

fantastic

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Contents

STORIES



Jalu, the Golden Girl of Kalendar, returns once more in Orlin Tremaine's newest story, in the March issue.



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- NEW YORK FIGHTS THE TERMANITES** by Bertrand L. Shurtleff 8
Panic grips New York as the new subway opens the way to a weird underground world; and a horde of ghastly white monsters swarms up to attack.
- THE PRINCE OF MARS RETURNS (Part One of a Two-Part Novel)**..... by Phil Nowlan 28
Dan Hanley landed on Mars, and found himself expected! An ancient legend dogged his every move. But then he met the lovely Lalrin and rebelled.
- LANCELOT BIGGS COOKS A PIRATE**..... by Nelson S. Bond 40
All that stood between the crew of the *Saturn* and death at the hands of a cruel killer was Lancelot Biggs and his chemical theory of cooking.
- THUNOR FLEES THE DEVILS**..... by Russell Storm 48
The flying devils came, and Thunor's tribe fled. But flight was futile, and Thunor determined to return and face the mystery of "four knocks."
- MYSTERY OF THE WHITE RAIDER**..... by Thornton Ayre 58
There seemed nothing human about this awful "white outcast" who raided Square 14. What did he want that demanded such terrible destruction?
- LET WAR GODS CLASH!**..... by Don Wilcox 70
Deep in the bowels of the earth, in an artificial volcano, a pair of war-mad Dictators meet and are forced to fight out their own senseless battles.

FEATURES

- The Editor's Notebook..... 7
Fantastic Hoaxes..... 26
Romance Of The Elements..... 47
Prize Story Contest..... 85
Introducing The Author..... 86
Quiz Page..... 88
Readers' Page..... 89
Life On Pluto..... 97

Front cover painting by Robert Fuqua depicting a scene from *The Prince of Mars Returns*
Back cover painting by Frank R. Paul
Illustrations by Julian E. Krupa and J. R. Hammond



THUNOR FLEES THE DEVILS

BY RUSSELL STORM

THE shrill cry of the hunting hawk, coming down wind from the tall cliffs overhead, lifted Thunor to his feet. One lithe step took him to the entrance of the cave, where he stood looking up with narrowed eyes.

The valley was a knife gash filled with shadows. Overhead the rays of the descending sun illumined the tall pines and the jutting spires of rock on top of the cliff. Thunor listened, a bronzed, fur-clad giant of a man, the whole six feet, two hundred and twenty pounds of him tensely alert.

Around him he heard the rasp of moccasined feet on stone as other members of the cliff community came from their caves. They were silent. They waited for Thunor to speak or to act.

The hawk cried again. No, it wasn't a hawk. It was Tomess, up there in the pines at the top of the cliff, and his cry was a warning signal of danger.

Peril was no new thing in this community. It was everywhere in this fierce land. To the north there

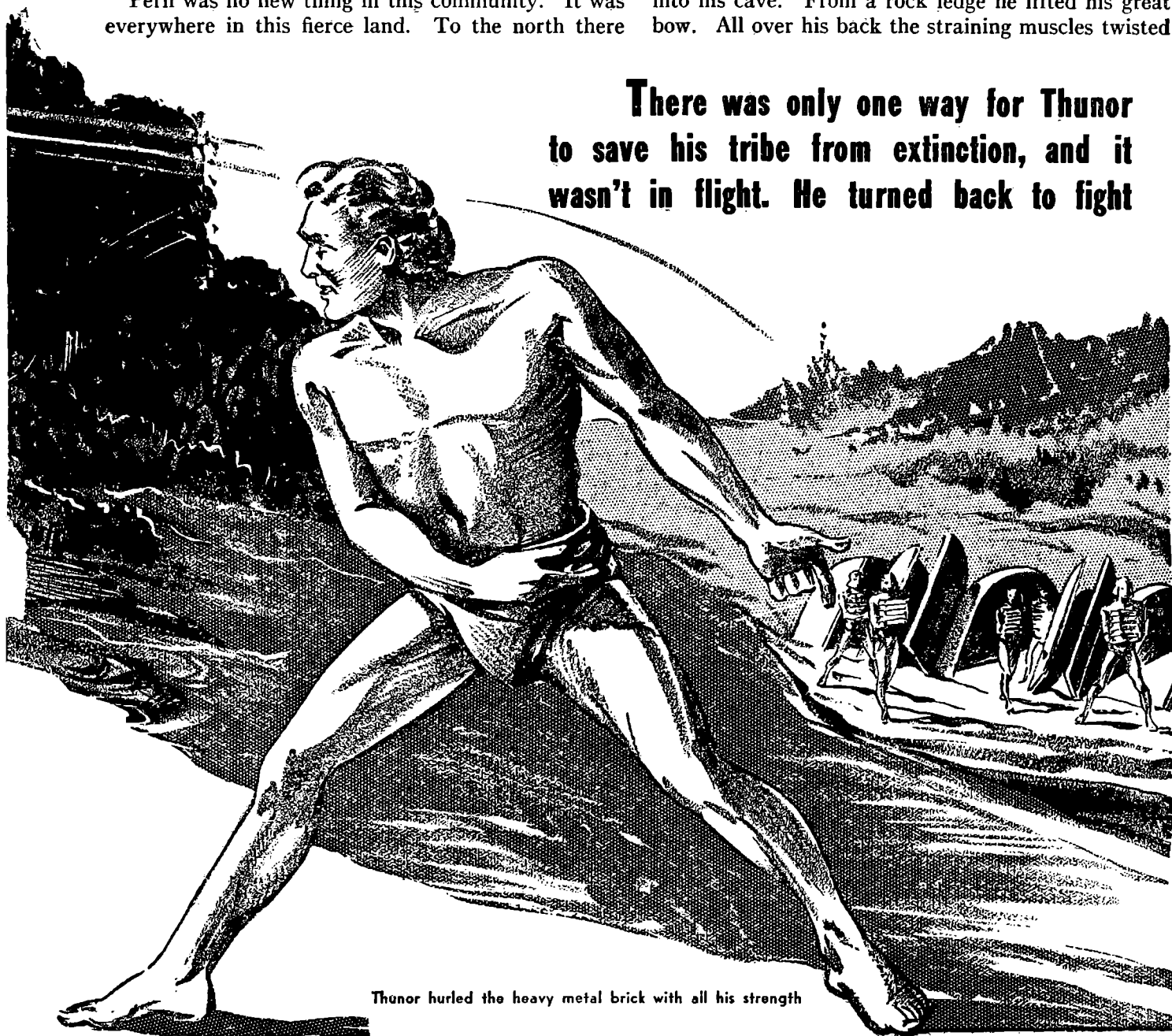
was danger—the great cold was there. Here in these rugged, rocky hills lived great bears and huge wolves and sneaking cat-lions. Southward, there was even greater danger. Devils that flew through the air came up out of the south.

Devils that were worse than the bears and the wolves and the cat-lions. Devils worse than the famine that came in the winter when game was scarce. Devils worse than the forest fires, worse than hunger, worse even than death itself.

Each spring they came north and hunted through the hills, for something known only to themselves. What they hunted, the cave dwellers did not know. It was not food. It was—something quite different. They continued their search until winter came, and then they returned to the mysterious south.

Thunor heard Tomess' cry come keening downwind the second time. The bronze giant turned then into his cave. From a rock ledge he lifted his great bow. All over his back the straining muscles twisted

There was only one way for Thunor to save his tribe from extinction, and it wasn't in flight. He turned back to fight



Thunor hurled the heavy metal brick with all his strength

into knots. The bow string, made from the gut of cat-lions, thrummed fiercely as it felt the tension of the wood.

Thunor took a sheaf of arrows from the rock shelf, examined their feathers and their points. They were tipped with metal. It was a soft metal, but it was better than the flint-heads the tribe had used in the past. Thunor knew it was better. During the winter he had found a great supply of it hidden in a secret place, had learned how to pound it into arrowheads and heavy axes.

As Thunor went up the narrow trail the men of the tribe called to him, asking him if he needed their support.

He shook his head. "First I will see what the danger is. Then I will call if I need you."

The women clucked to him to be careful, to take no chances.

"Take care, Thunor," his own mate called after them. "If you do not return, who will protect us from the wolves and the cat-lions? Who will bring meat for the children?"

At the top of the trail, Tomess awaited him. He was young, not yet a man. Nor would he ever win recognition as a warrior, because his left arm, his bow arm, broken in an accident, had never regained its full strength. But Tomess was very fleet of foot, and his eyes and his ears were the best in the tribe. That was why he had been detailed to mount watch from the top of the cliff.

"What is it?" Thunor asked him.

Tomess pointed toward the southeast, Thunor following the line of his arm. In the sky a light flashed, as of sunlight glinting from bright ice. It glinted again. Listening, the bronze giant realized he could hear a sound.

THERE was no fear in Thunor. Nothing that walked the face of the earth frightened him—except this one thing. And it did not walk over the earth.

"The devils that fly!" he said, the words growling in his throat. With the coming of spring, the devils had returned to their grisly search.

Thunor's tribe had lived in these hills south of the great river for two generations. His father had led the last tribal exodus southward. Before the little band had come here, they had not known these flying devils existed.

"Watch here, Tomess," Thunor ordered. "Call twice if they come near."

He went back down the hill, to where the tribe waited.

"The devils from the south have come again," he said simply.

Occasionally in the past the devils had captured cavemen, had no doubt questioned them. None of the tribe knew the questions that had been asked—although each time they had found the bodies of the men who had been captured.

Those limp corpses were another reason why Thunor hated the devils. They killed wantonly, without needing the flesh for food. And if they caught even a glimpse of a skulking caveman, they slew him just for fun.

A little stir of apprehension ran through the tribe. The women looked quickly toward their children. But the men muttered angrily, gripping their weapons.

"We will destroy those devils this year," they growled. "We are strong now, with our new axes and our arrowheads, and mighty Thunor leads us."

"No," Thunor told them. "They have weapons that kill with a puff of light. We can't stand against them. Not this year. We must leave our caves and hide in the hills until they are gone."

The tribe muttered. Leave their warm caves! It was still early spring, and there would be ice and snow before the summer came. They would freeze. Besides, they now numbered forty fighting men.

"Am I the leader?" Thunor demanded. "Am I the headman here?"

"Yes, Thunor, yes! You are indeed the leader!"

"Then obey me!"

Thunor's forceful command sent the women scurrying to follow orders. They began to gather their cooking pots of baked clay, their sewing needles and fishhooks, made of bone. The children saw the fear of their elders and ran to help. Not a child whimpered.

Without delay Thunor sent the men to collect their extra weapons. He himself stood in the flat space in front of his cave, listening to the drone in the sky. It could be heard plainly now.

"We'll go to the west," Thunor directed, detailing an advance guard of ten men to lead the way. Twenty he sent to aid the women. The remaining ten he kept with him.

"Put out all fires," he ordered. "So the smoke may not betray us."

When it was done, Thunor ordered the tribe to march. In the gathering shadows of the coming night, the little cave community began moving up the valley, away from their cliff homes, toward the trees and the rocks where they would be compelled to skulk all summer, not returning to their caves until the winter drove the devils south again. Thunor, listening to that unearthly drone in the sky, shouted to the tribe to move faster.

Abruptly from the cliff the hawk's cry came again, to be instantly repeated.

"Faster!" Thunor shouted to his people. "Run for your lives!"

Then he cursed himself. The order had been given too late! The devils' sky ship—a fat, fishlike affair that flew without wings—suddenly appeared over the cliffs. Now it was passing directly over the valley, over the tribe.

"Down!" Thunor roared. "Don't move!"

Stretched flat on the ground, Thunor watched the big sky-fish in which the flying devils rode. Would they see the tribe, down here in the shadows?

The ship was moving slowly. It was so near that Thunor could see faces peering out of the round holes in its sides. Now—now it was passing by overhead. The devils hadn't seen the tribe! The little cave community was safe. Thunor, giant of a man though he was, dared to breathe again.

A FALLING stone rattled down the cliff. Turning his head, Thunor saw Tomess slipping down the trail. He hissed at the youth not to move. Simultaneously the drone of the ship died away. In the heavy stillness Thunor could hear the hoarse breaths of the frightened men. They were safe, then—

No, they were not safe! The ship turned, nosed downward. It was coming toward the helpless little band. The devils had seen Tomess on the trail!

A woman screamed then. Thunor leaped to his feet.

"Run!" he yelled. His rearguard he ordered to stand with him.

The ship was very near now, nosing downward at a steep slant. The rearguard eyed Thunor with panic on their faces. Grimly their leader fitted an arrow to his great bow.

"We must let the devils attack us," he growled, "so the tribe will have time to escape. That is our only chance."

When the arrow was drawn full back, Thunor released it. The bow string thrummed and the narrow shaft screamed in its flight. It struck the sky ship fair and square, and glanced off.

For a moment Thunor had hoped that the new arrowhead would penetrate the devil ship. But it failed to do so.

The air was heavy now with the throbbing of tribal bowstrings. A barrage of pointed shafts leaped outward. Leaped, and fell short. Only Thunor's great bow could speed an arrow that far. And Thunor himself was releasing shafts as fast as he could notch the arrows. The sky ship came on, heedless of the rain of arrows directed against it.

A pencil of light leaped from its nose. The man standing beside Thunor screamed, threw himself forward to the ground, kicked convulsively once, and died.

Thunor muttered bitterly, released arrows in a flashing stream. The metal tips struck the great ship, glanced away. Other arrows were striking it now, as it came nearer. And the beam of light lanced out again. And again and again. It winked off and on, like a baleful eye. Each time it flashed out a caveman screamed, died horribly.

Thunor knew then that he had to create a diversion so the tribe could escape. If men died here, it was so others might live. But men were dying too fast. Thunor glanced over his shoulder, saw his people scattering frantically toward the pines.

He yelled to his guard to run. Three obeyed him. But when they reached the shelter of the pines, only two were at his side. The third had been slain on the way.

AN hour later, the tribe was hidden under an overhanging cliff. The devils had not pursued them. The devils never pursued cavemen—merely enjoyed themselves by shooting them.

Deep darkness had fallen. Thunor, who knew the names of every member of the tribe, called them off slowly. Eight failed to answer. Eight would never answer the rollcall again. Eight had died forlornly in their tracks.

Tomess did not answer. Thunor called again, to make certain no mistake had been made. But Tomess was not present. None had seen or heard him; and being fleet of foot, he would have kept up with the tribe.

So Thunor himself turned back toward the caves to search for Tomess. But before he left he ordered the tribe to continue westward. The little band wailed when he left them, but he commanded them gruffly to be silent and refused to take any of the warriors along for protection. Finding Tomess was Thunor's own perilous task.

He slipped the great bow over his shoulder, took his axe in hand and slid away into the darkness, moving for all his strength as silently as a shadow. Before he approached the caves he gave the call of the owl.

"Whoo! Whoo-o-o-o!"

Tomess did not answer. If he had heard, he certainly would have replied. He knew the calls like his own name—a hawk by day, an owl by night.

Thunor moved on through the darkness. Beneath his breath he cursed the devils. Why must they come north every spring? What did they search for here in these hills south of the river? Thunor did not even pretend to know.

Last summer, after the little tribe had fled from their caves, Thunor and several of the young men had returned to spy on the devils. The sky fiends had gone along the valleys, setting up strange instruments. Obviously they had been making magic, but their magic seemed always to have failed. The devils investigated every cave, every crevice in the rocks. They seemed especially interested in caves—

THUNOR called out to Tomess again. *"Whoo! Whoo! Whoo-o-o-o!"*

No answering cry. Soon Thunor was so near to the caves that he did not dare call. He could see lights now. Moving closer, he saw the devils had landed their ship in front of the cliff homes. The suns in the ship were shining brightly.

Then Thunor saw why Tomess had not answered. *The devils had captured him!*

Thunor growled bitterly. He had seen these fiends before, knew they looked a little like men. They were thinner and scrawnier than real men, their legs were reeds, and there was not enough strength in the arms of a dozen of them to bend the great bow. Yet the very sight of them always made Thunor sick.

There were—he counted slowly—ten of them. They were dancing around Tomess; Tomess, scared

and trembling, who sat on the ground, his eyes staring wildly from face to devilish face.

It was the first time Thunor had ever seen the devils excited. They were yelling at each other and at Tomess.

"'E lies. I tell you the cavie lies. Where is four knocks, cavie?"

Tomess shook his head. "I don't understand," he wailed.

"You do understand!" the devils jabbered. "You have found four knocks. Don't deny it."

"But I don't understand," Tomess pleaded. "I don't know what 'four knocks' is."

One of the devils held something in front of Tomess.

"This is from four knocks," he yelled. "Now where is it?"

Thunor, watching the bewildering scene from the darkness, gasped when he saw what the devil held. One of Thunor's arrows!

So that was the thing that had made the devils so excited! Could it be the sky fiends were looking for arrows, Thunor wondered. He couldn't understand. They had no use for arrows. Their weapons were magic.

Then his attention was again riveted on the scene below him.

"That is an arrow," Tomess explained uneasily. "One of Thunor's arrows. I don't know what you want when you tell me it came from four knocks. It came from Thunor's bow. He made it."

This made the devils angrier than ever. "Won't talk, eh?" one of them shrilled. "We'll see whether you talk or not!"

Thunor could not catch what the fiend did, but a beam of light flared from an object the devil held in his hand. When the light touched Tomess, the youth screamed. He tried to leap to his feet, but the devils grabbed him and held him while the first devil played the light over him again.

Thunor flinched every time Tomess cried out. In all his life he had never been so angry. He knew now what real hatred was. He hated the cat-lions, because they were sneaking. He hated the famine, because then the children cried all night. He hated the snow, because sometimes the tribesmen froze in it. But the hatred that raged through Thunor when he saw the devils torturing Tomess was stronger than any emotion he had ever known. It was an overwhelming passion.

Growling, Thunor fitted an arrow to the great bow. "Run, Tomess!" he shouted and loosed the shaft.

The devil that had been torturing Tomess sprang erect at the sound of Thunor's voice. The arrow that had been aimed at his chest struck him instead full in the thigh, knocking his legs out from under him. He fell flat on his face as the other devils leaped to their feet.

"Run, Tomess!" Thunor shouted again, loosing another arrow.

Tomess needed no urging. All he needed was a

chance. Like a frightened deer fleeing from wolves he was on his feet and running.

Thunor's second arrow struck a devil in the throat. The creature went over backward, clawing madly at the winged death that had leaped at him out of the night.

"Into the ship!" one of the devils shouted. "But first—"

HE pointed something in his hand at Tomess. An arrow of light leaped out, flicked at Tomess between his shoulders. The youth leaped up, fell and turned a dozen somersaults. When he stopped rolling, he did not move again.

Thunor raged. He had seen deer collapse as Tomess went down. When the long-ranging arrows struck their hearts, they fell like that, too.

Eyes aflame, Thunor made his great bow thrum again and again, but the devils were running now and the metal-tipped shafts missed. The sky fiends jammed through the door of the ship, kicking at each other in their haste to get inside, a scrambling, clawing, hysterical mass, arrows rasping among them until the door closed with a loud clang.

Two remained outside. One of them lay unmoving, an arrow through his throat. But the other, with an arrow in his thigh, was not dead. Begging for help, he had crawled after his fellows. Reaching the door of the ship, he got his hands on the threshold, tried to pull himself inside. From within, the door had slammed in his face.

The ship roared, started to rise in the air. Frantically the wounded devil clung to the door, screeching to be taken inside. But the door remained closed. Callously, the devils ignored their comrade's pleas. His fingers slipped. He yelped like a beaten dog as he fell through the widening space—

Brilliant suns, flaming from the ship, searched for Thunor. They did not find him, because he was gone. As he fled through the night, he knew the devil ship was following close behind. The devils were seeking him, he thought, because he had killed two of them. Later, Thunor was to decide they were seeking him—or any of the tribe they could catch—for another reason.

As the ship passed overhead, Thunor ducked into a natural cavern between a boulder and a fallen log. The devils did not see him. When the ship was gone, he came out of his hiding place.

So he had evaded them. Well, he could always evade them. Then a new thought struck him. The devil-ship was moving westward. The devils wouldn't find him there. *But what if they found the tribe?*

THEY did find the tribe. Beams of light, fingering hungrily through the darkness, caught two of the cave dwellers in the open. The tribe tried to flee by breaking up and scattering into the darkness. Most of them succeeded in getting away. But three were caught. No, they were not killed. They were

taken screaming into the ship—which was the same thing.

How the devils caught them was not clear, except that they worked a magic that made men mindless. The three were fleeing with the rest of the tribe. Suddenly, as a strange light touched them, they stopped running—and started following the ship as it floated over the trees. When it descended to earth the three tribesmen, walking like men in a dream, went up to it. They stumbled dazedly through the open door—and that was the last seen of them.

Thunor heard the story from a shivering tribesman who had answered his returning owl hoot. The bronzed leader gathered his tribe together, sent them hurrying westward, intent only on escape.

But the sky devils would not let them escape. Long before dawn their ship was howling overhead again, its lights making the night as bright as day.

Thunor hid the tribe, but the devils searched them out. Again they scattered into the darkness, and again most of them succeeded in escaping. Four did not. Four halted in their mad flight as a finger of light touched them. Four tribesmen, their minds no longer their own, turned and walked along a path parallel with the ship overhead.

Thunor rallied the remainder of his tribe, grimly sent them toward the west.

After a harsh night, dawn broke forth in a blaze of blood-red glory. And with the dawn the devils came again, their ship howling like a gigantic wolf on the hot scent of escaping prey. When the devils captured two more helpless tribesmen and carried them off, Thunor knew at last that the fiends were not following them merely to exact vengeance.

No—the devils were following them for another reason. They *wanted* something, and they would pursue until they got it, or until the last tribesman was dead. Thunor realized what the devils wanted, and what would happen if they did not get it—and what he had to do.

BREAKING the tribe into small groups, he said, "Take different trails."

His last command was, "Continue to the west," and he said the words gruffly.

The tribe hesitated. "What of you, Thunor?" they asked. "Where do you go?"

"I go to parley with the devils," he said. "To bargain with them."

Steeling himself against the unhappy protests, Thunor turned back to the east, toward the place where the ship had landed to take aboard its last two captives. The tribe watched him forlornly until he was out of sight.

This was Thunor. He was the headman. The tribe looked to him to save them and their children. If he gave his life that the tribe might live, it was no more than his duty as its leader. So Thunor went to the devils, to save his people.

When he saw the ship, resting in a little glade, even

his stout heart quailed a little. The devils had magic, powerful magic. He had only his great bow and his axe, and a great heart. He knew that the bow and the axe were worthless against this devil-ship. Well, he would use his heart and his head, then.

He walked resolutely forward, and when the door of the ship was opened and two bodies were kicked out, he knew beyond any doubt what would be his reward if he failed. Those two bodies thrown from the ship, like carrion tossed for the wolves to find, were the last two captured tribesmen.

His jaws set in a grim line, his gray eyes flashing fire, Thunor walked forward. The ship roared, started to rise. The devils had finished with their two victims. Now they sought more.

Thunor ran. He must stop them before they found the tribe again.

Into the open he stepped. "Ho, devils!" he called.

The ship stopped rising, hung suspended in the air, a bare yard off the ground. Behind the round openings in the side, Thunor could see faces watching him. A beam of light turned toward him, focused on his body with a merciless illumination. Thunor blinked, but the beam did not destroy him, as he had half expected. Silently the devils watched.

Thunor laid the great bow on the ground, the axe beside it, swung the quiver of arrows from his shoulder. Weaponless, his hands in the air, he stepped forward.

"Ho, devils!"

WHAT if they blasted him now? What if they suspected treachery? Since they were devils, he knew the first thing they would suspect would be treachery.

Round tubes swung around to point at the bronzed leader. He had seen arrows of fire leap from those tubes, had seen men die as the fire touched them.

Sudden sweat dripped down over his face, but Thunor did not dare lower his hands to wipe it away, lest the devils misinterpret the movement. Courageously he walked forward. The tubes moved to point at him. But the devils still watched.

"Ho! I came to talk to you." Thunor rapped against the door. "Open up!"

Inside, he could hear them squealing to each other.

"It is a trick. These cavies are not to be trusted."

"—blast him!"

"—the only good cavia is a dead cavia!"

Another devil protested. "I see no others. And he laid down his weapons."

They quarreled about opening the door. Thunor waited, and the sweat grew on his face. What if they decided it was a trick?

"Ho, inside!" he called. "I come to show you four knocks."

Instantly the quarrels ceased. There was magic in those two words, magic that made the devils open the door in a hurry.

Ignoring the evil weapons they had in their hands,

Thunor swung into the ship. Momentarily he breathed easier. He was inside. He had not been destroyed—yet.

"You came to show us four knocks, cavie," one of the devils demanded. The questioner was portly for a devil, and if he had been a caveman his name would have been Big Belly.

"You know where four knocks is? The others have lied to us, saying they did not understand. We know they lied. You have found four knocks. Here is proof that you have found it—so don't lie, cavie!"

"I do not lie," said Thunor. "Yes, I have found what you call 'four knocks.' And I will show it to you—if you will spare my people!"

THAT was Thunor's bargain. He would show the devils how to find the four knocks they had sought in these hills for so long, if—if in return they would not molest his people further.

He had realized what "four knocks" was—the metal out of which he made his arrowheads. He had found what the devils had searched for and had been unable to locate. *They had found his arrow.* That was why they had followed his tribe.

The metal he had found; the metal that made better arrowheads than flint; the metal that had been his gift to the tribe; the gift that should have made his people stronger—this gift had brought death instead.

"'E says he knows where four knocks is!" Fat Belly gasped. "Take us to it, cavie. Hurry!"

"First," said Thunor, "you must swear not to harm my people."

"People!" the devils laughed scornfully. "Your kind are not people. They are animals. *We* are people!"

"Animals or people, they are mine," Thunor answered. "They look to me to save them. And if you do not promise to spare them, I will not show you where the four knocks is hidden," he finished defiantly.

At first, the devils were angry because this animal dared to defy them. Some of them screeched that they would make him talk, fingering the things they held in their hands. But they looked again at the caveman, and those who looked at Thunor's eyes became uneasy.

"'E will not talk. 'E will die first."

"Let us promise what he wants," Fat Belly said. "Just so he takes us to four knocks."

"Do you swear it?" said Thunor firmly.

"Yes, yes, we swear it," Fat Belly answered impatiently. "We will swear anything you wish. Now take us to four knocks."

Thunor suspected the devil was lying, but he saw the weapons they were fingering and he realized fully he was in their power. Besides, he could not be sure they were lying.

"Very well," he said grimly. "You have sworn an oath. I will keep my part of the bargain. See that you do likewise."

THE devils were almost too excited to take the ship where Thunor told them. Fat Belly was especially excited. He continually licked his thin lips with a pink tongue like a glutton looking for more food.

Thunor directed them to land the ship beside a narrow gulch cut by water deep into the red soil of a hill. The devils piled after him as he slid down the steep side of the gulch, into a damp hole in the wall at the bottom.

At the back of that hole was the stuff that the devils called "four knocks" and which Thunor used for his arrowheads. The yellow bricks were everywhere. The devils gasped when they saw them.

"This is four knocks! The cavie has found it."

"The old legend was right! Four knocks was here, south of the river. As I contended, the topography of the country has changed so much, we could never have located it from the surface."

The devils made lights and ran everywhere in the depths of the cave, calling out gloatingly to each other.

"Billions here! Billions and billions! We will be rich, rich, rich!"

Thunor watched. He could not understand at all. He knew the stuff they called "four knocks" made better arrowheads than flint. But other than that, he could not see it had any particular value. Yet the devils seemed to think it was very valuable. Perhaps they made magic from it, he decided.

They fell on their knees before the stuff, kissed it, hugged it, worshiped it. Perhaps it was their god, Thunor thought, turning disgustedly to leave.

A SHRILL voice told him to halt. Fat Belly was shouting at him.

"I go," said Thunor, "to join my people." All over his body, his muscles tensed. If these devils tried to stop him now—

"Good," said Fat Belly. "Good."

The devil yelped at the others, and Thunor relaxed. They had not tried to stop him.

"Good," Fat Belly repeated. "Bring your animals here. We need them."

Thunor's mouth dropped open. He closed it with a click.

"You need them? What for?"

"These bricks are too heavy for us to carry. Your animals will do the work for us."

"Too heavy for you to carry!" Involuntarily the words leaped from Thunor's lips.

These devils were weaklings, degenerates. True, the bricks were heavy, but Thunor could carry two in each hand and not know he had a burden. The devils could not move even one of them. Now they would force his people to do their labor for them.

"No!" said Thunor flatly.

"Yes, you will, cavie," Fat Belly said, angrily raising his weapon.

Thunor faced them. "You have sworn not to molest my people. You promised on your oath. I have shown you 'four knocks' and my bargain is complete.

I did not bargain that my people should slave for you."

"Bah! What is a promise? We will take you in our ship. You will bring your people here, or—" Fat Belly fingered the weapon suggestively.

"Or what?" Thunor roared.

He crouched and leaped in the same instant; leaped toward the devils. They had broken their word, they were trying to make slaves of his people. If he could get close enough to get his two hands on them, there would be a different story.

"Or *this!*" Fat Belly snarled, aiming his weapon. A blaze leaped from the thing, leaped faster than even mighty Thunor could move. It caught him full in the chest.

A sudden torture cut through the bronzed giant like a knife, doubled him over, drained the strength from his limbs. He tried to force his body forward, but his legs buckled under him and he fell to the ground, groaning. The blaze of light was agony, but even worse was the knowledge that he had failed his tribe.

"Now, cavie," Fat Belly rasped, bending over him. "Will you bring your animals here?"

"No!" Thunor whispered from bloodless lips. "And you cannot find them, either. By now they are hidden so that even devils cannot smell them out."

He hoped it was the truth. The tribe, traveling in small groups, would indeed be hard to find. Some of them were certain to escape.

Fat Belly hesitated. He had intended to destroy this caveman. Thunor saw it in his eyes. But he changed his mind. The devils crowded around him.

"Let this cavie carry the bricks for us," one of them suggested. "After he has finished, we will destroy him."

THUNOR slaved. His massive thews groaned under the weight of the yellow bricks. Meanwhile the devils quarreled.

"Half is mine," Fat Belly insisted. "You remember our agreement when I financed the expedition this year—I was to have half."

"No, no," another devil protested vehemently. "Remember it was I who interpreted the old legends many years ago. If I had not solved the legends, we would never have looked for four knocks. I am entitled to half."

"Share and share alike," the others argued. "We have risked our lives in this cursed wilderness the same as you. We are entitled to an equal share."

"But my costs!" Fat Belly wailed. "And our agreement!"

"That agreement doesn't go now."

"And my interpretation of the legends—"

"To hell with the legends. Share and share alike, or else—"

THEY fingered their weapons. Fat Belly and the one who had interpreted the legends yielded only when they saw their lives were in danger. They were very angry, and their mutual distrust was so great that

the whole group followed Thunor each trip, to make certain that no devil forced him to secrete one of the bricks.

They ceased following him only when their strength gave out. Then two of the devils stayed in the cave, to watch Thunor and each other. Fat Belly waited just outside the cave. The rest strung out in a line to the ship, arranging themselves so they could watch each other at all times.

Thunor slaved. It would take a long time to carry all the bricks from the cave. The devils would not let him rest a moment. And when he finished, Thunor knew he was doomed.

Well, he had saved his people, anyway. By now they must be far away. They would find a land which the devils never invaded. There the tribe would grow into a mighty community. Perhaps some day they would learn magic and make ships that flew through the air, and mighty weapons. No devils would ever dare molest them. Thunor knew sadly that he would not live to see that day.

No, there was no chance to escape. He would die. But that did not matter. The tribe was safe, and that was the most important thing. What was one life—

Then it happened! Thunor was just coming out of the cave when he heard the sound. He recognized it instantly—the throb of a bowstring. No, not one bowstring. Many bowstrings, released at the same instant!

From the edge of the gulch a flight of arrows leaped. Arrows! Thunor's heart surged with a tremendous hope. The tribe had followed him! They had disobeyed their leader, in a brave effort to save him. They had come to fight the devils, to free the bronzed giant from a fate worse than death.

For one mad moment, when the flight of arrows leaped from ambush, Thunor was proud. His people were facing a terrible death to rescue him. As he would die for them, so they had come to die for him. He was so proud of them, so glad to be the leader of such a tribe, that his eyes filled with tears.

"Fight!" Thunor roared hoarsely. "Smash these devils!"

Dropping the bricks, he leaped away and began to scramble up the side of the gulch. He was going to join his people, to lead them, to fight beside them.

With wild exultation he saw what happened as a result of the first flight of arrows. The shafts had all been directed at one target, the devil nearest the ambushed tribesmen. All over the fiend's body little tufts of feathers suddenly sprouted as the arrows drove into him. That devil died, then and there.

Suddenly four devils raced for the ship.

"Don't let them get to that ship!" Thunor shouted.

Arrows screamed through the air again. One devil fell; then another. Thunor saw two of them racing toward the ship. He fought his way up the gulch then. Another leap and he would be safe—

It was a leap that was never made. Fat Belly was firing from the protection of the cave mouth. Thunor

felt something touch him. His legs buckled. As consciousness faded, he knew he was falling, falling hard.

BLACKNESS swirled before Thunor's eyes. When it began to fade away, he could hear the shrill piping voices of the devils. Painfully he opened his eyes. He saw that he had fallen back to the bottom of the gulch. His people were all around him.

In the air, the huge ship droned spitefully. Two devils were landing it at the bottom of the gulch. Fat Belly and the two remaining devils had come out of the cave and were guarding the forlorn tribesmen. That is, what was left of them. He could see bodies scattered along the edge of the ravine. Evidently the little band had charged. With ruthless abandon the devils had killed many of the tribesmen and rendered the others senseless.

"You disobeyed me," Thunor growled. But there was no anger in his throat.

A moment later the devils landed the ship. Two remained inside. Two others went back into the cave. Fat Belly took up his position just outside the entrance. Only five devils were left now; five warped, cold-blooded fiends.

"Get busy, cavies," Fat Belly ordered. "And no nonsense, or I'll blow you apart."

Guarded by the devils, Thunor and his people began carrying the yellow bricks from the cave. The devils were intensely suspicious now. They watched every move the cavemen made. But they were not angry because the cavies had killed three of their number. They were rather pleased about that.

"Three less to share with," Fat Belly said, in a satisfied voice.

Then, because one of the tribesmen was only a boy and could not carry even one brick, Fat Belly calmly destroyed him.

Thunor almost went berserk. He started to charge the devil, but Fat Belly used his terrible weapon again, and Thunor's strength was drained away.

When Fat Belly released his weapon, Thunor went back to work. He picked up the bricks again. Now, as never before, he knew how terrible the devils were, how ruthless. He had to save his people. But how? How could they escape when inside the ship two devils were constantly on the watch? Fat Belly waited at the cave mouth, a weapon in each hand. And inside the cave were the remaining two devils.

If the tribesmen tried to run, the devils would mow them down. Even great Thunor, who could break a devil in two with one hand, was not stronger than the devils' magic weapons.

Then Thunor thought of something. It had been before his eyes all the time—there was one weak point in the devils' artificial armor. A plan began to form in Thunor's racing mind.

If it would only work! It *had* to work. It was their only chance. If it failed, the women and children of the tribe would have to fight the bears and the wolves and the cat-lions without their men to help

them. For their men would be dead.

Each time he had a chance, Thunor whispered to his comrades.

"Be ready when I give the word."

They passed his message along. "Be ready when Thunor speaks! Great Thunor will save us. He will tie these devils into knots, will Thunor!"

A new light kindled in the hopeless eyes. Lagging spirits again knew the thrill of things to come. Thunor saw how his men believed in him. He could not fail them. He must not!

And so, each time Thunor was in the huge sky ship, he did something. He did the same thing at the mouth of the cave and again inside it.

The tribesmen watched tensely as they worked. Thunor continued his regular trips from the cave to the ship, burdened each time with four bricks. Every second the tribesmen expected him to roar at them to seize the nearest devil. But he didn't do that. He didn't do much of anything—except wait.

Nothing seemed to happen. But the cavemen realized with a thrill that something was about to happen! For the devils were becoming even more nervous. Fat Belly was always looking into the cave now; from the cave to the ship. The two devils in the ship were becoming angry. The remaining pair in the cave were whispering furtively to each other.

WAS Thunor using magic to fight the devils? If so, when would the magic begin to work? But Thunor said nothing, except "Be ready!"

Then—then Thunor's magic began to work! Fat Belly was peering into the cave, sticking his head around the corner like a turtle watching warily for enemies. Suddenly a beam of light lanced out from the ship. It drilled into the red clay inches from Fat Belly. He heard its hiss, jerked his head around with a screech, saw what was happening and ducked into the cave.

Almost instantly he came running from the cave, firing back over his shoulder. Just as he emerged, he saw the tubes of the ship pointed at him. He leaped to one side, cursing, and took refuge in a gully.

Then the tribesmen saw why Fat Belly had run from the cave. The two devils—his own comrades—were after him. They came leaping from the cave, firing at Fat Belly, and they emerged just in time to run into the beam of intense light that flared from one of the ship's tubes. The deadly ray caught one of the devils full in the chest. Like a tree struck by lightning, he burst instantly into flame.

The other devil fired at the ship. A round hole appeared in the metal hull as the ray struck it. Then the fiend fired again, the ship answered, and the second of the devils died—horribly.

"Now is the time!" Thunor shouted. "Run!"

The tribe obeyed him. They fled in every direction. As they ran they heard the ship roar as it started to rise into the air.

Thunor did not run. He knew that if the ship got

into the air, the little band's chance of escape was gone. And the ship was rising ever higher from the ground each second.

The bronzed giant had just come out of the cave. He had four bricks in his hands. He dropped three of them. Grasping the fourth one in both hands, he ran—toward the ship!

It was rising slowly. Evidently the shot from the devil-weapon had damaged it so that it could not lift as rapidly as usual. But it was going up, a foot at a time, and as it rose the tribesmen's chances lessened. From its nose white beams were frothing as one of the devils fired at Fat Belly. The other devil operated the controls.

Thunor could see the fiends. And they saw him. The tube swung around viciously to point at him. It was now or never. Thunor lifted the yellow brick over his head, hurled it with all his strength.

The hull of the ship would deflect an arrow, but the brick was far the heavier, and it was hurled with all of Thunor's massive strength. Not for nothing was the bronzed giant named Thunor, the great bear that growls in the sky, the thunder. The brick struck squarely in one of the round ports. It shattered the glass, passed through, caught the devil who was operating the tube.

Backward the fiend staggered, reeling heavily across the ship. He crashed into the devil who was working the controls. The huge ship spun in a circle, zoomed up, completely out of control—and smashed up full on its nose in the bottom of the gulch.

The explosion that followed rent the heavens and the earth. Thunor was already running when the detonation sounded off. The blast lifted him from his feet, slammed him forward, rolled him over and over. His head struck a rock, and a million stars flashed weirdly before his eyes.

WHEN Thunor recovered consciousness, the tribesmen were all around him. He struggled shakily to his feet.

"Where is Fat Belly?" was his first question.

A tribesman pointed. Thunor looked. There was a great hole in the earth where the ship had struck.

"The explosion blew Fat Belly forty feet, Thunor!"

The bronzed giant sighed. Suddenly he felt weak all over. He sat down, and his people crowded around him.

"Mighty is Thunor," they said. "Great is his magic. It makes the devils fight among themselves. Truly a wonderful magic!"

If this had been a few thousand years before, Thunor would have blushed. As it was, he looked decidedly uncomfortable.

"Oh," Thunor protested, "it was nothing. I merely told the two devils in the cave that the other two in the ship and Fat Belly were planning to go away and desert them. Then I told Fat Belly that the two in the cave were hiding the 'four knocks.' He believed me, because that was what he would have done if *he*

had been in the cave!

"Next I told the two in the ship that Fat Belly and the devils in the cave were planning to destroy them, so that the 'four knocks' might be divided among only three. They were willing to believe me, because that was what they wanted to do themselves. But there was no magic in it. If the devils had been strong enough to have faith in each other, it would not have worked.

"But they were weaklings, each fighting the other man to see that he himself got the biggest portion—instead of all fighting for the same end. And their weakness destroyed them."

The tribe gasped. "Great is Thunor," they marveled. "He sets the devils against each other. But why did they seek this 'four knocks,' Thunor? Why do they value this yellow stuff so highly that they destroyed each other in order to possess it?"

Thunor shook his head. "I do not know," he said frankly.

The tribe was awed. Here was something that even great Thunor did not understand. It was a puzzle, a vast mystery.

"We will try to find out why they valued this 'four knocks' so highly," Thunor said. "Bring me one of the bricks. Perhaps magic may be made from it."

The tribesmen brought him a brick of the stuff the devils called "four knocks." Thunor studied it. If there was magic in it, he could not discover how to make the magic work.

He shook his head a second time. "I do not know."

But he did know one thing—the devils were dead. Now his people could return to their warm caves. Now they could live in this land in peace. Now they could stay in one place and grow into a mighty tribe.

Thunor looked into the future, saw his people rising as a strong and powerful nation. Perhaps, when the ice to the north went away, they could return and repossess the land from which the ice had driven them.

Yes, they would do that. It was Thunor's prophecy. The tribe would grow strong and mighty and live again in the land to the north. Ten thousand years ago dim tradition said the land had belonged to them. But that was before recurrent wars on the earth had wiped most of the population away in a holocaust of destruction. Only isolated villages, and one small section in central Europe had survived.

Thunor looked now at the brick. Faint marks had been indented on its surface. He wrinkled his brows in thought, wondering if those marks were magic. If they were, he could not understand them. Perhaps only devils knew their meaning.

He traced them out with a twig, so that they were clear and distinct.

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"I wonder what those marks could mean," Thunor puzzled.

One of the tribesmen fingered the yellow metal.

"Huh!" he snorted disgustedly. "Imagine fighting over something like that!"