

PLANET
stories

SUMMER
1947

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DE PINA
WALTON
GARSON

VASSALS *of the* LODGE-STAR

SNATCHED FROM SPACE AND TIME
TO SERVE A CRYSTAL FLAME!

Novel by GARDNER F. FOX



PLANET STORIES



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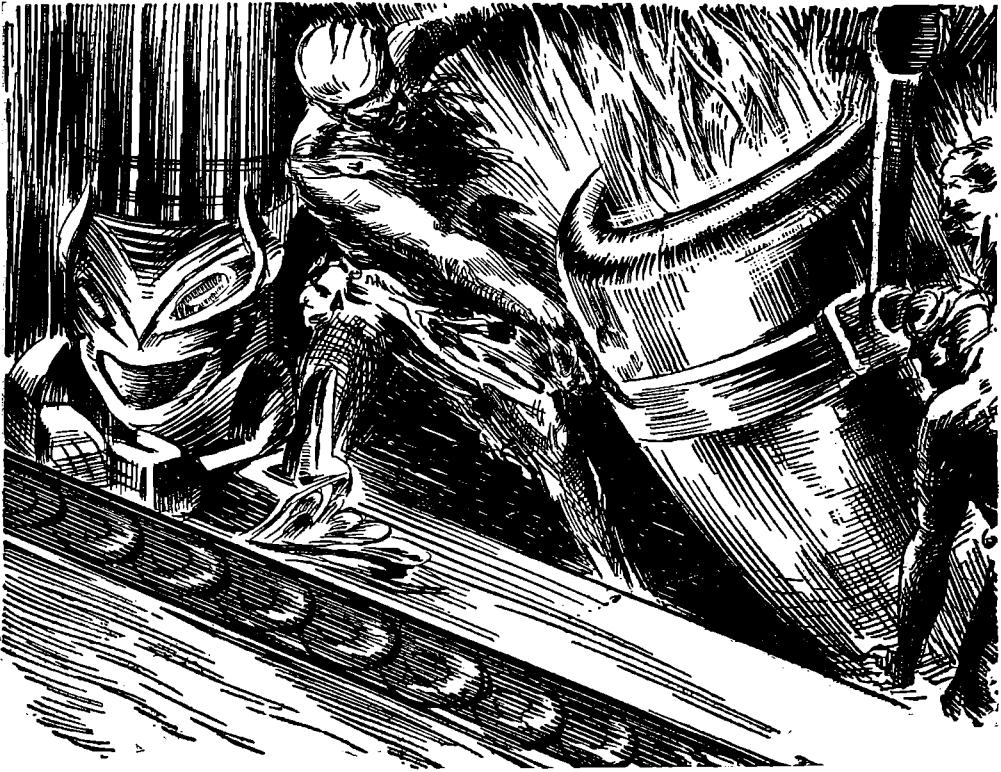


Vol. III, No. 7
20c per copy



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A scream of fear and fury tore from the throats of the fighters.

VASSALS OF THE LODE-STAR

By Gardner F. Fox

Illustrated by NAPOLI

Caught up in a mad space-time snarl, making their last grim stand against a surging android horde, the outlawed man-beasts of the Settlements could not see why mighty-thewed Thor Masterson of Terra chose instead to battle a strange green flame!

In that dim dawn of all things, when Time was unmeasured and Space was an empty void, before the strange mating of these two and the birth of the cosmos, the Rebel lived. Its streams flowed forth from unfathomable errors, seventeen-hundred billion years ago. It was a cancer of Space, and when Space met Time and flowed with it toward eternity, the Rebel fought. Time and Space sought to disgorge it, for it was the Rebel, and its own great tendrils of Space and Time heaved and raged like the corona of a giant sun. The tendrils leaped and danced, and once in a while they touched reality. And when they did . . .

THE PURPLE LIGHT CAME first, tinting the library of the old house, and flooding across rugs and books on the shelves. Then the mansion rocked and tilted as though being lifted and torn loose from its foundation.

Thor Masterson came up from his chair, brown eyes staring. His flannel shirt

opened to disclose tanned chest and thick neck. He saw the purple light, but he did not think of it as a pathway between worlds. He felt the tilting of the house, but he did not think of it as riding down the cosmic corridor through which it was being transported.

The mansion rocked and turned slowly.

If Thor could have had time, he might have tried to reason, but there was no time—

A woman stood in the center of the rug, a woman with long yellow hair and gauze trousers and jeweled girdle. A dwarf-man with a big club leaped for her, snarling. The woman whirled, a slim dagger glittering in her right hand.

Thor Masterson came alive. He drove forward. His big right fist, scarred with battles in Oregon lumber camps and wise to the ways of axes and bounding footballs and enemy jaws, swept up in a short arc.

The dwarf-man seemed to leap backward. He fell against an antique secretary, splintering wood. Slumping toward the floor, he lay still. The girl screamed.

Again the mansion was rocking and tilting, lifting and falling. A chair skidded into a corner, and a heavy picture dropped with a shattering of glass and frame.

Thor Masterson thought of hurricanes and cyclones and tidal waves. He held the girl against him, looking into her frightened violet eyes.

"Easy does it. Just take it easy. Relax. It's like skiing. If you're not stiff, you won't get broken bones."

The violet eyes told Thor that she hadn't the slightest conception of what he said, but his tones made her generous red mouth yield a tremulous smile. She relaxed and lay against him.

THOR stared out the window. There should be the elms of the Midwestern campus out there, but all he could see were pale purple mists. Thor went toward the window and peered out. Midwestern University, where Thor had come from lumber camp and battlefield, ought to be showing its greystone buildings soon. But the more Thor stared into the lavender mists, the colder became his heart.

Because, as the clouds shifted to reveal darker spaces, Thor could see stars glittering in the blackness. He thought, *Something has lifted the house right off the campus. Something has us in its grip. We're being taken away from the Earth—taken out in space.* For he knew from the star formations that he could see momentarily, that something was moving him and the house swiftly across the void.

The house bumped, pitching at a gentle

angle. The floor was like the deck of a ship caught in the trough of a wave. Thor rolled with it, legs straddled.

The front door cracked open as the house settled onto something solid. The purple mists began to flee before the pale yellow light streaming through the door and window,

Thor walked with the girl to the doorway and stood on the cracked sill, looking out. *I'm delirious*, he thought. *I've read some fantastic tale and gotten drunk, and this is the result. What I'm looking at is the chaos of a surrealist nightmare.*

Sprawling grey rock humped itself into impossible contortions under the warmth of a great yellow sun. Where the rock disappeared, red grass swayed its blades. Low mists hung in the distance.

The girl whimpered. She whispered in a language that made Thor think of jewels in a tumbling spring, clicking and clacking. He grinned down at her.

"Don't ask me, sweet stuff," he said. "Offhand I'd say that Dali had us in one of his landscapes. And you wouldn't know about him. But as far as any explanation of where we are or what happened, I'm up a tree. Still, I rather imagine that something went wrong with the space coordinates."

He went on dreamily, "We don't know an awful lot about space. Maybe it moves along with the rest of the expanding universe, and maybe it doesn't. But if a certain segment of space was addicted to going off on a tangent—away from its usual sphere—it could conceivably snatch up whatever was in its path, and sort of kidnap it. Get it, sweet stuff?"

Like a woman, she ignored everything but the one thing. Seriously she repeated, "Sweet stuff. Sweet stuff."

Thor laughed, "That's you." He touched her with his finger. She shook her head vigorously, making the yellow hair fly out fanwise.

"Karola, Karola," she said insistently.

"Karola. Okay. I'm Thor."

The violet eyes were sliding over him, taking in his big frame and long legs. Thor flushed a little, reading the frank admiration in her eyes. Felling logs and playing an all-Conference grade of tackle on the football team had built up an already good physique. But the years of

logging and football and fighting had left little time for women. And Karola was a woman among women.

She laughed at him, and said something.

"We'd better take a look around," he said, carefully looking over her golden head.

HE WAS staring at grey rock as he spoke. Above it a shape took form out of empty air. It was a man, standing and staring at them. It was as though he had slid sideways out of another dimension. The man watched them with unblinking eyes. He fumbled at a red jewel that hung on a chain at his chest.

An instant later, the man was gone.

"A swell place this is, where a man appears and disappears right in front of you," he said disgustedly. "If they can come and go when and where they please, what chance have we?"

Riotous ideas of invisible men swarming about him and overcoming him capered through his brain. Unconsciously he tensed, preparing for trouble. But nothing happened. Slowly he relaxed.

"Guess they aren't coming at us, after all. He was just a look-out."

The girl was talking that queerly jewel-talk of hers.

He cut in with, "Sweet stuff, you and I are going to understand each other if we're staying together. And since I like the idea of having you around—and since I've a hunch we'll never get back to where we came from, we might as well begin right now."

Thor pointed to things and sang out his words for them. The girl listened, head to one side, nodding. She repeated after him, syllable after syllable. They wandered across the grey rock, the man bulking big alongside the woman. Thor knew it would take time, but the girl was eager. Her violet eyes flickered swiftly after his pointing finger and her mouth readily formed the words.

Suddenly Karola gasped and caught his arm with a hand that dug long nails into his flesh. "Slag!" she cried, and flung up a white arm.

Thor saw the house tilted across lava-like rocks. It looked distorted without the elms around it, and the background of grey stone university buildings. The man-

sard roof was buckled in spots as though under the sledge of a mad giant. Windows gapped without panes of glass, and rungs in split porch railings stuck up like broken teeth. But the dwarf-man leaping from the open doorway was what brought him to his feet.

The girl jabbered in alarm, but Thor grinned and waited. Not for nothing had he been born and raised in a lumber camp. He had fought men with fists and axe-handles. The club was just another axe-handle to him, a little heavier and metal-shod, but as easily eluded.

The dwarf-man halted and looked at them. He called out to the girl. Thor saw that his words calmed her, even as she showed surprise.

The dwarf-man threw the club away and knelt.

Karola frowned and tossed her long yellow hair back over her head. Thor saw she was struggling for words, that she wanted to tell him good news. He fancied that the dwarf-man was trying to make friends.

"That's all right with me," he chuckled, and went and held out his hand. After a moment of scrutiny, the dwarf-man took it.

"Slag," said Karola, touching the dwarf.

Thor studied him, seeing tremendous shoulders and, hanging from them, long arms that were heavy with red hair. Matted red locks fell to either side of bright blue eyes in a grotesquely ugly face where big nose and broad lips gave him the look of a cheery gnome. A leathern girdle was twisted around his waist. Short legs, thick with muscles, were slightly bowed.

"I'm Thor, Slag. We'll get along, you and I. But no more fighting with Karola."

The dwarf-man grunted and slapped his stomach. His gesture reminded Thor that he was hungry himself.

They walked over the barren rock. In the distance Thor could see where the stone fell away and the earth began. He began to trot. Those red grasses might lure animals to feed. And thinking of steaks cooked over an outdoors fire brought saliva to his lips.

For three hours they stalked through the red grass. And then, around a black outcropping of basalt, Thor sighted two small deer.

Slag started to run, but Thor caught him by the arm.

"The club, man. Give it to me."

Reluctantly, Slag loosened his grip. Thor glanced at the club, hefting it. It was heavy, but balanced perfectly. Often, in the Oregon camps, Thor had thrown axes at a mark, axes less perfectly balanced than this club.

He took off his shoes. In socked feet he crept nearer the deer. Thor was glad the wind was blowing away from the animals and into his face. Otherwise . . .

The club swung easily in his hand. He moved it faster, around and up. Then he flung it, shoulder and body behind the toss. Sunlight glinted from the red metal embedded in the clubhead.

The club thudded home on the temple of the nearer deer. The animal went over sidewise and lay still.

Slag gave a great cry of amazement. Looking down at them from his black pedestal, Thor felt a kinship toward the dwarf. He liked him. It had never entered Slag's head to throw his club. The blue eyes worshipped Thor, looking up at him. They made him feel good.

And the violet eyes. Thor looked down into them and liked what he saw. His hands felt the need of losing themselves in that thick tawny hair that flooded the girl's white shoulders. And that red mouth that spilled the jewel-sounds so easily was ripe for kisses.

Slag ran ahead toward the deer, but Karola waited for him as he leaped from the basalt rock. Her hand nestled in his, and her violet eyes flirted with him. Thor grinned and stepped along beside her toward his kill. What did it matter if he was somewhere undreamed of? What matter that they were worlds apart? He was a man with a woman, a man who had killed his first food. His chest rose with added power, and the muscles tingled in legs and arms.

Slag tore the deer apart with powerful hands, and Thor roasted the sweet flesh over a fire of dried twigs. As they ate, the giant sun sank low on the distant horizon. Strange stars came to life in an azure sky, twinkling and throbbing. They were queerly distorted, Thor noticed. In his astronomy classes, he had picked up a smattering of star clusters and formations,

but these he saw now, from the little hill where the fire flared, were peculiarly distorted.

"Almost as though I were looking at them through rippled glass," he said.

Under the shadow of a scooped-out rock, they slept, huddled together for warmth.

FOR MANY DAYS the three wandered across the red grasslands of the strange planet. Always they found an unbroken strata of rock crust interlayered with lush lawnland. Occasionally a herd of tiny deer swept by, and from these they made their meals.

Thor grew hard and tanned with the wild life. The muscles that had seen him through lumber camp and football field waxed even stronger. His clothes wore to thinness, and shredded in places. Slowly he learned the jewel-language, and in turn Karola grew familiar with his tongue.

He taught Slag to hurl his club, and wrestled with him when he felt the need of violent exercise. The dwarf-man worshipped him, but he entered into their games with feigned rage.

Karola told him something of her past. She was priestess of Klogor on a small planet that swung around a sun invisible from Earth. Her temple had been raided by the dwarf-men, and as she and Slag struggled before an altar, something had come and snatched them up, and whirled them around and around.

"Klogor is our god," said the girl. "I called on him, but he did not hear. I was bred into his service, but he failed me in my need."

Slag rumbled, "This is my god," and shook his big club.

"You may need it," said Thor dryly. "Look!"

They were sitting on the edge of a rock, baking in the hot sun. Below them spread the red meadows, rolling in even swells across a valley toward jagged rocks that rose high into the pale sky. In the middle of the meadow, ankle-high in the grass, three men were standing.

Karola gasped, "They were not there a moment ago."

"The invisible men," commented Thor dryly, getting to his feet. "They come and they go, and you can't see them do either."

Slag lifted his club, rumbling in his throat.

The men walked toward them slowly. They called out words. Fanning into an arc, they came on. Now their hands fell to their sides and they lifted long swords that dangled from the leather harness around their middles.

Karola pulled her long legs up under the remnants of the gauze trousers. Thor lifted her beside him with a hand. Side by side they stood, awaiting the men.

"They have swords and we only have your club, Slag," said Thor. "We want to work this together. Take the man at the left. I'll tackle him, going for his sword, while you clout him. In that way, we'll each have a weapon."

"And me?" asked Karola. "I can handle a blade. Priestesses of Klogor are taught to defend themselves."

"We'll see. They're coming head-on for us. Careful, Slag. Go for your man when I say the word."

His muscles tightened in his legs. This was like a football game, in a way. The man with the sword was a ball carrier. Thor wanted that sword more than he had ever wanted a football. He shifted his feet, balancing himself.

"Now!"

They went off the rock together, dwarf and man.

Slag brought his club around in a vicious arc. Thor slid under it, going for the arm. His fingers tightened on a wrist even as the club crunched home. The sword came free. He grabbed at it. With his hip he hit the man and drove him sideways into his companions.

Thor landed on his knees, the hilt of the blade in his right fist. He looked around him, hearing Slag yell with superstitious fright.

Karola screamed from the rock, "They've disappeared!"

The meadows held only Slag and himself. Thor shook his head, and looked at the grasses. Even against the red, there should be bloodstains visible. But the blood had gone where the men had gone.

"They don't even bleed," he said. "You sure you hit that guy, Slag?"

"Slag hit him!"

"I don't understand it. They come and go unseen. They must come from some-

where. They must have dwelling places."

He lifted a long brown arm, thickly muscled. With it, he swept the red grasslands, the grey rocks, the sky with its gigantic orb of sun. For many days they had trod this world, and always found it as they saw it now. Empty and barren, like a newborn planet.

Karola ran to catch them, and then the three walked on and on, into the sunset.

EIGHT days later, they found the Discoverer. At first Thor thought him another rock, so almost perfectly did his queer markings and sprawling, bloblike form match the stone. And then when he moved, in a peculiar, pouring sort of slide, and the electric tingles marched up and down his spine, Thor knew he was alive.

"Hallo," called Thor.

The blotched thing swung about. There were no eyes to be seen in its immense shape, but Thor knew he was being surveyed, and closely.

"You are an Earthman," ran a thought in his mind. "The woman and the man are Klogorons,"

Thor said eagerly, "You know that? Then you must also know where we are—how we came here?"

"I know, yes."

"And those men that come and go? And why we see no cities, no habitations where they live? Do you know that too?"

"The Discoverer knows everything. I am the Discoverer. I live everywhere and nowhere. Or at least I did until the madness that is this queer space lapped out at me and brought me here, just as it did you.

"To understand, you must think of the universe that you know as a big, big bubble. It is stable and steady. It has its star clusters with their space velocities and planetary orbits. Inside the big bubble everything is orderly—except one thing.

"That one thing is a very tiny bubble. A sort of cancer, you might say. It obeys no laws. Its very space coordinates and vectors are different than ours. It is fluid—always in motion. Its space segments are so alien that they can reach right through ordinary space, annihilating distance, and seize upon objects."

"But that's nonsensical," protested Thor.

The Discoverer thought-beamed, "I said it is not space as we know space. Let me

put it this way: the magnet can draw metal to it without touching the metal. So this space-cancer can attract objects by reaching out for them, drawing them toward it—through a sort of purplish mist—by some power of magnetic attraction.”

Thor made a sound as if he understood, and the Discoverer went on, “The segment of the rebel-universe came through the true universe, and touched you—”

“Touched my house on the Midwesttrn campus.”

“Yes. It drew you within itself—”

“But Karola and Slag! They came out of the air right in the middle of my living room.”

“They were in the magnetic pull, too. And where their space and this space met, was the middle of your living room.”

Thor looked at Karola, whose forehead was wrinkled in tiny furrows as she followed the thoughts of the Discoverer. Slag was off to the right, chasing a fat rabbit bounding ahead of him in terror.

The Discoverer went on, “I sought entrance to this world many eons ago. It was one of the few spots in space I had never visited. Again and again I sought to enter, but its strangely twisted space-time continuum proved too much. Always I failed.

“And then, when I was visiting—I am almost all brain and it is a habit of mine to roam a bit—I was visiting a planet of what you call the Magellanic Cluster when everything went blank and I found myself tugged through the purple space and landed here, stretched across a rock.”

Thor said, “You claim you can roam, mentally. Away from your body, that is,”

“Your world would call it astral projection, in which the spirit levitates from the body and crosses distance. The high-energy potential of the mind is used to dissociate the ethereal self, with which I include the mental self, from the matter of the body.”

Thor grunted dubiously, but the Discoverer went on, “I was engaged in astral projection to the Magellanic Cluster when this space lapped at my body that rested in the ruins of ancient Flormaseron. It is a form of magnetic current that did the trick. Not ordinary magnetism, but a current of it.”

Thor thought of the Ehrenhaft experi-

ments and nodded. He said, “And what of this world where we are? We saw some men—”

“Not men. Androids. They are semi-human, invested by Aava with a synthetic life force.”

“Aava?”

“Aava is the Green Flame. He rules this land. He is like nothing I have ever seen. He can create, to an extent. He can destroy. He has made androids to serve him, but he is limited in materials on this planet. It is mostly rock and sand. If he had enough material, he could make millions of the androids. As it is, he can, and has made only thousands.”

Thor said abruptly, “Can we get back to Earth and to Klogor?”

“Defeat Aava, learn the secret of this universe and destroy it, and you may return.”

“Aava. You called him the Green Flame. Where can I find him?”

Thor caught a flicker of humor in the thoughts that flooded his brain. “Would you see Aava? I will show him to you. Lie down, on your back. So. I warn you, control your thoughts. If Aava suspects he is watched, you are doomed.”

Karola pressed his arm against her warm side. Her violet eyes glared in fear out of the white, lovely face. Her scarlet mouth begged, “Do not do it, Thor. I beg you. I am afraid.”

“There is nothing to fear. The Discoverer sounds as if he knows what he’s doing. And you *do* want to go back to Klogor, don’t you?”

The girl flushed so that a delicate pale rose flooded her neck and cheeks. Her violet eyes were brilliant as her torrent of gold hair seemed to gather new brightness from the sun,

“I am not sure. It is a nice life, this roaming in open air, across great prairies.”

Thor held her hand. “You wait. I’ll be back.”

He lay down. His last recollection was the feel of Karola’s long nails pressing the flesh of his hand . . .

THOR hung bodiless in blackness. He was aware with all the five senses of him, that life teemed about and all around the blackness, that something walked and spoke and moved. Thor struggled until a

dull pain pounded and throbbed all through his being.

"Patient. Be patient," counseled a gentle voice.

"Are you the Discoverer?"

"I am he. It would be too dangerous to let you take your first mental flight alone. Besides, your brain has not the electrical potential sufficient to let you make progress. Hush, now. Listen!"

There were voices, deep and thunderous in a rolling wave of sound. Dim and faint at first, the paean swelled and pulsed. And as the sound grew, so came the light—at first in tiny ripples of greyness that shimmered and fled—then a refulgent glory in broad bands,

He hung above the broad walls and ramparts of a queer city, whose domes and minarets were queerly bent and twisted. The broad avenues and narrow alleys were bare. It was a dead city.

"Not a dead city. Listen!"

The song was louder, richer.

"Lower yourself. Think yourself down."

Thor found himself sweeping in a gentle arc closer and closer to the towers and temple domes. Now the song was crashing out in ponderous triumph.

"Go through the golden dome. You can do it."

Yellow metal shone and glimmered as he dropped gently through opalescent hues of gold and amber and yellow. It was like thick water, with faint bubbles glistening, locked within. He broke free and hung in the groined ceiling above a great chamber.

Hundreds of the androids with the glittering jewels on their chests stood arm to arm. Their rich voices boomed tribute toward a niche cut in the north wall, arched and wide, that held a squat black urn resting on a white alabaster pedestal.

"The song is nearly done. Watch the urn."

All sound and movement died away.

A tongue of green fire stabbed upwards out of the black urn. For one long instant it hung there, quivering and pulsing. It broke and faded into green mist that the breezes blew out across the chamber.

"That was the manifestation of Aava. Now we will see him as he really is."

They swept through the air with the

speed of light. Matter that was wall and stone and metal blurred into a liquescent dimness that darkened the further they went. From grey to black to grim jet went the colors. And still they went on. Now the colour grew light tan, like sand.

"We are in the bowels of the Mountains of Distortion. The blackness is rock hidden forever from a glimpse of sunlight. We are nearly there. Go cautiously! This buried desert is right above him."

It was a cave. From the high rock ceiling stalactites drooped like the fringes of a weeping willow eternally etched in stone. Amid a riotous profusion of clubshaped stalagmites thrusting up from the rough cave floor, lay a circle of red space.

And in the red space stood Aava.

Green light, flickering and flaring, now subdued, now pouring forth in a verdant shower of pride and strength, flooded the cave. Thor could feel its sentience through every beat and pulse of it. Like the tongue of some mighty star trapped in matter, it licked and thrust and strove to speak its greatness.

The green fire lowered, hung brooding.

"I smell men."

"Careful," thought the Discoverer.

Thor moved no muscle, took no breath in his spirit form. Yet the machinations of his mind slipped a cog. He thought, and the green flames knew.

A sword of flame lunged outward, at him. He felt its heat, the wild life of it, the pride and all the cruelty.

He tried to cry out. Then his mind went. The last he knew was the voice of the Discoverer.

"Come!"

THOR gasped lungfuls of sweet, cool air, staring up at the sun in the blue sky. Yellow hair splashed on his face and chest as Karola wept and whimpered. Wonderingly, Thor put a big hand to his face. It was beaded with damp sweat.

The Discoverer beamed a thought at him.

"That was a near thing, man of Earth. Had I not kept constant control of your mind, Aava would have had you."

"What—what is he? That green fire is alive. I could feel it. I knew its emotions."

"Aava is alive. He has been alive for

eons piled upon eons. His beginning I know not. Whether he will have an end—I also know not.”

Thor shuddered.

The Discoverer went on, “Destroy Aava, and destroy his universe, and you may return to your own. But how can you destroy Aava when even I, the Discoverer, must admit failure?”

Thor shook his head. Destroy that flame? It was impossible.

When he looked up, the Discoverer was oozing a path into the distance and Karola was hugging herself to him. Thor put an arm around her, smiling grimly into her frightened eyes.

“We’re in it, baby. All the way. Lost in some mad corner of space that nobody can get in or out of. Trapped. And me with an education to catch up on. Although,” he grinned, looking at her thick yellow hair and large red mouth, “I’m not feeling any too scholarly at the moment. Yeah, I guess it could be worse. I guess it could.”

Slag came toward them with three rabbits dangling from his right hand. He knelt and began to make a fire. Thor and Karola watched him until the roasting flesh scents reached their nostrils.

Thor laughed, “Hell. I’m just hungry. After a good meal, I’ll feel better about it all.”

But that meal was never finished.

The androids came in the middle of the second rabbit. One moment there was only the stars and the rolling meadowland, and the red flames making shadows on the grass and on their arms and legs. The next they were falling out of thin air, all over them, fists hitting at Slag and Thor, hands reaching out for, and lifting, a screaming, clawing Karola.

“Thor! Thor!” she cried.

Thor heaved up from under three androids. His muscles rended with the strain, but he threw them from him. His fists lashed out and thudded into rib and jaw. He clove a path through living men, dropping them with chops and uppercuts.

Karola stood writhing in the grasp of three giants. Their hands were wrapped about her wrists, and their free hands fumbled at the jewels that hung about their necks.

Thor flung an android from him;

whirled to his left, avoiding a sword thrust, hitting down with the edge of his hand against the android’s neck even as he turned. His knees slid under another’s knife and splintered his ribs. He heard Slag’s club crunching home to his left, but all he could see was Karola with the firelight playing across legs and midriff.

“Thor! Thor! It’s dark, Thor! I’m frightened!”

Her scream sent cold horror into his spine. Her white feet were almost in the fire. How could it be dark to her? Unless these fiends who came and went were blinding her—

Thor roared.

He lowered his head and charged, as some Viking ancestor might have charged a longboat’s deck. His fists hammered and clubbed. He blasted a path through cursing, sobbing men.

Karola was in front of him.

He reached out for her.

Karola disappeared.

Thor felt his hands sink through empty space where Karola should have been; where she was standing, one instant before. On spraddled legs he stood, naked chest gulping in cool air, staring at the darkness.

“Karola!” he cried.

The androids were all fading. Thor dimly understood that it was Karola they had been after, seeing them drop into nothingness, one after the other. The fire flared brighter. In its red beams, one still sat, fumbling a little dazedly at the jewel on his chest. Thor knew his own thoughts were fumbling, just as the other’s fingers were. Karola was gone. The androids were going, only one was left. There was no way to follow.

The firelight hung in the ruby jewel for one bursting moment, like red blood bursting. Red jewel. Fumbling fingers clawing at it. Three androids with Karola also clawing at their jewels. And Karola disappearing—

Thor leaped.

His big right hand stabbed for the ruby. He closed his fingers on it and tugged. The chain resisted, and then the android came awake to what Thor wanted and pounded at him. Thor lowered his head and chin until his jaw rested against his chest and hunched his shoulders. He rode

the buffets, swaying as he did in the ring.

Tug, tug. Tug and tear with that right hand, his mind kept telling him.

Get that jewel!

It broke and came loose in his hand. The android screamed, reaching out. Slag came over the fire with a tremendous bound and his club swung. It caved in the android's head and toppled him forward into the fire.

Thor stared at the dying green fire that spilled from the android's head. That was a part of Aava, that fire. It was the life force.

He looked at the jewel throbbing soft red fire in his palm. He grinned.

II

THE RUBY WAS THE SIZE OF A small egg. It was cut and polished until its burnished sides threatened to obscure the inner fires with their glimmerings. But deep inside the jewel was a core of flame that would never be extinguished. That flame looked purple.

Thor wondered. Purple heart of red ruby. Suppose Aava had imprisoned a jot of his immortal fire inside the ruby, as he had with the androids!

He turned it over. There was a rocking instant of vertigo, of pitch blackness and cold.

The meadowlands were gone. He was standing on a rocky escarpment that brooded over a small valley. And set in the middle of the valley, like a vision from an Arabic nightmare, was a city of elfin loveliness. Towers pointed slender spires to the sky, and hemispheric domes glowed softly in pale moonlight.

"The City of Aava," murmured Thor. "This is the place they sang the song to the urn, the city the Discoverer showed me."

His fingers tightened on the ruby. He turned it carefully.

He was back with Slag.

The dwarf-man was whining, and looking around him like a scared dog until he saw Thor looming massive in the fire-flames. He grinned and came close, shaking his club.

"You go where Karola went? Where the men come from?"

"Yes. It's a different world, Slag, but

the same. I've a feeling this ruby with the green fire in it is some sort of passport, or key, that unlocks the path into Aava's realm. It's a physical manifestation of a geometry Euclid never got around to. Dimensional worlds."

Slag grunted. "We go after her?"

"Take hold of the ruby. That's it."

Their hands held the warm jewel. Slowly they turned it. Darkness and coldness, and dizziness, and Slag and Thor found rock under their feet, and a white moon high above them.

Thor hunted for and found a narrow path of rock that twisted from the escarpment and curved downwards toward the valley. He called to Slag and they trotted Indian fashion along it.

The walls of the elfin city loomed gigantic as they crossed the sandy plain that stretched for miles in front of it. Cyclopean stones were fitted one on another until they spread up and up, seemingly toward the stars themselves. Thor felt like a midge about to attack a mastodon.

His feet kicked endless grains of dust walking along that massive barrier. Mile after mile they trudged, and found no gates.

Slag said, "How get in?"

Thor put a hand in his frayed pocket and drew out the warm ruby. He said, "This must be the only key. We haven't found any door yet."

They put hands on the jewel and moved it. They went forward over the red grasslands for a hundred feet. Thor said. "This ought to be just about right." Once more they turned the jewel, and experienced the dark, the coldness, and the vertigo.

Cobblestones underfoot, and smooth rock walls lining the streets as they crept forward. It was a dead city lying under the white moon, stark in its emptiness, sorrowful in its brooding strength. The windows were dark, the doorways shadowed.

Once Thor and Slag heard footsteps, but they came from a great distance, and soon faded into the eternal silence.

Ahead of them loomed the temple with the golden dome, where the paean to Aava had thundered forth, where the urn that held the green flame stood on its white pedestal.

"They will have taken Karola there,

to Aava," whispered Thor. "That is where we must go. To the temple of the green flame."

A massive knob of bronze, covered with greenish rot and carved with the emblem of Aava-in-the-urn, screeched as Thor turned it. The thick oaken door swung wide. Pale radiance bathed the arched columns that trod the mosaic floor of the vast chamber. At the far end of the room, the black urn stood empty and black.

Thor ran across the vast chamber, his footfalls sounding loud and lonely. He stepped to the white pedestal and peered within the black urn. Green flakes and crystal chips encrusted the bowled bottom of the urn.

He slipped a torn handkerchief from his pocket, and with the buckle of his belt, loosened some of the crystal chips.

"I don't know whether I can ever analyze these," he said to Slag, "but I'll take them along, anyhow."

Slag stood at one of the tall, arched windows, red head gleaming in the sun. He was making guttural noises in his throat, and he kept lifting and dropping his big warclub. Thor stepped to his side and looked into the streets.

Men were walking stealthily along the cobblestones.

THOR blinked and rubbed his eyes. He was staring down at men clad in chain-mail armour, men in fur skins, men in suits of the same cut as he wore. There was a huge creature that Thor would have sworn was an ape, except for the two tusks depending from its lips, and its erect, intelligent bearing. There was a four-legged being, and something that had two heads. There was—

"They are men, Slag. Real men. Not androids!"

He felt a warm delight in him, a welling of friendliness inspired by the weeks of wandering on the red, lonely grasslands. He lifted an arm and opened his lips to shout. A mental censor made him close his mouth. It would be better to wait, to see what manner of men these were who stalked the empty streets of a deserted city, before showing himself.

Thor vaulted over the stone sill, calling to Slag to follow. Side by side they crept after the group.

They went deeper into the heart of the city. By twisted alleys the stalkers went, and their furtive tread and cautious glances told Thor that they were in hostile territory. Where a building cast gloomy shadows, he ran nearer, until he could distinguish voices.

To his amazement, some of the beings spoke English. He could catch fragments of words, of phrases. Mixed with his own language were terms of the jewel-speech of Klogor. And there were other tongues, too, languages that were like the cacklings of monkeys or the shrill treble of singing birds. They were mingled together, as through the ages of common living had created a new tongue that was all of none, yet something of each.

Thor whispered to Slag, "They are after women."

"So are we. Karola."

"Yes. I wonder now—"

He stood out from the shadows and called, "I am an American."

A man in tweed suit that hung in tatters from bulky shoulders whirled and stared. His hair was pale blond, and his eyes were icy blue. Thor didn't need his, "Jove, you are!" to tell he was from England.

"Thor Masterson," he said, putting out a hand.

The Englishman chuckled, "Peter Gordon. I'm a gentleman farmer—or was, you know—from Devon. When did you get into this place?"

"A few weeks ago. How long've you been here?"

"Seven years, near as I can make it. How—how are things back—back there?"

Thor told him. Gordon opened wide eyes at news of the war. He shook his head, smiling, "It seems so far away, when you've lived here for a while. It's as though you knew no other life, Jove! War. Well, we fight a war here all the time. With the Black Priest. He and his men raid our little settlements. For women, you know. Have to raid back, naturally. Got to have women to breed kids to fight the Flame."

Gordon led Thor forward toward a group of three. One was the white-haired ape. When Thor looked into his eyes, he saw keen intelligence blazing out of black eyes. Another was a lavender-tinted man clad in broad leathern belt and kilt of dark maroon. He was from a planet named

Zarathza. The third man was a giant in a black fur mantle, who carried a spear that looked like a small Oregon pine.

"We must attack that low-walled building over there," said the Zarathzan, whose name was Tor Kan. "They keep the women in there. We don't have many weapons, as you can see. We'll lose a lot of men."

Thor thought of the robots he had fought. They didn't seem like such brilliant warriors. He said so.

The giant in the black fur grunted, "A frontal attack is always costly, even if you fought against women."

"Why attack frontally? Create a diversion, with a false attack. Then slip through the walls—"

"Through the walls? You sound like a bally ghost," smiled Gordon.

Thor lifted the ruby from his pocket and showed it to them. Their eyes bulged in awe, looking at it. "A gatestone!" whispered the Zarathzan, licking his lips. "With that we could go anywhere."

The white ape, whom Thor later learned was from Fomalhaut's fifth planet and called Yorg, drew back his lips from his big fangs. He rumbled, "Let the American hie himself and his red dwarf through the walls with a few of us. Others will storm the gates of the compound. The American can open the gates when he is inside. If," he added wistfully, "he could get us a few of the robots' weapons—"

Thor grinned, "Come on, Yorg. You and Slag and I will turn ourselves into an ordnance crew. We'll get the weapons."

They joined hands and turned the ruby.

The red grasslands were back, blowing in the breeze. The three ran swiftly forward. Yorg, who knew the compound almost as he did his own settlement, called to them to halt.

"Now turn the gatestone."

When the blackness of the dimensional barrier faded, Thor found himself in a room that was formed by a circle of grey stones. From wooden racks inset in the stone hung swords and spears, tall bows and metal-tipped arrows.

Yorg whispered, "There is almost no metal on this planet. That partially accounts for the reason that we fight with bows and arrows. To make weapons that are any more powerful you need steel and

other iron alloys. And besides, I often think that Aava only trusts his androids as far as he can see them.

"The magnetic current of the planet that drags men and women and anything it touches onto its surface must at some time or other have taken potent weapons. But if there are any, only Aava knows where they are hidden. Then too, you need intelligence to use complicated weapons. The androids possess only a pseudo-intellect."

Trip after trip the trio made, their heavily muscled arms laden with every weapon in the arsenal. Once Yorg said grimly, "If ever we had a gatestone in our possession before, things would be different today." He looked at Thor and added, "The man who owns a gatestone could rule the settlements."

"I don't want to rule anything," growled Thor. "I just want to find my woman—and have another go at Aava."

YORG had been slashing air with a sword, testing its balance. Now he lowered the point and popped black eyes at Thor, in amazement. "Another go? Have you seen Aava? And you live?"

As they carted the weapons back across the grasslands, Thor told him of his experience with the Discoverer. York listened in silence, then dropped a gigantic paw to his naked shoulder.

"Forget Aava," he counselled. "Aava is too powerful. Nothing can defeat him."

"I'm a funny guy," replied Thor. "The longer the odds, the better I fight. It's a sort of tradition in my country. The Alamo. Custer and his last stand. Bataan. Wake Island. Yeah, I'd like another try at Aava. Some of these days, I'll get around to it."

Tor Kan crooned in his throat when he fitted his palm around the hilt of a sword. Morlon, the giant in the black fur pulled his lips back from white teeth in delight as he hefted a huge bow. Peter Gordon twanged a bowstring, with, "I used to do a bit of archery in Devon. For fun, you know. I haven't forgotten how to feather a shaft."

In the shadows, the other weapons were handed out to eager hands while throats whined in battle lust.

They turned to Thor then, and stood waiting. He drew a deep breath.

"The best archers among you, do you know them? Good. You're the artillery. You stand in the shadows and shoot at any who show themselves on that wall. You others—swordsmen and spearmen—follow Tor Kan and Yorg. They'll charge for the gates. Slag and I will get inside the compound walls and open them for you.

"Listen, all of you. Listen well.

"I don't know whether any of us will ever go back to what we used to call home. Maybe there isn't any need for that. We have a world all our own, now. We can make it what we will.

"But we have to defeat Aava. Don't flinch at his name. He has you licked already if you do that. By fighting his robots, you're fighting him. They're his arms and legs. Take them away and Aava isn't anything!"

Their voices growled angry reassurances in the shadows. Weapons glinted as they were swung, shimmery in the moonrays.

"Come, Slag."

The purple light deep inside the ruby seemed to flare in mad anger as Thor held the jewel in his palm, looking down at it. Turn it slowly, turn it gently. Go into the darkness and the nothingness, to—

Thor stood inside the walls. Ahead of him was the great gate with rusted bolt, looming in the white walls like a gap between bright teeth. He leaped for the bolt and wrenched at it.

Slag came to help him. Between them they broke the rust of years, watching reddish flakes fly as the barrel-bolt turned in its groove.

An arrow plunked into the wooden door, an inch from Thor's brown hair where it hung to his big shoulders. He whirled and deflected its fellow with his sword as Slag threw wide the gates.

A horde of furred and savage fighters came roaring into the compound, swords and warclubs in their hands. Thor saw the androids swarming from the far side of the enclosure, racing to meet the invaders. Yorg grasped his arm and swung him around.

"The women," he gasped. "Hurry! We won't have much time. Those androids can only be stopped by smashing the machinery inside their skulls."

Thor ran with the white ape across the

hard flooring of the pavilion. He could hear the screams and excited cries of women beyond the inner battlements.

He hit the lock a blow that crumpled the cup-guard of his blade, but the lock broke. Yorg threw open the doors.

"Come! All you women, come!"

Thor pressed against the open gate, staring at women in rags, women naked, women in torn silks and satins. There were red heads, and brunettes, and girls with hair the color of old amber. Some were lovely, some ugly, some were furred like Yorg. They ran silently, scenting freedom.

Thor was a tall man. Standing, he looked over those tossing heads, seeking Karola. He saw her in the press, clothes almost ripped entirely away. He bellowed and shook his battered sword above his head.

He clove a path to her, swung her up on his hip, and ran.

She whimpered, "It is glorious, but useless—*look!*"

Thor stared toward a balcony four feet above the sunbaked floor of the compound. A giant of an android, with bristling black beard matting his red face was gesturing to three others who were bent and straining at something between them.

When they moved, Thor saw it was the black urn.

"It is Aava," Karola whispered hoarsely. "The women told me of him. And that is the Black Priest, the one they call Malgrim. He will move the urn to face us. Aava will kill all, even his own men. What are men to Aava?"

A scream of fear and fury tore from the throats of the fighters. Shrilling above it was the frightened cry of the women.

Yorg was bellowing, "The gates! Fly! Save yourselves, if you can."

It was too late. The urn was turning in the hands of the androids.

THE Black Priest cried in a strangely sweet voice for such a man, "Foolish rebels! For the last time you have dared defy the power of all-consuming Aava. This time you die! Swing the urn. Let the outlaws taste the green kiss of mighty Aava, that he may take them with him to the land of nevermore!"

The black orifice of the urn was becoming rounder as it tilted down. Deep in the rounded bowl, green fire shimmered.

Thor went forward, swinging his sword. It was not as good as an axe, but it would do. He flung it straight for the broad chest of the Black Priest, and followed it.

He saw the blade go deep into the man, saw him stagger backwards, bellowing his rage. Then Thor was reaching for the top rail of the balcony, leaping, his legs like springs beneath him.

Thor caught the top rail and used it as the pole vaulter uses his pole. His wrists turned and his hips twisted. He went up over the bar.

His feet hit the urn, with two hundred pounds of muscles and desperation behind it.

The urn tilted back.

The androids screamed as the green flame leaped outward. For one instant they hung there, as though in green mist. Their open mouths and bulging eyes were straining to escape what they tasted and saw. It was no use.

Thor knew the androids were dissolving even as he brought his left fist up to the Black Priest's jaw. The man went back, heels dragging on the balcony floor. He lay where he had fallen, motionless.

Thor went and stared into the urn. The green flame was dead, now, just glittering green stuff, like crystallized moss.

Yorg called, "Hurry, Thor Masterson. We have broken them but Aava will send more."

He swung from the balcony, a frown furrowing his forehead. There was something about that green flame—

Karola was waiting for him. She slipped her hand in his and tugged. "We mustn't stay here, Thor. You heard what Yorg said."

Thor stepped over fallen androids, with arrows and lances jutting from mouth and eye-sockets, with crushed and split-open skulls.

Thor stood in the arch of the gates and stared back at the balcony where the black urn lay tilted. That green stuff! His head was churning, trying to catch the elusive thought that dipped and darted out of reach of his mental hands. He shook his head.

"There's something about Aava—"

"Thor, please. There isn't time. Yorg says at any moment Aava will send androids to surround us. They will fetch other urns. We will die."

He snapped awake to the knowledge that he was walking with a frightened Karola behind the others, that ahead of him the women and the men were running. They had gone through the gates and were spreading out over the streets and alleys of the cyclopean city.

"Yorg! Tor Kan! Gordon!"

The Englishman heard him, came to him through the press, his longbow strung with a ready arrow.

"Jolly brush, what? Found I haven't lost my eye for a target. Got thirty of the blighters, myself."

Thor said, "We'll never escape Aava in his city. There's only one chance. We have to use the gatestone, and scatter. Can you get the others?"

Peter threw back his head and sent a shrill cry ululating across the streets. The men and women paused, looking back over their shoulders. Gordon waved an arm. Fearfully, the listeners began to return.

Thor lifted out the ruby, told the others to grasp it, as many as possible. He said, "Once we get into that other world, it will be easy for us to lose ourselves. Aava and his Black Priest do not know we possess a gatestone. They will search for us here in the city. While they hunt here, we will be far away."

Kor Tan rumbled, "Good. We will find our way as close as possible to our settlements. Then you, Thor Masterson, will find us with that ruby."

Hands stretched out. The ruby turned.

IT DID NOT take long. A ruby will turn swiftly in a steady hand, making many trips with people eager to be saved from the green blast of Aava. There were some who had not heard Peter Gordon call, and they stayed behind in the city. But the great majority of them were taken through the dimensional door by the red ruby, and set down on waving grasslands and bleak rocks.

With the red grasses brushing his ankles, Thor said, "We cannot search for the others. Aava will have his androids in the streets. Scatter now. Make your way toward the settlement. Gordon, will you come with us? I don't know my way to the settlement of yours."

"Glad to, Masterson."

Slag, Karola, Thor and the Englishman

watched the others walk swiftly to the four corners of the horizon.

Gordon said, "We'd better take the most roundabout way I can think of. It will take us longer, but it will be safer. You have the gatestone. No one must get you."

They travelled swiftly and lightly for four days. Peter Gordon brought down juicy rabbits with his arrows for food, and taught Slag to use his weapon. With the wild man's aptitude for arms, the red dwarf was swift to learn.

On the morning of the fifth day, Thor Masterson went ahead of the others to scout. He strode up over massive rocks, to reach the summit of a small hill from which to look into the next valley.

When he reached the top, he halted in amazement.

A SHIP rested on black rock, tilted over. On the rotted white sail, there was the remnants of a dragon's head worked in red. From the prow, with its upreared serpent's neck and gaping jaws and forked tongue, to the stern where a broken rudder lay across the rock, it was every inch a Viking ship. A few shields still hung on the wooden sides. The mast, splintered, stood at a dangerous angle from the sloping deck.

Thor went up the rudder-stick and clambered over the side.

A skeleton lay near the helm, a vest of rusted-through chain-mail pooled on the white bones. A little in front of what had been a hand, lay a great axe.

Thor grinned, seeing that axe. He reached for the ivory haft, lifted and swung it around his head.

He staggered.

The pain was unbearable, there in his side. He reached down, felt in his pocket. His fingers closed on the ruby.

With a curse, he flung the jewel from him. His palm still stung from its icy coldness. The ruby hit the deck and bounded across the ancient planks. It rolled to a stop near a shield.

Thor stared at it.

The ruby was changing, right there in front of him. It pulsed and throbbed with the light inside it. Its red hues gave way to deep, royal purple; an angry purple.

Thor went nearer. He could see the beat and heave of the Green Flame, trapped in

the crystallized alumina. It waxed and surged, as though battering against its jeweled walls.

"Aava!" he whispered. —

"Of course, Aava. Did you think I put parts of my immortal self in these bits of stuff to pass the time? They are myself; I, them. It is my method of keeping watch on all my planet. I am with every android who carries a gatestone, if I so will."

Thor lifted the axe; he looked from it to the ruby, at the greenish fire flaring within it.

"No use," Aava thought-waved at him. "You cannot harm me, just as I cannot harm you—in this form. I have been searching for you. You invaded the Cave of Life with the Discoverer. You stole a gatestone. You raided my arsenal and woman-stockade. You assaulted the Black Priest. You overturned Aava in the urn. A long list for one man."

There was silence. Above his head, Thor heard the rotting sail flap dismally in the slight wind. He shifted and a plank creaked underfoot.

Aava went on, "But I am a patient being, and kind. I bear no ill will. Become my man, you who call yourself—what is it—Thor? You will not regret your move."

Thor thought of Karola's golden hair and red mouth, of Peter Gordon and his bow, of Slag, of Kor Tan, of white Yorg. They and the others were depending upon him. They needed him and his gatestone to return them to their settlements and safety and peace.

He shook his head, gripping the war-axe tighter.

Aava chuckled, "You *are* an idiot, aren't you? Oh, I can read your thoughts. It isn't hard for someone who's spent an untold eternity of eons living by one's self. You train yourself to do things... You have loyalty in your heart. You love this woman with the yellow hair.

"But what is one woman? What are casual friends? I can give you more than that. I can give you anything you want.

"Permit me to demonstrate. Turn the gatestone."

The sail flapped louder in the breeze. A shaft of sunlight glinted on the edge of a shield fastened to the side of the longboat. Thor bit his tongue inside his mouth. It came home to him suddenly, with the force

of a powerfully swung sledge, that he was trapped irrevocably.

The outlaws who fought Aava needed the gatestone to get to their settlements. He had the gatestone, but Aava was alive and awake, inside it. Whenever and wherever he used it, Aava would know. The settlements would no longer be secret. If he used the gatestone to transport the outlaws home, he would be leading an army to slay them!

Thor growled in his throat.

Aava laughed softly. He urged, "Turn the gatestone. Let me show you the wonders I could give a man like you, were he to be my friend. I want a friend, a strong friend. I do not trust my androids overly. They are only pseudo-life. Besides, there are too few of them to build an empire with. Lack of materials to make them has hampered me.

"Will you be my friend, Thor?"

Thor blinked. The insidiously sweet voice was working its will on him. He found himself thinking about those wonders and those marvels. Why not? What allegiance did he owe Gordon and the rest? Karola now, that was different. And Slag.

"You may have your woman, if you want her after I show you—my brand of woman!"

"It is a trick!" Thor rasped,

"What trick? What harm can I do you inside this jewel?"

That was true enough. If worst came to worst, he could always stuff the ruby into his pocket and get away. Aava couldn't see where he was going inside a dark pocket. He could see only when he was out in the open, such as he would be when Thor used the ruby as a gatestone.

"Use it, man."

Thor bent and held out his hand toward the red gem. It winked and flirted with him with its gorgeous purple hues. It was no longer cold with the iciness that stung. It was warm, with the heat of a human body. His fingers closed on it. The ruby throbbed softly, like a living heart.

"Now—turn me!"

GONE was the ship with its flapping sail and ancient planking. Gone was the sea of grass and the broken rocks. Thor almost dropped the ruby, staring.

A fey city stood not one hundred feet from him, set on the hard sands. It glowed with the creamy luminescence of alabaster where sunshafts struck its white walls and domes and needled spires. Crimson bands, interlaced with black, formed patterns of eerie loveliness against the whiteness. Inside its walls a chorus of sweet voices chanted with ensorcelled harmony.

The red doors in the wall swung open.

Chariots drawn by great black stallions raced toward him. Standing behind the hooped fronts were women of exquisite loveliness, their hair streaming behind them, whips held in red-nailed hands. They sang as they came, a song of sounds that stirred the senses.

"This is yours, Thor. All yours."

"It is unreal. It is too lovely to be real."

"It is real."

The lead chariot slithered on the sands, powdering Thor's ankles with grit. The black stallions reared, their hooves slashing at air.

The girl in the chariot caught Thor's eyes with hers, and laughed. She tossed the reins aside and stepped from the tailboard. Her red hair hung to her waist in back, and was powdered with silver dust. She held out white hands to Thor.

Thor reached out and grasped her hands. They felt real. And looking into her brown eyes, seeing all the beauty of her in gauze skirt and white linen cloak worked with a border of red and black interlacing, he almost felt his doubts vanish.

His fingers rubbed at her hand, twisting the flesh. That was real flesh. The girl seemed to catch his thought, for she came nearer and pressed herself to him.

"Kiss me, and know," she breathed.

Her mouth was warm and clinging. After a while she drew away and laughed, "Well?"

"You're real."

Aava whispered, "All yours, Thor. Go with her. Let her show you the city that is yours, that belongs to the friend of Aava."

He thought of Karola waiting with Slag and Peter Gordon. He felt the warm hand of the red-haired girl tug him. Her red mouth blew him a kiss. Her voice murmured cloyingly, "Come, Thor. Come to your city, and your throne." Karola seemed far away, forgotten.

Behind the black stallions, the chariot swept on toward the city. It rode smoothly, easily over the sun-baked sands. The red walls came nearer, nearer. Now he was under them, and inside the city.

Balconies on either side of the broad avenue were hung with banners and rich draperies. Men and women in red and yellow and purple garments laughed and tossed flowers at him, on the backs of the horses, into the street before him.

"Thor! Lord Thor!" they cried with delight in their voices, and awe and worship in their eyes.

The girl leaned into the hook of his arm. She said, "This is your city, Lord Thor. These are your people."

He looked into her brown eyes.

"And you?"

She put her mouth to his and left it there while the chariot thundered over roses and carnations and the pavement of the streets. Later she whispered, "Stalyl is yours, too." And Thor rode with chin held high, and pride in the set of his shoulders.

Before great doors of carved quartz the chariots came to a stop. Stalyl walked with Thor between the doors, her hip brushing his, her fingers wrapped around his fingers.

Alabaster pillars rose from an alabaster floor toward a red alabaster ceiling. Sunlight poured molten pools on the floor through tall windows. At the far end of the massive hall, on an oval dais of iridescent opal, stood a gigantic jewel, carved in the semblance of a throne.

"Lord Thor—your throne," said Stalyl softly.

He went and sat on the cold edge of the massy carnelian, fingering scarlet arms. In front of him, Stalyl clapped her hands, and young girls garbed in trousers of striped satin led giant men by chains around their necks. The men bore caskets in their hands.

Girls and men knelt before the throne. The caskets were placed in an arc before Thor.

Stalyl went to the first casket, threw back the cover.

Thor choked. It was filled to the brim with diamonds, diamonds that shimmered and glittered in the sunlight. Stepping down, he reached out a hand and dipped it into the jewels. He bore a handful, star-

ing at them. Cut and polished with expert care, the diamonds were white fire against his palm.

Aava spoke, casting a thought at him from the depths of his pocket, "You like what I have prepared for my friend, Lord Thor?"

Thor drew out the ruby and held it free in his palm, staring from ruby to diamonds. "This is my price, eh, Aava? I sell my friends for these jewels?"

The purple hues of the ruby grew cloudy, as though with hurt. "Who spoke of selling your friends? I ask no traitor to come to me. I want the friendship of a true man."

Stalyl moved closer, touching his arm. Her red hair was a flaming halo around the white, red-lipped face. Her brown eyes burned at him. She was a living witch's spell of beauty and desire. Her nearness made Thor tremble.

He opened one hand, and diamonds tinkled on the mosaic floor. He reached out for the girl, seeing her lips beckon.

The ruby flared warmer, hot with pride. It dragged Thor back to reality, drumming alarms into his core. Danger, danger! With a wrench he tore his gaze from Stalyl; looked at the ruby, saw the green fire beating up with delight.

Thor tottered.

He knew, now. Somehow, in some strange manner—

Aava had triumphed!

III

THE ROTTING SAIL FLAPPED and bellied over his head. He stood again on the longboat deck. Out there, all around him, was the red grassland. Gone was the city of alabaster and the red witch, Stalyl. A myth. An hallucination. A mirage of temptation.

In their place—

Androids!

Thor drew his lips back from his teeth and flung the ruby from him. But, as it twisted in air, Aava cried, "A trick, Thor. But just a trick to test you. Pay no heed to the androids. They are here to lead us back to the city of the Urn. I tell you—" Thor caught his war-axe where it rested against the helm. He shook it at the ruby.

"You foul liar!" he rasped. "You hyp-

notized me. You showed me things that existed only in your mind. All right, I'll play your little game. But I'll show you things, too. And the things I show you will be real. Real, like death, Aava!

"You don't know what death is, do you? But you'll learn. I'll find a way. I'll pay you back—"

A lance sang in the air as it slid over his head. The androids were closer, hemming him in. They began to clamber up the sides of the ship.

Aava said swiftly, "You can make the dream come true, Thor! With you to help, I shall build a city of alabaster, make it lovely as the one I showed you.

"And Stalyl! We will create her, you and I. We will make her as lovely as the Stalyl I showed you. Far lovelier than any woman—"

"You lack materials! Otherwise you would have made more androids to fight the outlaws!"

An android hurdled the rail. Thor stepped forward, swung his axe. The keen edge bit through hair and skull.

Thor grunted, "This is the opening move, Aava. I'll find a gambit to beat you. I'll checkmate you yet."

The axe bit and dug at climbing androids, toppling them. Thor aimed always at the heads, for that was swift annihilation. Android after android dropped under the slashing impact of the double-edged Viking weapon. Thor used it with a full swing, letting the weight of his body add the impetus, learning that the perfect balance of the axe was manageable with a twist of the wrist. His hand on the ivory haft changed course and the edge drove home; it swerved, and the axe dipped under a sword to cut upwards through a jaw.

He spoke no more to Aava, though he felt the blazing green gaze fastened on him where he held the Viking deck. He used his wits for fighting.

After a while Thor dropped the tip of the axe to the deck and grinned at Aava, "You didn't send enough androids. Take a look!"

He held the ruby at arm's length above his head. The deck and sides of the ship were littered with sprawled bodies, with broken springs and gears spilling from crushed and severed heads.

Aava sighed, "It is hard, using androids.

They are good servants, but they lack one thing. They lack initiative. They can't think."

Thor brought the ruby down, grinning mirthlessly into its depths. "How long have you lived, Aava?"

"I am immortal. I always was."

"You will die, some day. I will kill you, myself."

"Nothing can kill me, Thor."

"I will."

"Nothing can kill—"

Aava checked. Thor felt the cunning of the green fire, beating up through the crystal layers of the jewel. He whispered, "Nothing can kill—*what?* What are you, Aava? What is your secret?"

"You will never learn."

Thor shrugged and knelt. With his fingers he pried up a rotting board. There was a beam-joint beneath it. Thor placed the ruby in the crotch of the joint and stared down at the jewel, knowing the wild rage of Aava.

"I must leave you here—in darkness, Aava. I can't take you with me. If I did, you would see all I am going to do to whip you. You understand that?"

"Thor, be my friend!"

He shook his head, "I cannot. I do not trust you, Aava."

"The androids were not to fight you—"

"Yet they did."

Thor checked, peered closer. The purple hue of the ruby was fading. The gem was tenantless. Aava was gone.

Thor stood up and kicked the plank into place. He filled his lungs with crisp air. He knew what he must do. He had to learn all he could about Aava. If Gordon and the others could not help him—

There was always the Discoverer!

Thor dropped over the longboat side and went striding off into the grasslands.

IT WAS NIGHT when he found the campfire, Karola came running, hearing his shout, her yellow hair streaming behind her. Thor caught her, held her close. He thought of Stalyl, and there was remorse and tenderness in his kiss.

She felt his mood. Head tilted, she looked at him and whispered, "What is it? Where did you get that axe? And your eyes—there is a little sorrow in them. Why, Thor?"

"I will tell you, darling. But I must tell the others, too. I want Gordon's advice."

Gordon wrung his hand and then held out some cooked meat on the point of a sword. Thor was famished. He sat with legs crossed before him and ate and ate. Karola sat close to him, watching him with her large violet eyes. Once in a while she touched the great waraxe, running the pink tips of her fingers along the fresh scratches on the steel.

Thor dug his greasy fingers into the sand, powdering them; then he rubbed them dry.

"I talked to Aava," he said slowly. "He came into the gatestone that I carried. He tempted me. I—almost yielded."

The others stared at him. Thor fastened his eyes on the heart of the fire, where the twigs and dried grasses glowed bright red. It was easier, looking there, to tell his tale, than to look into the eyes of his friends.

HE concluded, "I do not have the gatestone now. I left it there, in the ship. Otherwise, we would have Aava with us, with every move we make. And Aava is what we are fighting. The odds are bad enough, without taking your enemy into your confidence."

Thor raised his eyes. He looked at Karola. He said, "I am sorry. Say that it's all right."

To his surprise, she laughed. Her violet eyes poked fun at him. She whispered, "No woman can compete with a dream. Stalyl was only that. At the same time, a dream cannot compete with a living woman. I am a living woman." She leaned over and kissed him gently, then sat back.

Peter Gordon said slowly, "What can we do now? It's a rotten situation. The others expect us. If we can't find a way to return them to the settlement—" He broke off, shaking his head.

Thor slid his hand up and down the stained ivory haft of the axe. He said, "The androids came into this dimension with the use of a gatestone. If we could find it, we could use that one. All the robots were killed, but I saw no gatestone."

"Perhaps the Black Priest used one to transmit them into this world. Then there wouldn't be any gatestone at all," said Gordon.

Thor opened his eyes, and blinked. He got to his feet, lifting his axe. "There's a chance. Aava will send someone to get the gatestone I hid in the ship. Then, if he should return to the gatestone—or we can get us one from an android—there might be a chance."

Peter Gordon drew his bow toward him and strung it. "Let's go," he said gruffly.

They went in the dark of the night, when the moons were below the horizon. Thor led, trotting swiftly with the long Indian stride an old Cherokee had taught him. Karola and Slag ran side by side. Peter Gordon, bow in hand and fingers touching the string of it, loped far behind, eyes continually moving.

Hour after hour they ran. Over rolling grassland, with only an occasional clump of rock formation to break the barren monotony of the dark landscape, they went at a deceptive pace.

Thor almost went by the ship. It was easy to lose trail here, where no trees ever grew. But the moons were sweeping up, and in their light a shield-boss winked to the left. It was enough. Thor swung about and when he grew nearer, he could discern the high rock and the curved hull of the longboat looming black against the sky.

He went up the rudder, without waiting for the others.

A sword flashed.

Thor went back on his heels, his shoulders hitting empty air. The axe in his right hand came up, almost of its own volition. Steel met steel, and sparks flared.

Malgrim loomed burly and huge, his beard bristling. The Black Priest chuckled, "What Aava did not do, I will do!" As he spoke, he was bringing his blade around in a mighty, whistling swing.

Thor was rammed against the low shield-wall that dug into the backs of his knees. There was no room to move, no space for footwork. Malgrim's flat blade caught him alongside the head. Thor went over the low shield-wall into roaring blackness.

How long he lay there, helpless, he did not know. But it was the scream tearing from Karola's throat that brought him staggering up against the musty old hull.

There was no time to find the rudder. He seized a trailing, rotted line he had not seen before and swarmed up it onto the deck.

Malgrim had Karola, afar off on the prow. She must have been the next one to reach the boat, had leaped lithely aboard—and now the Black Priest had her. His blade was high and starting to descend.

Thor groaned. No time! Karola screamed and clutched at Malgrim's gatestone, chained around his neck. Malgrim, sword still poised aloft, roared and beat at her tiny hand.

Then Thor saw the axe. With a sob he snatched it up. Once before, he had thrown a weapon at that monster. Now he hefted lovingly a thing so like the double-bitted axe of the North woods. Remembering, he swung the axe full circle—and threw.

Once again, the sword steadied for its downward slash. And then the axe thudded home in the base of Malgrim's skull—the spike between its blades biting deep. There was the sharp *tiing* of breaking metal. A stricken look burst in the Black Priest's eyeballs as he lurched and staggered. He fell forward, left hand reaching for the gatestone that hung on his chest.

He was blurring even as Thor reached him.

Thor thrust his hand into the coldness and the utter darkness and caught the ruby. He wrenched. There was a queer sliding motion of the Priest's body, and the ruby came free. But the Black Priest was gone.

KAROLA swayed against Thor. They stood tightly together for a moment.

"Jolly nice going," said a voice.

Peter Gordon swung a leg over the shield-wall and came toward him. "We watched from the grass. You can play that axe like a Norse raider. Got his gatestone, eh?"

Thor handed it to him. "This means we split up. You go your way, to the settlements. I go a different route."

"Man, you don't know the way!"

"I'll find it."

Thor went and lifted a rotted plank. The red gatestone still lay in the crotch of the beams, winking at him. He took and put it in his pocket. "Now, if Aava hunts us, one of us will still get through the barriers."

Thor put an arm around Karola's waist and held her against him. He said, "This is a Viking longboat. It is from a past day in the history of my planet."

Peter Gordon murmured, "What queer things this space of Aava has snatched from the universe. I wouldn't be surprised to learn, when all our chips are in, that a great many disappearances on Earth are due to this place.

"Remember the *Cyclops* that went off the face of the ocean in 1920? And do you recall the *Copenhagen*? And, back in 1755, a quay with a lot of people on it just puffed out of existence, disappearing all at once, in Lisbon, Portugal. There have been other disappearances from the Earth, None perhaps as sensational as those I mentioned.

"There's something wrong with this world we're in. It doesn't hew to a lot of natural laws we know."

Thor said, "There are no trees. Just rock and sand."

"Mean anything to you?"

"I'm not sure. There's something tugging and pulling in my mind, but it hasn't caught hold yet. And the weapons we use. Bows and swords and axes. There isn't a modern weapon in the lot."

Gordon grimaced. "Aava and his androids get the loot of the worlds, you know. They grab whatever drops on the planet. If he found guns or worse, he might horde them somewhere. The androids do not have the intelligence to use them. Besides, Aava doesn't trust his androids."

"Yes. Well, we do all right with what we have. But that thought in my mind—I want to follow it up. Karola!"

"Yes, Thor?"

Her violet eyes smiled into his. He kissed the tip of her nose. "You go with Peter and Slag."

"Oh, no, darling. I don't want to leave you. I—"

Thor squeezed her hand. "This is serious business, sweet stuff. I want to find the Discoverer. He has a method of transportation, Peter, that's a dilly. He calls it astral projection."

Gordon looked interested, icy blue eyes lighting. "I've read up on that, you know. It's some sort of yogi business. Certain Eastern fakirs claim to be able to do it. You know, he sits down and pays his brother a visit one hundred and some odd miles away. That sort of stuff.

"I've often thought that mental telepathy was a form of fumbling astral projection."

The Duke University experiments proved amazingly accurate. And then there were the Sherman and Wilkins tests."

"I remember those. They worked quite well. I see what you're driving at. You think that the human mind is a sort of sending and receiving set, that it can communicate—"

"Communicate at first, then travel. That would explain your Discoverer."

"If he could teach me to travel that way," Thor mused, "we might really get somewhere against Aava."

Suddenly he bent and kissed Karola, and pushed her toward Gordon. "Take care of her, Peter. You too, Slag. I'll find you, somehow, sometime soon."

He dropped over the side of the longboat and waved an arm at the three black silhouettes that stared down at him. Then he turned and, as nearly as he could judge, went loping across the grasses in the direction in which he had last beheld the Discoverer.

THOR did not find the Discoverer for three days. And then it was the Discoverer who found him.

He came out of sleep one morning, with the mists all around him and the warm rock under him to stare at the great bulk of the sprawling being that lay and watched him. Thor sat and rubbed his eyes. He got to his feet.

"I have been hunting you, Thor Master-son. Astrally, that is. I found you two days ago, but we were far apart."

"And I—I hunted you. I want to learn about Aava. I—"

"I can help you. Some time after you left me, I began experimenting with my astral projection technique. I learned that, chronologically, I was not hampered in the least by normal bonds. Back on my home planet of Flormaseron, I was not hampered by the bonds of space, but the barriers of Time limited me. I could not go far into the past, nor far into the future. Here, I can do either."

"You can't call that witchcraft," Thor went on. "There is a science to it, but we just don't know the rules of that science. Just as, back in Roman days, atoms existed even if the Romans didn't know of them."

"There are some laws," said the Discoverer. "You have the beginning of them.

You can launch your mind from your body and see what occurs elsewhere. Come, Thor. Lie down. I want to show you what happened here in the space of the green flame billions of years ago."

"Will that help me to conquer Aava? I want to visit him now, to learn what he does, what he plans—"

"I do not know whether it will help you conquer him, but it might help you understand him. And understanding is usually a prerequisite to any form of victory."

Thor lay back on the warm rock, moving his head slightly to find a more comfortable pillow on the hollowed rock. His arms he dropped to his sides, relaxing all through his big body. His chest rose and fell more slowly. His legs flattened against the stone. He closed his eyes and lay quiescent.

"Relax still more," whispered the Discoverer. "Sink deep, and deeper still. You must sever all bonds with your flesh. Sink—"

He was going down and around into a bottomless vortex of darkness. He fought to get down into the heart of that fancied whirlpool, down where its own power could drag him free. He fought, and struggled, fiercely.

He reached it. He hung in sunlighted air, looking at his prone body near the slumped mass of the Discoverer.

"Good. You did that all yourself, I think now you may do that without my help. But we waste time. Rise with me!"

An invisible tentacle touched him, flooded him with power. He rose high into the cloudless blue skies of Aava's planet, soaring sunward. Beneath him the red grasslands and grey rock spread out in vast splendor.

Soon now he was high enough to see the great globe that was the planet in all its entirety, slowly revolving. Out in space, in the vast distances between the suns, he floated bodiless. The planet receded, became a dot.

"Now we will go back, far in Time."

"How?"

"Think and will it. Your astral self, your *ka* or twin-soul, is a creature of mind, not matter."

Thor thought, hanging there in black space. And, as he thought, with each bit of energy he threw into his will and into his brain, there was a change.



He sought to turn and flee.

The suns and the planets were moving. They sped like balls batted across a net by hundreds of players. They slid in ancient grooves, rotating and retreating, going back the paths of their orbits. A ball of raging fire looped at them. Thor paused in instinctive dismay; he sought to turn and flee, dreading the vast sun coming at him.

"Move not. It can not harm you."

He was in the midst of a roaring red inferno, feeling nothing of its annihilating heat. An instant later it was gone, raging gustily down the tracks of Time.

Thor stared. There were fewer stars now, only a couple of hundred of parsecs away. This universe was retreating away from him.

"We must follow!"

"No need. They will return."

"But an expanding universe means that it will be retreating now, going back to ultimate beginnings—"

"Our universe—the universe of Earth

and Flormaseron—is an expanding universe. But here, in Aava's worlds, there is no room for expansion. This is a finite universe, gigantic, but rimmed with some strange force that keeps it separate from our universe.

"Here the suns and planets rotate around each other, but at the same time they revolve inside this space. They traverse this great bubble thousands of times through the ages. Watch. You will see them return."

Thor hung there, in utter blackness. And then, far and faint, in the opposite direction from which the suns had gone, they came. At first they were pinpoints, then dots. They came nearer, great fiery orbs.

"Two hundred million years have passed, Thor Masterson. Let us drop down, toward the planet of Aava."

There was only one vast desert of sand facing them, as they hovered above the surface of the slowly revolving planet. Dunes a hundred miles high, whipped with

savage and incessant winds. They saw sandstorms that were titanic in their fury.

"Sand," thought Thor. "Mile after mile of silicon dioxide."

"Drop down. Go through the sand."

Grayish granules all around him, bringing the sensation of suffocation until he grew used to it. The gray darkened and grew black as pitch.

"Rock," whispered the Discoverer. "Be cautious, now."

They slid from the blackness into the green light. This was a cave, seemingly endless. Embedded into walls and sides, glittering and sparkling, were bits of onyx, carnelian, opal and amethyst. Thor caught his breath at the iridescent wonder of the jewelled cavern.

"Far off, Thor, to the right. Look there."

Brilliant green fire, rising and falling, Alive, and waiting.

"Aava!"

"Careful. Think not so harshly. He will be aware of you. Come. It is time to go."

They went back, high into space.

Once again the planets and the stars left them alone, and again they came. But this time the planet Aava was molten, filled with shooting flames, burning with white, silvery flames.

Thor and the Discoverer went down into the bowels of the planet, seeking Aava. They found the green flame burning with brilliance in a sea of molten rocks. It leaped and danced, and gathered bits of matter around it, as though weaving a garment for itself.

"That is the oval in which we saw him encased," said Thor.

"Pure quartz. When hot, it goes cherry-red."

"This is four hundred million years ago. He is truly eternal."

There was amusement in the Discoverer's mind as he said, "We will go back even further, back to the remotest beginnings. And even then, Aava was."

EIGHT-TIMES the universe came to them and receded. At last they stood in utter darkness, for a long time. There were no stars, no suns. There was emptiness.

"We are in the very dawn of all things. We are so far back that there is no Time, no Space. Only emptiness."

"If there is nothing, what are we here for?"

"Wait."

Faint rosy shafts of light streamed up from nothingness, incredible distances away. The light bathed them, sent tingles of electrical power throbbing through their beings. Although he was only brain, Thor felt that force. It was something from beyond, godlike.

Where there had been emptiness, was now matter. Here and there were stars.

"Is this creation?"

"Call it creation. Call it a life-force coming from somewhere that our animal minds can never fathom. Say the force gathered the floating electrons and bound them into balled suns. And in one of the suns, we will find what we seek."

They hunted through the weird wonders of this weird universe. And deep in the heart of a gigantic star that pulsed and threw its forces hundreds of thousands of miles high, they saw it.

A green blob, restlessly burning, circling within itself, like a fluid always in motion. Cradled and warmed by the heat of the star, given not only existence, but life itself by the rosy shafts of light, was Aava.

"Not eternal. But almost so."

"Master of this cancerous universe, this alien from known Time and known Space. Remember, the only thing that penetrated the force-shell around this space-cancer was the light, the rosy light."

"Aava is not absorbed by the sun."

"He is different."

"And being composed as we are composed would be gone in less than a fraction of a second, in that heat."

The Discoverer whispered, "Is that knowledge any help to you, Thor Master-son?"

"I don't know. The idea in the back of my head, that hammered away at me ever since I met Aava—I almost have it. It is there, if I can find a way to—"

Loneliness!

Hanging in this space, hundreds of millions of years from his body, Thor Master-son was alone.

"Discoverer! Where are you? Speak to me!"

There was empty silence.

Thor wondered. He was not afraid, for fright is a bodily thing, where the heart

pumps faster and the skin grows white while the blood is sucked into the belly. This feeling was different.

He knew he was alone, that something had happened to the Discoverer. He called and received no answer.

Can I return? Thor asked himself. Can my mind span the countless eons between my body and my brain? He had learned all he could, out here in the beginnings of things. It was time to go back, now.

He took thought, calmly and dispassionately. There was no panic in him. He was a child with a new toy, turning it and examining it, feeling it bend to pressure, putting it to mouth to know its taste. Slowly he forced his brain into patterns, forming it with mental energy, twisting it into different shape.

Thor had to go forward in Time, swiftly. He must learn what had happened to the Discoverer, quest after Aava. He thought, and in thinking, found a new delight.

How long he hung there in the black voids, he never knew. But up from darkness came a white ball of flame that was Aava's planet, with its sun and attendant moons. They circled in darkness, weird and eerie in their iridescent brilliance.

I have succeeded, he reflected. That is the planet, bubbling with molten rock. Inside that sphere, Aava is fashioning a garment for himself, moulding it from crystal quartz. Somewhere on the other side of the universe, the sun that held him spewed him out, with the nucleus for his planet and its moons. I am speeding into the future.

Again and again Aava's planet and its sun and moons returned, to flee across the gulfs of space. Ten times they came and went; the last time, Thor knew he would have to wait no longer.

He dropped toward the planet as it circled its sun. He swept through heavieside and stratosphere. He plummeted into fluffy cloudbanks. Beneath him he could see red grasslands and bare rock. Across one rock was slumped the massive form of the Discoverer.

To one side of the Discoverer lay the body of Thor Masterson. The brain that was part of that body entered it.

There was coldness and a sense of numbness. He could not move a muscle.

Thor sent relays of orders along his nerves into every part of his body. A muscle twitched. He opened his eyes.

It took time, returning from such a journey; but at last Thor could move his arms. He rubbed his chest and loins, massaged his legs. Weakly, he stood up.

"Discoverer!"

It was a cry of anguish. The blob of jellied flesh lay seared and burned. Little blisters covered the massy body like globules of sweat. Where the blisters were greatest, the outer mass of the body was broken open into crevices, like the cracks in a human brain,

"Aava did this," whispered Thor. "They brought him in the urn, and he killed the Discoverer. And he spared me. That was a blunder."

It occurred to him that he was granted life because Aava thought he could use him. "He'll see. I'll show him what I can do."

Raging, he brought out the gatestone, staring at it. "You hear me, Aava? I'll get you yet. I'll find a way to beat you. There must be a way. There has to be a way!"

The ruby lay, warmly glowing. Aava was not inside its red crystalline substance. Thor closed his fist on the ruby and shook it back and forth. He culled oaths from lumber camp and battlefield. He swore them all.

He spent himself, there on the red grasslands. Dry-eyed, but grieving, he put out a hand and touched the blistered body. He whispered a farewell under his breath and turned his head to the north.

ALL NIGHT LONG Thor went at an easy lope across the plains. Just as dawn came up with red lances of light across the horizon, he stopped and turned the gatestone.

"If he wants me, he'll have to find me," he said. "I'll lead him a chase that—"

The rest choked off in water. He was in blue depths, in cold clear water that was so transparent he could see a shimmering forest of crimson coral and white sands far below him. Thor swam upward, aided by the natural buoyancy of his big body.

He treaded water a hundred yards from a shore where dead bodies lay scattered like leaves after a windstorm. There two androids lay broken in half; beyond them

a fighter clad in reddish fur rotted. The rising sun glinted on a shattered spear in the hands of a Zarathzan, slid on to the blade of a sword buried in an android's skull.

He clambered, dripping, from the sea. Sorrowing, he walked among the bodies, recognizing many beside whom he had fought in the women's compound.

Something groaned, ahead of him. It was Morlon, hairy torso riddled with arrows, his black fur dyed red. Thor knelt and lifted his head to a knee.

"Aava came into the gatestone you gave Peter Gordon, Thor," muttered the dying man. "He saw where we went. We fled as swiftly as we could with the women, but Aava's androids crossed the Undying Sea in ships and caught us."

Thor's lips curled in anger. "Always Aava!"

"We fought a rear-guard fight, all the way. I fell here. I don't know what happened to the others. They went on—"

THE giant Morlon stiffened suddenly, muscles ridging over legs and arms. His eyes rolled backwards.

Thor put him down on the sandy shore, gently.

He went on, along the path made clear by fallen bodies, by dropped weapons. Here was havoc wrought on man and android by sharp steel, by the honed edge of war-arrows and spears. Thor saw that there lay more androids than men.

Toward evening he heard them. Hoarse warcries throbbed in the air. He crawled up over a lip of rock.

Before him lay the settlement, a low-walled city of kiosks and towers, their dun clay surfaces ornamented with ochre and vermilion. On its broad walls were archers and spearmen, patrolling during a lull in the battle. The low tents of the androids penned in the city, ringing it with pointed pennon-poles.

Thor gathered himself. He lifted his axe, swung it loosely to accustom his hand and arm to its feel. There was no way leading between those robot-tents, but Thor knew there was an invisible path leading to the settlement walls, a road he had to cleave with axe and feet.

He stood up, grim and gaunt against the bright sky.

Standing, he could see beyond the lip of rock, away to his right. Androids were tied to chains there, pulling. They were dragging great wagons filled with huge urns. Aava in the urn! He was coming, to blast the walls with his titanic power!

Thor stifled a sob of anger and leaped forward. He ran as runs the deer, barely touching the passing ground with his feet, but flying swiftly. His axe was steady in his hand.

This was his one chance, when they were bringing Aava to the city. The androids would be occupied with their master. They would not be prepared for anyone trying to get *in* the city.

If anyone noticed him, they paid him no heed. He was almost under the walls when three androids sprang from the shelter of a tent to meet him with naked swords.

Thor never stopped his rush. The axe lifted and swung, went back and swung up again. One android remained standing, coming in swiftly, throwing himself in a desperate lunge.

Thor sidestepped, pecked with the point of the axe right into the middle of the forehead. There was a sharp scream, and then the ponderous gates were opening before him. Thor dove through as spears whistled over his head.

Yorg grinned, slapping Thor on naked shoulder. "We thought you dead. Gordon and Kor Tan will be glad to see you."

"And Karola?"

Yorg laughed. "She pines, the yellow one. But come."

Along clay-brick streets they went, as Thor told of the urns they were bringing from the shore. He scowled and shook his white-furred head. "We cannot last when Aava sears holes in our walls. The androids will come, and then the Outlaws will be no more."

"If we had some wood on this accursed planet," growled Thor, "I might be able to rig a catapult."

He explained the function of the catapult to Yorg, who nodded, lips tightly drawn. In his eyes was the flicker of a new hope. "It might be. We gather what we can from the spacewrecks that the planet gathers. Other things we steal. We have some wood stored. And some cording. I will get to work at once."

Yorg led Thor to a great circular building with walls of glass, where sunlight fused across a tile floor, making the room alive with light. A girl with long yellow hair turned from a group at the end of the chamber. She screamed her delight.

"Thor! Peter, Slag, it's Thor!"

Their delight chased the worry from their eyes and faces for a few moments, as they shook his hand and pounded his shoulders. Peter Gordon said, "Jolly good to have you back, old man. But I'm afraid even having you here won't do any good. The androids have us surrounded. You say they are bringing Aava in the urns. Looks as though it's all over."

"Not yet," Thor growled, and told them of the Discoverer, and the astral voyage they had made.

Gordon wrinkled furrowed brows. "Can't see what good knowing that is, you know. It—"

"Think, man. I'm not too good at chemistry, but there are clues and hints all over this planet. Most of it is sand, rolling mile after mile. Even the red grasslands have sandy beds. And the rocks. There is almost as much rock as sand. What do you and the robots build your cities of? Clay! What jewels are embedded in the cave where Aava dwells? Opal, onyx, carnelian, jasper!

"Aava lives in a circle of pure quartz. Look!"

THOR put his hand in his pocket, drew out tiny green flecks of crystal, "I got this by scraping the urn where Aava appeared to his androids in the temple. It's glass! Something in Aava's nature was hardened by oxygen, and the sand in the substance of the urn turned into glass!

"When the Discoverer took me out into space and back in Time, when I saw the worlds of this space-realm created, one thing struck me. I watched Aava and his planet evolve from an empty void, saw the planet grow and take form.

"Gordon, I saw no fern forests, no great jungles of vegetation whose rotting and sinking into peat bogs gave us coal. Coal is carbon. And there were no petroleum wells, and petroleum is a compound of hydrocarbons."

Gordon rubbed his chin, frowning. "It's all jolly interesting, old man."

Thor waved a hand. "Can't you see? It all argues just one thing. No coal, no oil. No forms of carbon at all. Just quartz, sand, onyx, jasper, clay, carnelian, opal, rock—all forms of silicon.

"Aava is silicate life, where we are carbon life!"

The Englishman whistled low.

Thor went on, "Silicon is almost as ingenious as carbon. Both have a valence of six. Both unite with other substances to form various compounds. But, just as life with carbon structure cannot stand its own refuse—the carbon dioxide that we exhale when we breathe, so life with a silicate base cannot stand its own refuse—silicon dioxide—or *sand!*"

"Afraid I'm rather stupid, old man. Not following you very well."

"Human beings exhale carbon dioxide when they breathe, after taking the oxygen into their lungs to help release their energy. But if they breathed only that refuse, or carbon dioxide, they would soon die. The same with a being formed of silicon, such as Aava is. He forms sand—silicon dioxide—as his debris when he removes the oxygen from the air that is necessary to his life. Suppose we fed only sand to Aava?"

"You mean it would smother him?"

"You're thinking of human death. This is different. Why must all death be a matter of limp, lifeless clay? Why couldn't silicon beings die and become—"

"Of course. Sand and the heat generated by Aava's flame, plus the high silicate content in the flame itself—*glass!*"

"And glass is a form of death."

Gordon stared at him with wide blue eyes. "Man, man. You've solved it. But how can we get that sand onto Aava without getting killed ourselves? Even supposing we can get out of this trap?"

"You'll have to create a diversion. An attack on the urns. At night. I'll slip out and get to the Undying Sea. I'll swim underwater. I'll need a length of clay pipe to breathe through. And before I go, I want to make one more trip to the Mountains of Distortion. I remember there was a lot of sand over the cave of Aava. I want to check that. If true, one man might kill him. I'm going to try, anyhow."

Thor walked around the room, eyes gleaming brightly. He said, "Peter, we have a world here that we can make our own.

We're locked inside a bubble of space, a cancerous growth that keeps this universe and our old universe apart. We are free to make whatever kind of place we want, in here. It's up to us to do it. We can't fail."

Outside the walls, they heard the deep-throated roar of the androids as the urns rolled forward. Gordon said simply, "If you succeed, it will have to be soon. Or there will be none left to profit by it!"

IV

SUNLIGHT GLINTED ON THE flat surface of the Undying Sea. Near its sandy shore, an almost naked man clambered wet and dripping from its waters. In his right hand he carried a giant axe. In his left was a length of clay tubing. He paused and tossed the tube into the water, watched the ripples spread as it hit and sank.

Thor Masterson turned his face toward the black hulk of mountain far to the west. Around his loins was wrapped a cloth fitted with strips of toughened leather. Soft skin sandals protected his feet from the bite and burn of hot sands and rocks.

He ran smoothly, easily as the American Indian, at a lope that decimated distance. When sweat beaded his body, he found a pool and lay in its cool waters until fit to go on. Hammering away at him was the remembrance of the Outlaw settlement, of the androids storming the walls, of the urns rolling forward and tilting. Once in a while a stone from Yorg's crude catapults would overturn an urn, but the hits would be scarce.

While the attack went on, he lay on a smooth table and disassociated his astral self from his body. In spirit form he roamed the planet, seeking Aava. Deep in the bowels of the black mountain he had finally found him.

Thor dared not reveal his presence, or Aava would have lashed out with that titanic power that was destructive even to his projected self. Instead, he went down from the thin crust of rock over Aava, sinking through the golden granules of what had once been a great desert, to the fine crust of jewel-embedded rock that was the roof of Aava's cave.

Between jewels, hovering in rock and

sand, Thor had looked down on the Green Flame.

Aava was verdant brilliance in the red quartz oval, his inner fires moving fluidly, pulsing, beating. He seemed to slumber, thoughts far away. Thor knew where his thoughts were: at the Outlaw settlement.

Thor looked around him, studying the thin crust of rock, the jewels, the overhanging sands. Beneath the rock crust was a lip of stone bridge, five feet down from the rock roof. Thor had grinned, and slid back up through the sand and stone.

The rock cut into his feet as he climbed. Up sheer cliffsides, using fingers to clutch at stone projections, digging holes with his toes where no holds ought to be dug, hugging stone with his chest and belly, he went. By inch and by foot he climbed.

Night came while he stood on a yard-wide natural path. Thor grunted, eyeing it. Sleep was what he wanted, sleep was what his tired muscles craved. But he went on.

Into the darkness, where a misstep would send him plummeting to jagged rocks thousands of feet below, Thor crept. He crawled, vertically.

Above him he could see green light, faint tendrils of it.

That was the crevice, the entrance to the Cave of Aava.

AND at the Outlaw settlement, Peter Gordon whistled arrows at the heads of the androids surging through the break in the walls that had just been blasted by the urns. But arrows and spears could not stay such as the androids. With sword and axe they hewed their path above the bleeding, dying corpses of the outlaws.

Karola shuddered beside him, handing him arrows. "Will Thor find Aava? Will he be in time to help us?"

"Jove, I hope so. But it looks bad, Karola. Very bad."

The girl grimaced, and closed white fingers on the hilt of a slim dagger. "They'll never take me back. Never!"

"Got the bounder!... No, I know. Aava hopes to breed a race of living beings with artificial insemination. But he needs women for that, and so far we've kept him from them—"

Below the balcony where they stood, they saw Slag and Yorg lead a charge with club and sword. The red dwarf howled his oaths

as he slammed and battered at android skulls. Yorg, grunting and panting, used his blade like a scalpel.

"They're holding, Karola. The jolly blighters are driving them back."

"No, no. There—another blast by Aava in the urn. Another group!"

The fresh androids drove into Slag and Yorg's flank, wedged in the screaming fighters, threw them back on themselves. A hairy red arm wielded a club like a blackjack. A white-furred arm cut and stabbed with a sword. But the androids came forward. They rolled over the out-laws.

Gordon said sadly, "We'd best fall back, Karola. We can't hold them any longer."

HERE in the cave opening, Thor stood up and moved his axe, testing its heft. Green light danced and flared on the broad blades. Thor grinned wolfishly, and went forward.

Stepping carefully, using the shadows of the stalagmites to hide his giant frame, Thor went deeper into the cave, closer to the green flame that flared in the bowels of the mountain. It was warm here, for Aava was a thing of fire.

On the skin sandals that gave no sound, he stepped forward. He walked in the myriad light that the flame plucked from the gems and spread throughout his cave.

He could see the bridge of rock that lifted its stone arc high to the towering, shadowy roof of the cave. Up there, in the black shadows, he could stand on that bridge and be close to the roof—close enough to swing an axe.

Thor sped silently across the empty space between tumbled rock slabs. He leaped for the bridge and ran up its curving back.

SLAG and Yorg bled from a score of wounds as they fought their fight by the settlement gate with club and sword. Side by side, two against an army, they dug bleeding feet into stone streets, and fought like madmen.

They piled androids in front and to the sides. They made a funereal mountain of wrecked, synthetic bodies.

Slag and Yorg would die here.

They knew it, yet they fought on. The others needed time to get to the circular

tower, to fight their last stand against Aava. So the club and the sword stayed swinging, and the pile grew higher.

Now they could hear the trundling of the urn-wagons.

Yorg panted, "They come nearer, Slag."

"It will not be long. You are good fighter, Yorg."

The androids fell away. An urn was coming up. Behind it, androids massed with spears and swords, ready to attack when these madmen were wiped from their path.

Yorg rested on his blade and grinned at Slag. "Thor would attack that urn and tip it. Then the androids would get the force of it. It would kill a lot, facing that army."

Slag grunted and gripped his club.

The urn began to tilt toward the two bloody fighters. Yorg growled in his throat, and the red dwarf and the white ape leaped forward.

They struck the urn with their feet, at its apex. The clay vase shuddered and swung back. A green light reared up, blazing fury and annihilation.

Slag and York fell forward, over the lip of the urn as it dropped toward the androids.

A beam of green blight swept outward, over the massed androids. As a breath blows out the candleflame, so the green fire blew away the androids.

But Slag and York had fallen into that flame, unable to halt their forward impetus. The green flame touched them first, and destroyed them. They were dwarf and ape one moment, nothingness the next.

Watching from a slit in the tower wall, Karola rubbed tears from her wet cheeks with the back of her hand.

FAR beneath him, the floor of the cave was dark and broken. There on the stone bridge, with the jewel-embossed roof so near, Thor was in a different world.

He stood now on the tip of the bridge's arc. The thin crust of roof was within reach of his axe. Thor looked down, full into the red quartz oval where green Aava slumbered, moving and radiating always.

"He's at the settlement. He's blasting away at something," Thor whispered.

He swung the axe in circles. He stood on tiptoes and the muscles of his naked

back and thickly thewed arms bunched and bulged. With a sob of fury, Thor drove his axe at the crust of roof.

Sparks glinted. A flake of quartz fell away, dropped to the floor below and bounded. Echoes sprang up, dancing the length of the cave.

Thor attacked the roof with insane fury.

Flakes and chips of roof showered below, all along the cave-floor. Thor sobbed with the strain of his eerie battle. His lungs heaved. His arm rose and fell, rose and fell. Sparks grew to myriad thousands as the keen edge of the war-axe bit and dug in the stone.

Over the clatter and clang of steel and stone, rose an ominous thunder. Aava was being awakened from his slumbers. The green of the cave grew brighter, more freshly verdant. The red of the carnelians became purple; the purple of the amethysts, black.

Thor slashed and cut unceasingly.

Like a volcano gathering itself to spew its lava, Aava rumbled. With fire and with fury, he quested for the source of the falling rock.

A tongue of flame leaped up to stand for one long instant beside Thor. He grimaced and drove his axe without stay. The keen biting edges would not last long, now. They were almost done. A streak down the flat side of one axe-blade told him it would give, soon.

And the roof showed no sign of cracking!

THE MEN AND WOMEN in the tower watched the circle of urns gathering around them, tilting upwards. Hugging the walls and shadows of the buildings, the androids watched.

Arrows thudded down onto the androids attending the urns. But when two fell, four leaped from the darkness to take their places.

High in the tower, Peter Gordon fed his arrows to the attackers. The string of his bow was warm. His fingers were blistered, raw with continual friction. But his lips were tight, and his pale blue eyes were icy.

Karola bit her full red lower lip, shaking her long yellow hair from her eyes and wiping those same eyes surreptitiously with the palm when they grew moist.

The urns were facing the tower at last. Gordon dropped his bow, put out a hand, burying his fingers in the smooth flesh of Karola's nude shoulder.

"All over, all over. Jolly good fight while it lasted."

"Thor, Thor," Karola whimpered.

In another instant, the urns would thunder out their destructive fury. But the moment lingered into minutes, and still the urns were silent.

A wondering babble broke from the throats of the androids. Some of them bent and stared within the urns, where tiny green flames flickered. Those green flames should have annihilated the last of the outlaw settlement. Yet they did not.

Karola looked at Peter Gordon.

"Do you think—Thor—?"

AAVA knew he was on the rock bridge now. Thor knew that Aava knew, and still he dug and battered his axe upward. He had a depression sculpted from the roof. A few more blows and—

The axe dug in. Thor pulled it loose.

He heard Aava, then. A blast of titanic heat, of power unimaginable, came roaring up at him.

Thor leaped outward, away from the bridge.

For a moment he hung a hundred feet above the jagged floor of the cave. In that instant, Aava hurled himself upward, filling the cave with radiance and intolerable heat.

Thor threw wide his arms, closed them on a stalactite dropping its thin rock formation from the roof. His legs spraddled the drooping stone, hugging it.

Aava raged, biting and burning at the stone bridge, seeking his quarry. Sullenly, he dropped back within the quartz oval.

Thor almost missed the bridge, leaping back for it. His hands scrabbled at the loose shale, sliding and slipping, before his fingers tightened on a rough projection.

With insane might, he flung himself and his axe again at the depression. Before Aava gathered himself once more, he had to do it.

The axe dug in. When he pulled it loose, a few flecks of sand slid with it. The thin grains showered downward, running in a steady stream.

"Earthling, stop! The sand must not come down on me. Stop and—"

The voice of Aava rose to a shrill crescendo, battering at his ears. But Thor worked on. His axe arm lifted. The crack widened. Tons of sand hung above that thin roof, on delicate balances. By opening the roof even so slightly as he had done, he was destroying that balance. An incredible weight of sand was waiting, waiting—

Aava rose in all his might and splendour, to seal the crack.

And the sand fell.

Thor reeled back, battered by thundering deserts.

He hung on what was left of the rock bridge, staring. Upreared in green iridescence, showered by falling tons of sand that formed a tan curtain around him, Aava writhed. His great bulk was twisted into strange convolutions, distorted grotesqueries of liquid movement. A great spray of fire lapped out and upward to seal the gap through which the sand streamed downward. It rose against the falling tons, and was pressed back and down.

Thor huddled in the darkness, cold and numb. He was watching the death of a god, a god that he had killed.

The sand showered down, lapping and laving at the monstrous green tentacle that was Aava as he died.

THE androids stared deep within the bowl of the urns. The green filament was out, dead. They glanced in fright at the stone tower and stared at one another.

"Aava is dead! The Lord Aava is no more!"

Peter Gordon notched an arrow to his bowstring, sent it whizzing down and into the braincase of a robot. The flying arrow was like a signal. Spears and arrows darkened the sky. The androids fell in scores.

For a moment the androids stood undecided. And then, with a yell that sent shivers up the backs of the Outlaws, so vibrant was its grief, they turned and sped from the city, out across the plains, scattering.

"We will hunt them down," smiled Gordon. "There is nothing to fear, now. It is all a matter of time.

"Karola! Karola! The settlement has triumphed!"

She brushed back thick yellow hair from wet violet eyes. She turned and stumbled to the door. Catching herself Karola laughed over her shoulder, "I'm going to Thor. I want to find Thor."

"Good idea. Jolly good idea, at that. We'll all go. In the boats at the Undying Sea. I haven't sailed a boat in years. Say, Thor will need a fleet for his new world, won't he? I think I'd fit perfectly as admiral. Admiral Peter Gordon. Doesn't sound bad at all, does it?"

Gordon discovered he would have to save his breath, to keep up with Karola's long white legs. He grinned and loped on.

THOR came up from his crouch, coughing in the dusty, sand-clogged air. Aava was one solid pillar of farflung glass, etched and sculpted by his own death-agonies into something that looked like windblown moss.

The sand had clogged at the opening in the roof. In one last, despairing lunge, Aava had sealed his nemesis. But it was too late to save him. His very being sucked in all those granules, whipped them around in the fiery core of him and fused them with the silicon and sodium in his body. For one instant, Aava had become a mad factory.

Thor came forward, put out a palm and placed it against the smooth surface of the tall glass column. The glass was still warm. The bits of ferrous silicate that had given Aava his distinctive coloring were imparting that same warm green to the dead image.

"As though a sculptor had carved him," whispered Thor.

Outside the cave entrance, the sun was shining and a fresh wind was whipping the mountainside.

Seeing the ships crossing the Undying Sea, noting the shaken swords and lances, Thor grew hot with emotion.

A girl with yellow hair dived into the water, climbed dripping onto shore, and set out for him. After her streamed the others, all with new hope, new life in their breasts.

Thor grinned. He ran to meet Karola, arms hungry for her.

PS's Feature Flash

FLASHING you the highlights on two of the cosmic-minded writers who help to nourish PLANET STORIES. They need no introduction to you, unless you're new to PS's pages—in which case step right up and meet Gardner F. Fox and Raymond F. Jones, both of whom have stories in this issue.

Who stole it?

That's what I want to know! One minute I'm myself, and the next thing I know my head is resting in the trophy room of PLANET STORIES, staring down on incredible B. E. M.'s, spaceships, lovely gals, prognathous-jawed heroes, solar guns—let's go back to the lovely gals.

Anyhow, I'm talking about that head of mine that the Editor has on his trophy room shelf. Boy, what a marvelous excuse for being dumb. You spend your life trying to get ahead, and then they swipe it on you! Only trouble is, people say that, off me, it looks good.

It is night. The trophy room is silent save for the gurgle of a purple-eyed B. E. M. drooling over a toothsome morsel . . . somewhere my latest heroine is screaming with laughter (at my head) . . . I open my eyes to give her a dirty look and—

Whadda ya know! I knew I'd get back to the lovely gals. It's the Spirit of the Vizigraph herself, clutching a beam-recorder and wearing the very latest in Venusilk, Moonylons, and the snappiest Deneblouse you ever saw. She's even pretty. Hair the color of . . . and eyes that sparkle like . . .

Why should I tell you what she's like? Get the Editor to steal *your* head!

Vizzy cajoles me in canal-Martian. I snap back with some pig-Procyon. She wants my autobiography. I say no. She wipes the lipstick off my mouth. I say yes.

I was born in Brooklyn, and still pay for it by being an incurable Dodger fan. Spent my most impressionable years being an insurance runner, soda jerker, reporter—collecting a couple of degrees in college and law school—being a lawyer, and then a writer. I got sidetracked for a while from writing because I was practicing law, but straightened that out by quitting my office and writing. Have never regretted it.

Somewhere along the line I attached a wife and two youngsters to me. Love them dearly except on rainy days when they insist on standing in a semi-circle around my typewriter.

Like sports of all kinds, and books ditto.

I winter in Westchester, working like a dog, and summer on Long Island, trying to loaf like same. My big ambition is to make the Vizigraph gang swoon with delight over one of my yarns. Have made a science-fiction fan out of my Dad. Now if I can do the same thing to my wife—heh! heh! What a fate! I ought to know. I was one a long time ago, and still am.

Vizzy looks a little disappointed. I asked her does she expect *Ben Hur* and *For Whom The Bell Tolls* to happen to *me*? She claims it is an uneventful life. She may be right, but I like it.

—GARDNER F. FOX.