidently drawn up into this place, or else on the edge of the whirlpool, and then dropped by some opposing current."

"But how is it that no one else has ever heard the sounds from the pit?" asked the flyer.

"You mentioned a circular depression near the place where you stood," said Faire. "It is well known that sound waves can be caught and reflected, even though from great distances, by just such hollows. You might have been at the focal point of the depression. Perhaps there is no other spot on earth fitted for such reception, at least along the track which we may be said to follow."

Kent fell silent. Was this amazing explanation possible? But if not, what could explain the circumstances?

"I don't understand how you contrived to build this place by yourselves," he said at last. "And how do you get food and water without exposing yourselves to the Tortas?"

"They thought we were gods when we first came," answered the scien-

tist. "They gave over one of their villages to us, but it was a bunch of filthy, underground affairs, so we decided to build a regular home. Luckily one of the motor nacelles contained a full set of tools. We managed to unbolt or cut away that part of the framework we did not need, so that it could not be a convenient path for reaching us. We saw that there would be trouble later, so we made the Refuge, as Madeline named it, as safe as possible. The girders are filed so that even the Tortas can not climb up. They do not understand making such things as ladders, and so we are fairly secure."

"When Collins, the first officer, died from fever, the Tortas saw that we were mortal, and immediately attacked us. However, we had an old revolver with a few cartridges, so that we were able to drive them off. But they are our enemies and we have to watch them constantly. As for our food, we go out occasionally for raw supplies from which we make up various concoctions. Some are quite palatable. But it is dangerous and lately we have started bartering with the Tortas for these things. They are extremely interested in getting bits of silk, which we have stripped from the *Fidelis*, and a few trinkets which Madeline makes for that purpose."

The girl interrupted for the first time.

"I am so tired of seeing that old silk," she exclaimed. "Our clothes did not last long, and we have been making things out of this colorless silk ever since. I suppose we look like convicts to you."

She laughed at her last words. Kent looked at her in frank admiration.

"Hardly," he said, smiling, "unless I change my present impressions of convicts."

Then he turned back to the scientist, and in so doing missed the pecu-

liar expression which flitted across Fletcher's stolid face.

"Is there water on Suferno?" he inquired. "Surely there are no springs!"

"We catch the rain, or mist, which you have noticed," said Faire. "At first we had to drink it with only a slight filtering, and it was nauseating. The green crystal it deposits is somewhat like sulfur in taste, though not in chemical action. However, I have a combination filter and still rigged up which turns it into good water. You must see my laboratory later on. Hugh and I have just completed the manufacture of a high-power explosive. We call it *teslin*. With several small bombs of that we shall not fear all the Tortas on Suferno."

"If this place was formed as you believe," remarked Kent, "how did it come to be inhabited by these strange creatures and by those terrible monsters in the pit?"

Faire hesitated for a moment.

"I can explain it only by evolution," he said at last. "You may not believe in that theory. Under our feet are tons of matter lifted from the earth by an everlasting process. It is my belief that this life originated from protoplasm carried here in that matter. At any rate, life certainly exists. The Tortas fear the things in the pit as much as we, however, so we are doubly protected. They call them the Vangæ, according to Hugh here, who has mastered their weird lingo. As long as these strange animals do not find any way into the flat land outside the pit we are safe. I believe, though, that their caves and tunnels run far back, perhaps under the spot on which we live."

As he fell silent Madeline spoke eagerly to the flyer.

"Won't you tell us what has happened in the world since we left?" she pleaded. "It seems almost a dream that we ever lived there, for these six years have been ages."

Though he was tired, Kent complied willingly. Faire soon cut in on the recital.

"You forget, Madeline," he told the girl, "that Captain Kent has had a trying experience. You can talk of these things later, when he has had a good rest."

"It must be near morning," said Kent, as he rose to follow his host into another cabin. "Everything will doubtless seem more cheerful in sunlight."

Faire shook his head morosely.

"There is no day or night here," he observed. "Except for our *forlute* torches, made from a luminous weed, no light rays penetrate this everlasting green mist. I think it must absorb all light rays from outside, for the darkness is never lifted. As for the time, we have a ship's clock which was not damaged, but it is of little use to us."

He conducted Kent to an inner room and bade him good night. Within a minute the flyer was fast asleep.

3

FOURTY-EIGHT hours had passed since Kent had crashed on the aerial isle of Suferno. He had recovered from his strange experience, most of which now seemed a dream, though he had but to look through the screened ports of the Refuge into the perpetual night to assure himself that it was no fancy. Faire had proved an interesting host, an earnest scientist whose intellect had stood up well under his isolation. Madeline was a charming companion, doubly so because of her eager interest in Kent's descriptions of conditions in the world hidden below them. Fletcher maintained a cold reserve which the flyer at last decided was due to the loneliness of months on Suferno.

The Refuge was an interesting habitation. The little cabins made novel quarters and the furnishings from the salvage of the *Fidelis* afforded quiet

comfort. Numerous *forlite* torches illuminated the structure with a soft, pleasant glow. The central cabin even boasted a small library, which had been carried in the passenger compartment of the airship. At the rear of the Refuge was a combination storeroom and laboratory, where Faire spent a great deal of time in various experiments. As Kent was being conducted through this room he noticed several coils of wire and stopped abruptly.

"What is it?" asked Faire in surprise.

"I had forgotten my radio set," explained the flyer. "This wire brought it to my mind. I ought to get it in here at once, before the Tortas stumble on the place where it is hidden."

"Why do you want it?" asked Madeline. "You don't mean that you can send a message to the earth?"

He shook his head.

"No, it is not a transmitting set. But unless it is badly damaged, and its cushion supports should prevent that, we can listen in and tell just about where we are in relation to the earth."

A scornful laugh from the doorway interrupted him. Fletcher had entered and stood there regarding them morosely.

"How can you do that?" he asked insolently. "A wireless message might come from any place. Even if you heard it you couldn't tell where it came from."

Kent chose to ignore the other's tone. He smiled easily.

"What you call 'wireless' has undergone some changes since you left the world," he said. "It is called 'radio' now, and there are thousands of stations all over the globe, broadcasting musical concerts, plays, speeches, political conventions, and a hundred other things. At any hour of the day or night you can tune in on something interesting. And by use

of what we call directional antennæ it is easy to get the line of transmission."

Even Faire was amazed at Kent's explanation, while Fletcher lapsed into an ugly silence.

"And to think," cried Madeline breathlessly, "that in a few hours we may hear voices from our long-lost world. Oh, I hope the set will not be broken!"

"We'll soon know," said Kent. "I'm going out right now to get it."

He headed for his cabin to prepare for the trip.

"Wait a little bit," Fletcher called after him. "I've just put up a signal for the Tortas, showing that we have some things to trade. When they come I'll find out how they feel. They may be worked up over your killing Karn, their chief. If everything is all right I'll go out with you."

Half an hour later, in response to a string of *forlite* torches displayed from the Refuge, a dozen Tortas appeared. Donning a crude helmet and mask to keep out the green mist, Fletcher strode out on to the platform. His appearance was the signal for a chorus of hoarse gutturals from the fierce-looking creatures below. Then began a rapid conversation, accompanied by a series of gestures by Fletcher. The negotiations concluded, there came an exchange of silk and trinkets for several baskets of supplies the Tortas had brought, the baskets being drawn up by hooked lines. The other three castaways remained inside, peering through the ports, Faire explaining that Fletcher was the only one who seemed to effect an understanding with the ape-men.

"I think it is safe to go out," observed Fletcher as he entered. "Karn was a bullying sort, and they seem glad to be rid of him. You had better put on your mask and goggles."

"I'll take my gat, too," remarked

Kent. "It's an effective argument against any number of clubs."

Fletcher turned to the scientist.

"I'd better take our pistol, too. You can't tell about those devils."

Thus equipped, the two men descended the rope ladder and made off into the shadows. Their torches showed the way plainly, and the VR was soon located. It seemed not to have been touched, though Kent was not sure. Kneeling beside the shrubbery where he had concealed the tool kit and radio, he found that they also were intact. He drew the set out quickly and bent over to examine it when he felt a swift jerk at his holster and looked up to find himself covered by his own and Fletcher's pistol.

Seeing the mad, malignant grin which spread over the other man's face, the flyer made no effort to move, knowing that it would but result in his death. Fletcher laughed sneeringly.

"So you are going to take my Madeline back to earth with you, Captain Kent? I think not—in fact, I am quite sure of it."

Then, without moving his eyes from the flyer, he lifted his head and uttered a peculiar call. Almost at once they were surrounded by a group of leering Tortas who seized Kent and bound him with a long, ropelike vine. Though he struggled, he was like a child in their powerful hands.

"And now," said Fletcher with a mocking smile, "in order to lend color to my little story of your tragic death, I shall have to use some of your ammunition. But then you won't need it, anyway."

Raising the pistol, he fired several shots into the air. The Tortas dropped to the ground in terror, but at a command from Fletcher crept to their feet. Fletcher's voice took on a note of bitter hatred.

"You fool!" he snarled. "Do you think I can't see that she is falling in love with you? Do you suppose I

have waited all these years for nothing? What do I care about going back to the earth? When old Faire kicks off I can be king here, for these damned brutes are afraid of me because I know their language and can frame up things on them. And I'll have her! What more do I need to be happy? Yes—when old Faire is gone—and that may not be so long distant, either!"

He snapped a curt order, and Kent was roughly dragged to his feet. Then, with his lower bonds loosened, he was forced to march along an upward winding trail. Steeper and steeper became the path, while Kent cursed himself bitterly for not attempting an attack before the Tortas bound him. As a dull glow appeared above he had a sickening foreboding. They were going to throw him into the pit!

With the strength of desperation he broke for an instant from his captors, but before he could hurl himself down the precipitous slope the Tortas in the rear threw themselves upon him with angry cries. But for Fletcher's interference, he would have been torn to pieces. A minute later he looked for the second time on the weird, firelit walls of the space through which he had come to Suferno.

"You are going to have a new experience, Captain Kent," gloated Fletcher. "An experience no man has ever had—though our dear friend Faire may soon taste of its joys. Do you see that ledge below us?"

KENT looked and his heart went sick within him. A great, sinister form was plainly visible, though its features were obscured in shadows. One of the Tortas produced a long coil of the tenuous vine such as that which bound Kent. This was slipped under the prisoner's arms and firmly secured. Then he was carefully lowered over the rim, Fletcher's exultant

laugh following him in his slow descent. He closed his eyes in despair for a moment. Then, forcing them open, he looked down upon the ledge Fletcher had indicated. His body, which had been dangling limply, began to sway slowly from side to side, making of him a human pendulum. He saw the reason instantly. The ledge did not extend out far enough to intercept him, and the Tortas were endeavoring to swing him over it so they could drop him upon it. At the same time a new sensation came to him. The vine-rope was scraping against something. An upward glance showed where it was chafing against the side of the cliff. A jerk told him of a parted strand. He was still fifty feet above the main ledge, but there was a tiny projection less than four yards beneath. If by a miracle— His breath caught in his throat as he felt another strand break. Then a sudden rending and he was dropping, feet first. An agonized second and he landed with a jolt that almost drove his legs from their sockets, his head hanging over the rocky shelf.

By twisting about he was able to look up toward the rim. The spot from which he had come was hidden. Fletcher could not know the outcome of his inhuman scheme. Undoubtedly he would believe he had succeeded. Probably he had, for Faire had said there was no passage from the pit to the open land of Suferno. Nevertheless, Kent felt renewed hope as he began to work his bonds loose.

When he had freed himself he sat up and inspected his surroundings. At the back of the ledge was a small opening, barely large enough to permit his passage. He crawled into it for a few yards and stopped. It had turned abruptly, leaving him in abysmal darkness. Then he forced himself to go on, for it was his only chance, even though he might fall at any moment into some deep cavern.

There was a dank, musty odor in the air which increased as he went along. He proceeded cautiously, feeling his way in the blackness. The passage grew larger and in a minute he came to a fork. He chose the right branch and soon saw a glimmer of light. Forgetting caution, he ran toward it and in a few seconds found himself at the rear of the very ledge on which Fletcher had intended him to fall.

Stretched full length lay a gigantic creature, resembling a lizard in form but with a huge, bulging head unlike anything he had ever seen. Its legs were twelve feet in length, and its scaly, mottled body was at least fifty feet long. Kent recalled with a gasp the skeleton of a prehistoric dinosaur he had seen in a museum. But for its head this monster would be one of that species. Beyond the passage he had followed, a second one opened, wide enough to admit the gruesome occupant of the ledge. Scattered about the floor of the cave thus formed were mangled bones of great size. Evidently in the caverns under Suferno were other strange animals, prey for this creature and its kind, the Vangæ.

Though the eyes of the creature were open, it did not seem to see Kent. A transparent film covered the hideous yellow slits, whose fierceness was emphasized by white rings encircling them, like the eyes of a horse violently distended. He found himself moving forward as one hypnotized and stopped with a jerk. As a stone rattled under his feet the film lifted swiftly from the serpentlike eyes and with a mighty, bubbling scream the Vanga lunged to its feet, darting its head downward with incredible speed. Kent whirled in blind terror as he saw the cavernous maw open and two great fangs shoot out toward him. The hot breath of the monster sped itself after him as he flung himself to safety at the turn of the passage.

Hurrying back to the fork, he entered the left side. To his delight it soon turned upward. Perhaps there existed some tunnel which would take him into the open. There followed an hour of disappointments. The tunnel led to others, confusing him so that he became completely lost. Once he heard a muffled roaring, and guessed that he was near some great cavern where the Vangæ congregated, or perhaps prowled in search of food.

Retreating, he was about to give up in the exhaustion of all hope, when a draft of cool air struck upon his face. Tracing its source, he came on a slanting wall at the top of which a faint gleam of light straggled through. Rude steps had been cut in the slope, so that he was able to reach the top. Pushing his way through a thick mass of undergrowth which closed the entrance, he found himself not a hundred feet from a Torta village!

Evidently this passage was not known even to the ape-men, for it showed no sign of use in recent times. Kent felt a great relief. He could lie here until rested, and then search for the Refuge. Crawling a little closer to the village, he saw that the huts were in reality caves with raised, thatched tops. The inhabitants entered on hands and knees. It was fairly well lit, for an especially large growth of *fortife* bushes existed at this point. He saw that a conference of some kind was in progress between the males, the females being kept below, as far as he could observe.

The conference ended suddenly, and three of the Tortas picked up their clubs and torches, starting off into the mist. A thought struck Kent and he quickly circled the village, following as close as he dared. Luck was with him, for the three ape-men went straight to the Refuge, where they bellowed a loud call. After a wait, Fletcher appeared. Kent felt his pulses leap as he saw Madeline and Faire peeping out from the doorway.

He stole closer, keeping in the shadows. The Tortas seemed to be demanding something. He heard Fletcher ask some question of Faire, but could not catch the words.

"No!" exclaimed the scientist, firmly. "What can you be thinking of, to make peace with them after the murder of Captain Kent? After this I shall treat them as the animals they are!"

Fletcher spoke again to the Tortas, who replied with a fierce hubbub. The three Americans on the platform disappeared and the Tortas slunk away with angry mutterings. Kent shrewdly conjectured that Fletcher had promised the ape-men a reward for helping him carry the flyer to the pit, and that his mention of a peace-offering was a subterfuge to deceive Faire. An anger mounting almost to murderous hatred took hold of him. Then he calmed himself and tried to think of some way to reach the Refuge.

At last a plan occurred to him. If only Fletcher had not found the tool kit! He had forgotten to mention it in connection with the radio. Hastily he searched out the trail to the VR. To his joy the tool kit still reposed in its hiding place, though the radio set was gone. Taking out two Stillson wrenches, he went back to the Refuge.

When he felt sure no one was stirring above, he stripped off his uniform blouse and tore it into large pieces, one of which he tied about each hand. Adjusting the wrenches to a small grip, he forced one on to the nearest upright girder. By stepping on the handle he caused it to lock without slipping. He nodded in satisfaction, and placed the second wrench two feet above. The strips of cloth kept the sharpened edges from cutting his hands, though they bit through the outer layers. Slowly he worked his way up on this improvised ladder, changing each wrench

with the utmost care, lest some sound warn Fletcher or a loose grip send him hurtling to the ground. At last he hung beneath the platform, where he was forced to trust himself to the strength of his tired arms. After a great effort he swung his body over the edge and lay panting on the floor.

When he had regained his breath he tiptoed to the nearest port and looked in. The central cabin was deserted. He pondered a moment. The door was barred but if he waited for someone to open it he might encounter Fletcher fully armed. The sight of Fletcher's club in the corner of the cabin decided him. Stepping to the edge of the platform he hurled himself against the door, which burst open with a loud crash. Then, seizing the club, he dashed for Fletcher's room. As he approached, the door opened hastily and Fletcher appeared, a pistol in his hand. At sight of Kent a gray pallor overspread his face and he raised the gun in his trembling hand, but before he could pull the trigger Kent brought down the club on his outstretched arm, sending the weapon clattering to the floor. Dashing the club aside, Kent swung to the other's jaw with a blow into which went all the pent-up rage of the past hours. Fletcher collapsed with a gurgling moan just as Faire and Madeline rushed out.

As the girl's eyes rested on Kent she gave a little cry and would have fallen had he not caught her. Lifting her tenderly, he carried her to the couch in the central cabin, Faire looking on speechless.

"I thought you were dead," whispered Madeline dazedly, her eyes hungrily searching Kent's face. "Hugh said the Tortas—"

"I know," cut in Kent grimly. "But it was a frameup. And he is going to pay for it."

At his explanation Faire's brows grew black with anger, while the girl listened wide-eyed.

"So he must be put out of here," concluded Kent. "Not for what he did to me particularly, but because neither you nor Madeline will be safe if he is allowed to stay. He planned to kill you, Faire—of that I am sure. You can guess the rest."

"I trusted him," said the scientist slowly. "I never suspected him for an instant. But you are right—he must go out with the Tortas, since they are his friends. It will mean redoubled watching on our part, for he will organize them against us, but it is the only way."

"We need not fear him," said the flyer. "He will have no tools to work with, and I shall warn him I intend to shoot on sight if he comes near the Refuge. I shall carry him out at once, for we are not safe with him here."

And Fletcher, still unconscious, was carried by Kent down the rope ladder. There were no Tortas in sight, so Kent gave a piercing whistle to call them. Leaving Fletcher on the ground, he returned to the Refuge and drew the ladder up after him.

4

"LUCK is with us once more," announced Kent, straightening up from his inspection of the radio set, which Fletcher had carried back to the Refuge. "Two tubes are in working order, and as this is a reflex circuit we'll have the strength of three tubes when I change the connections a bit."

Two hours later he closed the battery switch and eagerly rotated the dials, while Faire stood by the huge loop they had constructed. Madeline watched with rapt interest. After several minutes Kent's eyes dilated with excitement.

"Hold it there!" he cried to the scientist. "We've caught something. It's an orchestra . . . ah! he's going to announce."

There was a moment of strained silence.

"WRC—Washington!" he exclaimed at last. "Write down these settings, Madeline. And get the angles on the loop, too, both the vertical and horizontal, for we'll need them."

The loop had been made so that it could be rotated in two planes, giving its deflection toward the earth when lying on its side.

"But this may be coming from a long distance," said Faire, anxiously. "We may be miles away, perhaps nowhere near the Atlantic coast."

"We're within fifty miles of Washington," replied Kent decisively. "I knew this set, and it wouldn't come in this loud any farther away. Here, listen for yourself."

Removing the headphones, he handed them to Faire. Seeing the wistful look in the girl's eyes, he drew one phone from the clips and for several minutes the scientist and his daughter listened to the music which was being broadcast from the capital. There were tears in the eyes of both when they turned to Kent.

"It is wonderful," breathed Madeline. "A great invention—but more wonderful because it gives us back our world. I shall never be lonely again."

"It may give us back the world in a very literal sense," remarked Kent. "I have a plan which may be worked out, but first we must determine exactly how we move above the earth."

Taking the phones, he began the hunt for a second station.

"Charlotte, North Carolina," he stated in a few minutes. "We must be somewhere between there and Washington, for the vertical angles are almost in line and the horizontal angles are in opposite directions."

For three hours this process was repeated, during which time more than a hundred stations were picked up and carefully recorded, with the time of reception. Then Kent shut

down the set and bent over a world map which had been torn from an atlas in the library.

"We are over the Pacific," he explained to the others. "There won't be anything but a ship or two for a long time, and we couldn't know their locations so we might as well trace our passage across the United States. By plotting the angles on stations which we caught at about the same time we can get a fixed position for that instant."

He began work with pencil and rule, while Faire read the angles.

"There are four stations on which the loop pointed straight down," he continued. "That is, the vertical angle was ninety degrees, indicating that we were directly over the stations. These four were WBBL, Richmond; WEAC, Columbus; WOC, Davenport, and KEPT at Salt Lake City. The curve drawn through these places shows that we touched first at Cape Hatteras and then moved in an upward arc across the country, our highest point being just south of Sioux City, Iowa. From Salt Lake City we curved back southward until we reached the Pacific, just below Monterey Bay, California. And, judging from the intersections of the inclination angles, we are about ninety thousand feet above the earth."

Faire scrutinized the map closely.

"This arc must pass through Guam," he remarked, "since you were caught up at that point. A continuation of the curve will cut through Singapore and then dip down below the equator. From that it would appear there is a second arc which covers the Indian Ocean, crosses Africa just above Cape Town and then swings up between Africa and South America until it begins at Hatteras again."

Kent nodded.

"I think you are right. I can't understand why we don't travel in a straight line around the earth, or

rather, why it doesn't move in that way below us, but undoubtedly there are many conditions affecting the winds up here which we can not comprehend."

"You spoke of a plan," suggested Faire. "I confess to being a skeptic, but I would like to hear it, anyway."

Kent's face was grave. He hesitated, looking at Madeline in some doubt.

"I don't wish to frighten you," he said finally, "but I believe that we shall have to prepare for an emergency. Of course you have noticed the crack in the ground which lies just beyond the framework of the *Fidelis*? Well, when I climbed across it the last time it seemed to have widened and become deeper. I have an idea that we are on the outer edge of Suferno, and that the tip of ground supporting us is being slowly broken off by the vibration from the center."

Faire's face was pale. He glanced quickly at the girl.

"I have suspected something of the kind," he admitted. "There seemed to be no remedy, so I never told Madeline. Hugh learned from the Tortas that large portions of Suferno have vanished in just that way. What happens to them after they break off I do not know."

"I believe they fall toward the earth," said Kent. "Perhaps the mass disintegrates, or it may be taken for part of a meteor if it strikes inhabited land. This particular strip may not break off for a long time, but we ought not to take a chance. How much silk have you left in the storeroom?"

"Several rolls, though I don't know exactly how much," answered the scientist. "What good will it do you?"

"We'll build an air-tight box," explained Kent quickly, warming to his subject as he went on. "We can make it from six-ply veneer, which is light

but strong. The base will be reinforced to hold the three of us. We can leave space between the inner and outer walls, and pack it with *nottok* pulp, which I remember you said was a poor conductor of heat. Now for the silk. If it is not rotted we can make five parachutes, one for the center of the box, and one to be held by an outrigger arm on each corner so that the chutes won't tangle when they open. The four will have to be small and the central one will be very large. I'll sneak out to the VR and bring in the oxygen tank. There is a little left in it, and we can make more in your laboratory."

Faire and the girl were staring at him dazedly.

"I don't believe it will work," objected the scientist, after a silence. "If this bit of ground tears loose we shall be milled around and our box would be smashed to pieces. Besides it would have to be kept in an open spot far enough from the *Fidelis* to fall free, and the Tortas would wreck it for us."

"It is the only possible way of escape," said Kent, somewhat impatiently. "I can manage to keep it a secret from the Tortas and Fletcher, and as for our milling around, it would be only in the air and the box would stand the strain."

"Oh, if we only could get away!" exclaimed Madeline. "Father, let us take the chance of being killed—even that would be better than staying here the rest of our lives. Somehow I believe that it would succeed."

Faire at last agreed, though he was far from convinced.

"Even if we fall free, and escape the vortex," he protested, "we may drop into some ocean or the middle of a wilderness. Except for the time when we are over the United States our track lies almost entirely above water."

"I know," said Kent in a troubled

voice. "That is the only thing I fear. Yet I see no way around it."

"If there were only some way we could make the ground break loose," said Madeline thoughtfully, "we could start at a definite time, for now we know just when we are over the States."

Kent sat up excitedly.

"That's a great idea! Why didn't we think of that, Faire? By heaven, we can do it!"

"How?" demanded the scientist.

"*Teolin!*" replied Kent enthusiastically. "We'll plant several charges of it far enough away to keep from blowing ourselves up, but close enough to break off this tongue of land. We have some spark plugs from one motor of the *Fidelis*, and even if they aren't any good we can fall back on those in the *VR*. We have plenty of wire and I can rig up a booster strong enough to fire through three or four plugs. We'll wait until we are just off the Atlantic coast and then throw the switch. It will take about an hour and a quarter to drop, if our parachutes open at once. We'll be sure to strike land then. We'll check up by radio to get the exact time on our clock."

Faire seemed to catch some of his enthusiasm.

"Wild as it sounds, I believe it is possible," he said. "Let's get to work right away."

5

"THERE is only half an hour left," said the scientist, unconsciously lowering his voice from suppressed excitement. "Now that the time has come I am tortured with a thousand new doubts."

"Don't worry about it," counseled Kent, striving for a cheerful tone, though he too felt the gravity of the moment. "We had our close call yesterday when the *teolin* exploded."

"Thank God it was only a small

charge," exclaimed Faire in a fervent voice. "I still fail to understand how *forlite* can ignite it. I have always thought of it as being without heat or fire, and the possibility never occurred to me. It is a wonder we have not had an accident in the laboratory."

Three weeks had passed since Fletcher had been exiled from the Refuge. At first the three castaways proceeded cautiously, keeping close watch for the outcast or lurking Tortas, but when nothing unusual happened they decided Fletcher was kept busy at the Torta villages organizing his new subjects. By this time the parachute box had been completed, and had been carefully lowered to the ground. The two men then moved it on crude rollers to an open spot three hundred yards away, where heaped brush and the intense darkness concealed it from wandering ape-men. Every ounce of *teolin* Faire had manufactured had been placed in sloping pits dug for this purpose. The wires from the spark plugs were led into the parachute box and connected to an induction coil which Kent had wound for use with the radio battery.

"It is strange that we have not been hindered by Fletcher," observed Faire thoughtfully, as he put on one of the rough coats of silk lined with *nottok*, which they had made for resisting the cold. "It is not like him to forget what we did to him. I am afraid of the man, for he is extremely cunning."

"I think he is simply saving his skin by staying at a safe distance," replied Kent. "We have the pistols and he knows we will not be slow in using them. Well, we had better be going or we shall have to wait another twenty-four hours."

With a last farewell to the Refuge, which had so faithfully lived up to its name, they descended the rope ladder. After a keen scrutiny of the surrounding area for skulking ape-men,

they set off toward the odd craft to which they would soon entrust their lives. Removing the brush around it, Kent opened the little door and made a last inspection of the oxygen system and the reinforced glass port. Madeline entered first, making a brave effort to hide her natural agitation. The two men followed and secured the door with stout turnbuckles installed on all four edges.

"It is only a few minutes from the time we figured," announced Kent rather nervously. "That amount won't make much difference—let's throw the switch now and have it done!"

Before the others could reply there came a thud against the door, as though some solid object had been placed against it. Then a raucous, triumphant laugh. Fletcher's voice! Consternation swept over the three in the box.

"Greetings to you, my dear friends," they heard in mocking tones. "Surely you didn't think to leave me without even saying good-bye!"

Kent quickly regained his poise. After all, he held the whip hand.

"You are playing with death," he shouted back. "In fifteen seconds I'm going to blow this box and everything near it into space. You have just that time to get clear!"

"How very interesting," retorted Fletcher tauntingly. "But I am afraid I must disappoint you, my dear Captain. I would suggest that you try your little plan—while I stand here and wait to be blown into smithereens!"

A chill premonition swept the flyer. He seized the switch and closed the blades. Nothing happened. Consumed with sudden anger, Kent snatched up his automatic, and as Fletcher's sneering laugh came again aimed directly at the location of the sound. The roar of the shot filled

the tiny box. Then rose a scream of pain from the outside.

"Damn you, Kent!" shrieked Fletcher. "You got my arm—I'll have you beaten to death for that . . . *Cheurgs gaar khwotee!*"

The language of the Tortas! In an instant the air was filled with the hoarse cries of the ape-men. After an interval Fletcher's voice was heard again, this time from a greater distance, and muffled in some way to prevent detection of its source.

"One more shot like that, Kent, and both you and Faire will feed the Vangw. And this time there'll be no slip. If you give in you'll have a chance to live—under my command. I want Madeline—and I'm going to have her. Even if you break out of that box you can't save yourselves, for I've got a hundred Tortas here, and after your ammunition is gone they'll finish you with clubs. The Refuge is in my hands—thanks to the ladder you left so conveniently at hand. You are fools—all of you—to think I'd let you escape like that. My men have been watching you every hour since you put me out—damn you! Your *teolin* is on its way to my headquarters and the spark plugs are in my pocket."

Kent remained grimly silent, waiting for Fletcher to approach closer so that he could try another shot. Without their leader the Tortas would be easier to handle. Faire had not spoken a word, but was trying to quiet the girl, who was sobbing in terror at Fletcher's mention of her.

"Pass your guns out through that port!" snarled the man outside, after a short wait. "Break the glass and then throw them clear. If you don't I'll——"

What he intended was never known, for just then the ground shook under a mighty explosion some distance away. Kent's hopes leaped, but sank again as the box remained immovable. The commotion outside

the box proved that Fletcher and the Tortas were as startled as the three prisoners.

"Probably the Tortas carrying the *teolin* got too close to some *fortite*," ventured Faire. "It won't help us, though. We should have stayed in the Refuge, for now we are lost."

"Not yet," answered Kent firmly. "You have five cartridges and I have two magazines left. We'll get through somehow."

At a touch on his shoulder he leaned down toward Madeline. Her voice came in a whisper, close to his ear.

"Kent, dear," she faltered, adding the endearment for the first time, "I am afraid there is no hope for us. Promise me one thing—that you will not let him take me . . . alive."

Something caught in Kent's throat and unchecked tears sprang to his eyes. For a moment he held her close, while love struggled with a great bitterness against the fate which was about to snatch this girl from him at the instant of victory. Then he dropped his head sadly.

"I promise," he told her in a low voice.

But now a new and ominous sound was added to the husky shouts of the Tortas and the angry commands of their white leader. Kent's emotion was forgotten as he recognized the never-to-be-forgotten moans of the dread Vangæ! In a flash he understood, and for the first time absolute despair overwhelmed him. The explosion they had heard must have torn away part of the pit walls, or had created an opening into the subterranean lairs in the bowels of Suferno, letting the Vangæ forth to wreck and destroy all in their path. Nothing could save them now!

Closer and closer came the hideous screaming, the blood-curdling cries of the monsters. A torch dropped near the port by a fleeing ape-man gave a view of the region outside. Fletcher,

after a frenzied attempt to rally his strange cohorts, swung about and dashed toward the box. The inmates could hear him tugging at the obstacle against the door.

"Madeline—Madeline!" he shouted in the shrill voice of a man gone mad. "Come out—I can save you—the Refuge—"

Then a groan of horror, as though he had realized his doom. Kent stared through the port to where a colossal body loomed from the shadows, followed by other sinister forms, each one advancing with great, awkward leaps which set the ground to shaking as from a heavy earthquake. Down from the huge body of the foremost creature swept an awful, loathsome head, from which two horrible yellow slits blazed forth into the gloom. All but paralyzed, Kent covered his eyes as Fletcher's screams split the air. And when he took his hands away, his heart leapt into his throat, for Madeline had unfastened the door, and was out in the open trying to call Fletcher into the box, for in spite of all he had done, she could not stand idly by and see him devoured by the Vangæ. But Fletcher was fleeing from the doom that menaced him, and did not hear her calls.

Stung into instant action, Kent sprang from the box to her assistance as he saw the wretched Fletcher struck by two mighty fangs and drawn into that fearsome maw. His last hope died as a second Vangæ launched itself directly toward them. It struck a few yards away in its final leap at Madeline, as Kent emptied his pistol at the monster, and the ponderous head drew back for its attack. In that brief second, a tremendous crackling rent the air, a thunderous roar followed by a jolting, dizzy swaying of the ground beneath the box. Madeline had reached the box, and she seized Kent's arm and helped him in as with one sickening lurch the parachute craft plunged downward.

Kent quickly closed the door, and bolted it; then, after a dazed interval that seemed a year, he reached for the release cords of the parachutes. With a jerk he let up two of the corner parachutes, the silken packs opening with a loud crack in the darkness above. As the box tilted awkwardly he knew that they had held. The other corner supports opened quickly, and finally the main parachute, the latter with a jolt which threatened to tear the box to pieces. The swift sinking sensation died out, replaced by a smooth, pendulumlike motion. Kent hastily spun the oxygen valve to its extreme opening, then closed it part way as the atmosphere cleared.

"We are in the hands of God," said Faire, solemnly. "If only He will save my little girl, and you, Kent, I shall be satisfied. I wonder where we shall fall."

"We'll all be saved," Kent told him, with renewed assurance. "After what we just went through we're going to make it, I know."

A little later he began to wonder if he had not spoken too soon. Despite the released oxygen the air became difficult to breathe, and he found his head throbbing with a dull pain. The cold seeped into the box as though it had been of paper, and at the thought of the long minutes before they would reach the earth his fear of their being frozen increased. The three huddled together, trying to conserve the warmth that waned from their bodies.

"Can't we punch out this port?" gasped Faire. "I'm suffocating, Kent."

"It would kill us to open it now," returned the flyer thickly. "There is nothing to breathe at this height, and the outside is much colder."

"It can't be much colder," said Madeline, weakly. "How long will it be now, do you think?"

"Less than an hour," Kent told

her. "We're dropping pretty fast. When we get closer everything will be all right."

An eternity seemed to pass while they descended on down through the pitchy void. Suddenly Madeline slumped down into Kent's arms. He called her name hurriedly, but there was no answer. His lungs began to ache and a great weight seemed to press upon his heart. In a minute Faire leaned toward him.

"I'm slipping, Kent," he whispered feebly. "I can't hold out any longer—"

The words died into an unintelligible mutter. The flyer felt his senses reel. His tongue hung from his mouth as he labored to draw in the life-sustaining oxygen. With a final conscious effort he raised his cold-numbed hands and drove the glass port from its frame. There was an inrush of air, bitter cold, which seared its way into his throat and nostrils . . .

PEEING ahead into the night, the engineer of the westbound Broadway Limited swore with amazement and, closing the throttle, hastily applied the airbrakes. As the speeding train squealed to a stop he leaped from the cab and raced back along the right-of-way. The wondering fireman followed close at his heels.

"What is it, Jerry?" demanded the latter, as the engineer halted near an odd-looking box, half covered by a spread of green-spotted silk.

"Hanged if I know!" cried the other, lifting the silk to gaze underneath. "The blamed thing came out of the sky, and the headlight caught it for a second. Damned if it didn't come near falling on the track."

They had been joined by the rest of the train crew and several passengers by this time. As a groan sounded within the box the silken parachutes were quickly torn aside and the

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Through the Vortex

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door burst in. The three fugitives from Suferno lay upon the floor, unconscious, but with unmistakable signs of life. Two minutes later they had been carried into the nearest Pullman, and the train had been searched for a doctor.

Although greatly weakened by their ordeal, all three were soon revived. As the train proceeded Kent gave a brief explanation to their wondering rescuers. Suddenly the conductor slapped his side.

"That's where those meteors came from," he exclaimed. "We've got orders to run a bit easy on account of several huge meteors dropping around this region an hour ago. But I wonder what became of those animals you're talking about? Guess they'd not make much impression on old terra firma, though, as far as living through it, anyway. But good night! If I hadn't seen that box out there I'd wire ahead for the first asylum keeper to meet us."

He laughed and the three Sufernites joined in, though rather weakly.

"Speaking of wiring," said Kent, "I wish you'd send a message for me to the Major General Commandant of the Marine Corps. Tell him Captain Richard Kent will report at Headquarters and explain his being absent without leave for the last month or so."

As the conductor started away Kent glanced at Madeline with an odd expression. Then he leaned over and whispered something she alone could hear. The girl blushed and then gave a barely perceptible nod. Kent called after the retreating conductor.

"If you don't mind," he said with a somewhat embarrassed smile, "you might add that Captain Kent would like to have a month's leave as soon as possible—for his honeymoon."