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# VENUSIAN TRAGEDY

Udeen was marooned more thoroughly than any shipwrecked mariner of Earth—and the only sources of companionship he had were the monstrous, anamorphic Volons.



By MAX C. SHERIDAN

## CHAPTER I

### Boredom

**G**REY shadows danced like animate veils in the dusky murk above Venucity; great formless patches of altered darkness which wove a

melody of restless movement against the opalescent haze of mile on endless mile of cloud-banked sky.

The low oval domes of the Earth colony shelters were but vague knolls in a world that guarded its myriad of enigmas with a jealous shroud of secrecy.

Dale Udeen flattened his nose against

the thick convex glassite of the Button's sole window, and his grey eyes squinted in an unsuccessful effort to pierce the curtain of eternal mist.

To add to the watcher's visual troubles, darker wisps of semi-substance pirouetted and gyrated against the vast grey screen like strange mischievous imps dancing with malicious glee.

Udeen stared silently into the nebulous haze, impatiently following one, then another of the perverse shadows which hovered elusively at the very boundary between obscurity and vision.

At last, he turned from the window with a frustrated oath, and his clear-cut features twisted in the grimace of a petulant child.

"**D**AMN it, Cap!" he complained, turning to watch his grizzled companion's complacent study of a fat book and his contented puffing on a battered briar. "Do I have to sit here in this stinking button of a house, and do nothing but read and read—and watch you sit at that packing-case desk, smoking that rotten hod till the smoke is as thick as the air outside? I came to Venus for adventure! For the romance of the skys, for the mysteries and wonders of a far-flung world as yet almost untouched by the foot of Man!"

"—And what do I get?" Udeen's lips twisted in a sneer. "I get thirty-three days of hell in a rotten little rocket ship filled with foul air, putrid food,—and space-sick men! Romance of the skys—bah!"

Udeen spat disgustedly. "And then what? —Just forty-six days more of monotonous existence in this two by four 'button' that the citizens—all twenty of them—of metropolitan Venucity dignify by the name 'house'!"

"Cap" Armstrong looked up from his book, and his delft-blue eyes twinkled with amusement.

"Easy does it, boy," he chided. "That makes, uh—seventy-nine days since you brushed the dust of Mother Earth from your cloven hooves. If you continue to lose your patience at the current rate, you'll be hopelessly bankrupt before winter. Just take it easy, and think about all the things we're going to see and do when the winter equinoxial precipitates a little of Venus' famed water-vapor."

The grizzled veteran looked up at the younger man with an infectious grin, and winked. "I'll guarantee you'll be able to see as much as fifteen feet ahead of you by then," he declared.

"Humph," was Udeen's desultory comment. "—And how about the Venusians,—the weird outlandish creatures you saw on the first expedition? When will we try to contact them?"

"—I'm so damned sick and tired of sitting here trying to see through an atmosphere of whipped cream that I'll be asylum-fodder before the week is over if something doesn't happen quick!"

"Hold it, son." Armstrong cautioned. "Can't rush Nature, you know. Next trip maybe the boys back on terra firma will have us a portable infra-red vision unit doped out. Then we won't have to wait for the winter clearing of the atmosphere to do our looking around."

"Too bad Evolution didn't equip us with eyes sensitive to the lower band of the spectrum," growled Udeen, "—like these fantastic Venusian creatures you've been spinning yarns about."

**T**HE veteran snorted. "Can't have everything, you know. For instance,—the Venusians wouldn't get a thing out of one of Beethoven's masterpieces,—or even from the doubtful melody of a swing band."

"Why not?"

"No ears," was Cap's laconic reply. "Seems funny that in a world with such an excellent medium for transporting

sound, evolution provided absolutely no means for utilizing it."

"How do they communicate,—or do they?"

Armstrong nodded. "Oh yes, no trouble about that. They have slender filaments or antennae of delicate nervous tissue which arise in the cortex of the brain and extend up through foramina in the skull, somewhat like the feelers of Earthly insects."

"Telepathy?"

"Yes, but very efficient and workable modification. Here evolution has devoted its faculties to perfecting telepathy, instead of wasting its time on elaborate equipment for the secondary senses of hearing and smell."

"Then your famed Venusians are nothing more or less than overgrown insects?" Udeen asked, with a scornful snile curving his lips.

Armstrong turned to survey the younger man with thoughtful eyes.

"Not insects,—and not reptiles as we know them," he said slowly, "but a queer and fantastic intermingling of certain characteristics of each, with perhaps a dash of mammalian likeness."

"Humph!" grunted Udeen. "I thought you said they were the equal of—and perhaps superior to Man. Imagine a heterogeneous hodgepodge like that equaling the accomplishments of Man on Earth!" he added with a snicker.

Cap regarded him silently for a moment, a queer smile hovering at the corners of his mouth. "Youthful intolerance and cynicism is a wonderful thing, youngster," he said. "It gives one the confidence to attempt miracles—and sometimes to accomplish them. However, it also has its disadvantages. It leads one to be didactic in his assertions and beliefs. It cramps his point of view to a narrow uncompromising fanaticism concerning any deviation from his own mean little path of experience."

"Don't preach!" snapped Udeen.

"Won't," said Armstrong. "But maybe someday you'll recall this:—If you come to know these strange creatures of Venus as well as I did on our first expedition, you'll realize that, notwithstanding their fantastic appearance according to our standards, their minds—yes—even their souls, are built of divine stuff—by any standard!"

## CHAPTER II

### Storm on Venus

SEVEN endless weeks dragged by like seven ages of Eternity for Dale Udeen, before the crisper days of a Venusian autumn brought a progressive thinning of the almost viscous white atmosphere outside the tiny shelter.

Gradually the dissolving veil permitted the Button's impatient occupants an increasingly more comprehensive view of the almost impervious network of interlacing botanical miracles which hugged the little clearing of the colonists in close embrace.

Mighty misshapen fronds mingled with coiling snaky tendrils and hideous bulging stems in weird portrayal of the astounding success of an utterly alien symbiosis.

Dale Udeen followed the retreating wisps of mist with eager, searching eyes, and each new miracle brought a dozen wondering questions.

Cap Armstrong met each new interrogatory outburst with an understanding patience that was utterly wasted on his youthful companion.

"Damn it all, Cap!" Udeen exploded, turning to face his all-suffering informant. "Why in the name of all that's holy do I have to mope here in this stinking Button? Why can't I go outside and see and investigate these things for myself—instead of sitting here listening to your wild



yarns about them! The mists are almost gone,—so what in the devil is holding us back now?"

"Our common sense," returned his companion. "If you'll stop and think, you'll remember I told you that the Venusian flora attains a state of metabolism paralleling Earthly growth only during the winter months.

"During the summer, a blanket of water vapor is so dense that not enough sunshine reaches the surface to enable the plants to manufacture their sustenance through photosynthesis. They simply 'hibernate' during the warm season, and wait for the thinning of the cloud bank

to allow penetration of the essential solar energy."

"Well?—" snapped Udeen. "What's all that got to do with us?"

"Plenty," said Armstrong quietly. "While the plants are resting, they no longer extract carbon dioxide from the atmosphere to synthesize carbohydrates. Exactly the reverse is true,—they use oxygen and give off CO<sub>2</sub> as the necessary by-product of a sustaining metabolism during their non-productive months. As a consequence, at the end of the summer season, the air has an excess of CO<sub>2</sub>, and an insufficiency of oxygen. So, we must wait until the renewed growth of plant-

life again renders the atmosphere fit for human consumption."

"How long?" was Udeen's impatient query.

"Month," said the veteran laconically.

**H**OWEVER, for once Cap Armstrong was decidedly wrong. It wasn't a month—nor even a day more that they were to spend in their tiny shelter.

That very evening came an event which both disclosed the reason behind the peculiar flat dome-shaped construction of the Earth-colony Buttons, and demonstrated the inadequacy of Man's somewhat dubious supremacy over versatile Nature.

Armstrong was sitting at his improvised desk, writing interminably in his voluminous diary.

Udeen was lying on the low couch, watching with sullen eyes and wondering what the veteran could possibly find to write about, when a hushed murmur crept through the thick plastic wall of the Button. It was an indescribably melancholy sighing that brought Udeen to his feet with a startled exclamation.

"Hear that, Cap?" he asked, turning apprehensive eyes toward his companion.

The older man nodded and hurried to the shelter's sole window.

That first faint lamenting murmur was now a harsh toneless moan that grated on Udeen's nerves like an off-key organ note.

Armstrong turned from the glassite window, and his face was grave. "Post-Equinoxial storm," he said. "Cooling air of this hemisphere rushing to the warm hemisphere. Better be getting ready. Can't tell what'll happen, you know."

Udeen nodded and turned to the telephone in the corner, by which they maintained contact with the occupants of the nine other shelters in the little clearing.

He gave the nine rings which was the emergency signal calling all the group,

and waited impatiently until all had reported in.

"Button No. 1, Udeen speaking. Hurricane arising, wind from approximate magnetic North. Prepare for emergency. Don space-suits and oxygen helmets and make everything tight. Communication may be cut off any minute,—and then it's every man for himself. Good luck!"

Udeen hung up and turned to help Armstrong, who was lashing all movable objects in the shelter to the eye-bolts set in the floor.

**A**FTER everything was fastened to their satisfaction, Cap unpacked the two space suits and helmets from their metal container and handed one outfit to Udeen.

Silently the two stripped off their outer clothing and donned the pliable rubberoid suits and plasticoid helmets, leaving the visor plates open.

Now the rising torrent of air from the cooling polar region lashed around the tiny hemisphere in a gargantuan wave of booming roaring sound. Sand and gravel scoured the rounded dome. Rocks as large as baseballs rebounded with a deafening clamor from the plastic walls. Mighty misshapen fronds and strange writhing tendrils slung around the Button like malignant ghostly entities striving to reach the two Earthmen within.

Higher and higher grew the ululant whine of the lashing winds as the fury of the storm climbed toward an unimaginable peak.

The dome shelter quivered in ghastly resonance to the battering waves of maddened atmosphere. The lashed furnishings danced and strained at their fastenings as if imbued with a hideous life of their own. The eye-bolts which extended down through the base of the Button, and deep into the rich Venusian soil, groaned and grated as the mighty forces gained a grip on even the sloping dome.

The two men looked at each other in silence, then Udeen stepped forward with outstretched hand.

"Well—" he said, with an apologetic smile, "—Just in case,—Cap, Old Scout."

Armstrong grasped the gloved hand in his own, and his eyes met Udeen's in a look of mutual understanding.

An eye-bolt across the room snapped off its shaft with a report like an express rifle, and the men stepped back and hurriedly dropped their visors into place, tightening the clamps securely.

Now the mounting tide of forces battered with unbelievable intensity against the Button, buffeting it so violently the two men could barely stay on their feet.

Udeen grasped the edge of the desk to retain his balance, and turned to Armstrong.

"Cap—" he shouted, his voice a thin whisper above the gloating drone of sound.

—And then it happened! A discordant crash of sound exploded against the tiny shelter with terrific force. The anchoring steel bolts snapped like match sticks.

Udeen's scream of warning was utterly lost in the roaring torrent of noise that lifted the Button from its base and flung it like a leaf before the racing blast of tortured air.

### CHAPTER III

#### The Volans

**D**ALE UDEEN opened his eyes and instinctively grabbed for support. Slowly his tensed muscles relaxed as his clearing mind grasped for the significance of what he saw.

He was lying on a soft resilient mound in a room whose walls were of stone-grey, and around him loomed queer incomprehensible masses of gleaming metal.

Udeen pushed himself up on one elbow, and the pain of the effort brought back a

flood of memory:—The storm that had lifted the Button from its moorings; the few seconds of buffeted agony as it hurtled before the blast; —then sudden darkness and oblivion.

Udeen groaned and painfully lowered himself back to a comparatively comfortable position, his mind furiously at work on the enigma of where he was and how he had arrived. His eyes searched the room eagerly for some trace of his grizzled partner, Armstrong, but there was nothing but those strange intricate mechanisms which reminded Udeen of nothing so much as experimental apparatus in a scientific laboratory.

A thousand questions swarmed through his aching brain in unrelated succession: Where were his unseen benefactors? Had the colony of Earthmen survived the fury of the Venusian storm, or had all gone to their deaths on the wings of the hurricane? Was Armstrong dead? Was he, Dale Udeen, the only human survivor on an utterly alien planet?

His befuddled reverie was rudely interrupted by the appearance of a nightmare shape in the low-arched opening which was the sole entrance to the room.

Udeen cried out in terror and loathing apprehension. He wrenched his battered body erect, tried to turn and flee from this demonic apparition of an unwholesome dream.

A grotesque and hideous creature stood framed in the doorway, like the preternatural materialization of one of anamorphic monsters. Repulsive squat reptilian lines mingled shockingly with characteristics Man associates only with the eternally mysterious family of Arthropods. But the thing that brought a sudden surge of nausea to Udeen was the faint, the haunting but unmistakable touch of mammalian resemblance in this frightful composite of a dozen genera.

In frantic desperation Udeen crouched for a horrible battle to certain death with

the alien creature, when strange irrelevant thoughts came unbidden to his mind—

"Queer," he muttered. "Must look as outlandish to the monster as it does to me. Maybe I look like a horrible exaggeration of certain tendencies to it, just as it appears to me as a frightful mixture of a thousand opposing elements."

Then he realized that those thoughts would not have occurred of their own volition, under the stress of the present crisis. They were the intrusive convictions of an alien intelligence—the thoughts of the anamorphic monster in the doorway!

Udeen relaxed a little and stared at the fantastic creature. The foot-long flexible antennae above the hideous skull moved with a sinuous caressing grace that Udeen could have sworn was intended to convey reassurance and good-will.

Suddenly the Earthman understood. This was one of the strange Venusian creatures encountered by Armstrong on the first expedition. And in Armstrong's opinion, the Venusians were extremely intelligent, and affable and kindly in nature.

Udeen relaxed, sinking back on his 'bed' as the weakness of his battered body took ascendancy over temporary stimuli.

**T**HE Venusian creature moved toward him with slender antennae oscillating reassuringly. Udeen moved apprehensively, and immediately there came the knowledge that it meant him no harm—meant only to administer to his needs.

With mingled gratefulness and loathing, Udeen suffered the Venusian to rub his tortured muscles with a faintly fragrant oily liquid which the creature poured from a metal container which it carried in one of its ten sinuous tentacles.

And all the while those writhing prehensile arms were tenderly massaging the pain from Udeen's body, the delicate an-

tennae moved rhythmically, and a lethargic sense of well-being crept through his mind, bringing a drowsy contentment. In a few moments he drifted into deep and restful sleep.

When Udeen awakened, he was amazed at the complete absence of pain and soreness. He felt as well or better than he had since leaving Earth—and was immediately impatient to learn of his companions' fate, and of the strange creature who had ministered to his hurts so tenderly.

As if in answer to a call, the Venusian monster appeared in the doorway and a query formed in Udeen's mind as if it were a thought of his own.

"You are feeling better?" was the solicitous import of the strange communication.

"Very much!" Udeen said aloud, forgetful of Armstrong's tale of the Venusians' complete lack of any auditory apparatus.

The mobile antennae moved in understanding, and Udeen gained the impression of the gratified satisfaction.

Then memory of the disaster flooded back to his mind, and he asked with fearful apprehension:

"My companion—Armstrong—is he—allright?"

The answer came hesitantly, sorrowfully:

"No. He—is no more. We could not bring back his vanished consciousness to the mutilated flesh. I am sorry."

Udeen felt the numbing weight of a great loss. His shoulders sagged, and moisture crept unbidden to his eyes.

"And the rest—" he said dully. "—they are gone too?"

Again the compassionate answer came, "Yes—they too. The storm of the Change was furious beyond precedence this period. We were unable to rescue any save you."

Udeen knew all the agonizing panic of a diver severed from his life-line on the ocean floor; knew the numbing terror of



one hopelessly lost in the intricate mazes of an utterly lightless cavern.

But they at least had a slender chance of rescue—a possibility of returning to the familiar world of Man and his friends. He, Dale Udeen, had none!

As if in sympathetic understanding of his emotion, Udeen caught the compassionate, comforting message of the alien creature:

"Perhaps it will not be as bad as it now seems," came the thought. "We *Volons* differ surprisingly little mentally from you of Earth, notwithstanding our grotesque physical appearance from your point of view. Mayhap you will come to understand us—to enjoy our companionship, our pleasures to the extent of at least lessening your sense of loss to an endurable degree."

Udeen's face contorted in a grimace of disgust. He—a human—come to enjoy the companionship of inhuman monstrosities hideous beyond belief? He, an Earthly image of the divine Creator ever to more than loathe the sight of a Caliban creature whose very presence brought a surge of nausea?

Udeen sneered at the thought, unmindful of the blow he dealt the Venusian's friendly attempt to comfort a lonely other-world creature.

**T**HE Earthman racked his mind for some possible chance of again reaching Earth—and knew there was none—for the rocket-ship was unquestionably strewn over a thousand miles of Venus' alien surface. He fondled the hope that another ship might be sent from Earth—and knew he was fostering a delusion, for the rare materials of half a century's production had gone into the construction of the single ship and its fuel.

Udeen looked up at the Venusian, and his words were vicious with his frustrated longing for Earth and humankind.

"Very likely," he said bitterly, "—that

I should come to respect something more repulsive than the foulest things in our jungle swamps; something that is a blasphemous parody on the very meaning of Life!"

For a long time the Venusian regarded Udeen with wide-set faceted eyes, and the Earthman understood that his words had hurt the creature deeply, but had not changed its compassionate determination to ease his lonely exile on an alien world.

In the days that followed—bitter in his isolation from everything even remotely familiar to his experience, Dale Udeen spurned the friendly overtures of the 'Volons', as the Venusians termed themselves, and gave a thousand provocations which a less tolerant people would have revenged in a manner befitting Udeen's actions.

However, all the Venusians, and particularly Dale's original benefactor whom he came to know as 'Kaldee', treated the Earthman with the same unchanging consideration and friendliness he had encountered from the first.

Gradually Udeen learned of the great civilization of the *Volons*, painstakingly constructed in vast caverns beneath Venus' surface.

With Kaldee, he viewed the huge underground cities of broad avenues and many-angled buildings, all of the clearest rose-colored crystal. He saw the tremendous subterranean factories with their almost humanly intelligent mechanisms which performed their myriad of duties with noiseless efficiency.

He learned of the benevolent governmental system by which eternal peace and order was maintained throughout the world of the *Volons*. He learned that two types of *Volons* developed from the immature fetuses cared for in the developmental and educational institutions of the nation.

One was the Subjective, or Introspective type, from whose ranks the scientists, the inventors, the artists, were drawn. The

other was the Objective, as typified by Udeen's companion, Kaldee. From this group came the educators, the advisors and constructive supervisors.

Absolutely no distinction was made between the two contrasting types as to rank or class. Each had the same privileges as the other, and all worked harmoniously toward the common good.

Slowly Udeen came to realize, in part, the truth of Armstrong's assertion of the superiority of Venusians over humans—for how many of Earth's noble citizens would work day after day in the unselfish effort to benefit mankind as a whole, with no promise of personal gain?

Slowly he came to understand and to respect the personality which dwelt within the fantastic body of Kaldee, his constant companion. He began to alter his own intolerant and cynical views of anything outside his own little path of experience.

More and more, with the passing days, Udeen recalled and comprehended Armstrong's warning against intolerance and didacticism. More and more he realized that beauty of mind and soul is *not* peculiar to the genus *homo sapiens*.

#### CHAPTER IV

##### Forzani

ONE day Kaldee led the Earthman down through tortured, dimly lighted passages—far below the mighty caverns of the cities. At Udeen's questions, the Venusian seemed singularly reticent—far less communicative and inclined to a spontaneous good humor than ever before in Udeen's memory.

Before long, a low murmur grew to a vibrant roar that shook the solid rock of the passage floor.

At last the two emerged into a vast amphitheater whose magnificent extent was illumined with a lambent reflected glow from the huge pit at its center.

As they neared the rim of the pit, Udeen felt the radiant heat of a mighty conflagration, and knew that he beheld the upper manifestation of the terrific volcanic inferno deep in Venus' substance.

At Dale's unspoken question, Kaldee turned, and there was a strange ineffable sadness—an enigmatic despondency in the mental message the Earthman caught.

"This is Forzani, the entrance to the seething heart of Venus—and the fiery tomb of a million Volons! Forzani is replete with traditions of ancient sacrifices in our race's indiscreet youth. It is haunted by the souls of Volons who have found themselves incapable of continuing a frustrated material existence. It is the resting place of those of our people whose affections for another have been thwarted or unreciprocated."

Kaldee's thoughts grew vague and unintelligible, but the Earthman sensed an ineffable haunting sorrow in the creature's mind.

"Forzani," mused Udeen, "the Kilauea of Venus—the River Styx of a strange and fantastic race. Forzani the beautiful—Forzani the terrible!"

Kaldee slowly turned away, and Udeen followed, with one last glance at that vast flaming liquid pool which held the heart of a planet in its fiery depths.

During the dark and torturous trip back through the ancient passages, neither of the strange pair voluntarily exchanged communications, but both caught the strange, melancholy thoughts which each fought to repress. Thoughts that were not so strange of themselves, but for the esoteric similarity and grotesqueness of their objectives.

In the days that followed, secure and comfortable in the vast underground civilization of the Volons, Dale Udeen struggled with a quixotic unrest that resisted all his attempts at analysis. An unrest which the Earthman sought to attribute to his isolation from Earth and humans

—and knew that he was wrong—was fearfully evading the fantastic but none-the-less real issue.

He sought to crowd out the strange insatiable ache by pursuing his study of the Volons and their civilization with a frenzied eagerness which both astounded and pleased the amiable Venusians.

Udeen saw less and less of his companion, Kaldee, until it became increasingly apparent that the creature was purposely avoiding him.

**T**HE knowledge brought a haunting pain that drove the Earthman to the limits of bodily endurance. In time, he became a student assistant in the great genetics laboratory which formed a single unit of many hundreds in the vast scientific center of the Volon city, and spent every waking moment in the huge gleaming laboratories.

He met and worked with the aristocracy of Volon science. He learned new and fantastic truths which transcended Man's Earthly knowledge as the sun overwhelms a star's feeble glimmer. But always there was that terrible insatiable longing for something—something Udeen no longer dared consider.

The Earthman's tortured efforts to occupy his mind to the exclusion of all else brought him an increasing recognition among his Venusian associates, and in time he was given the opportunity of penetrating to the inner sanctum of the Genetics department—the laboratory of the almost fabulous "Okar".

The genius of the aged Venusian scientist had recognized the possibilities of the Earthman's determined zeal, and he offered Udeen the honor of an assistantship under his regime.

Udeen gratefully accepted, and began his life under the sternly disciplined but tremendously able leadership of Okar with an eagerness that astounded the Venusian savant.

He counted chromosomes. He saw and catalogued the gene determinants through the great electron microscopes. He watched and even aided in the artificial production of living tissue, and the molding of that tissue into rude forms of life.

Then, one day while Udeen was busy with a new experiment on the transfer of genes from one chromosome to another, he heard a soft step behind him. An unexplainable surge of joy swept through his mind, and he turned with a glad cry of greeting for his erstwhile companion, Kaldee.

For a moment, Udeen caught an overwhelming rush of tender inquiry and affection, then the creature closed its mind to the Earthman and became stiffly formal in congratulating him upon his success and questioning him concerning his work with Okar.

Udeen felt a tearing sadness at the almost outright rebuff, and answered the inquiries with lifeless monosyllables while his mind fled furiously along a thousand paths in frantic search for some solution to a fantastic enigma.

**H**E REMEMBERED with an infinite shame, his imperious ridicule of Armstrong's claim that the Venusians were superior to humans. He recalled his inexcusable insulting of the "revolting anamorphic monster"—and realized with an ineffable sorrow that that same "revolting monster" had come to mean tremendously more to him than anything on Earth—or in the heavens!

Udeen at last had allowed full recognition of the haunting knowledge which he had steadfastly forced from his mind during the long months of loneliness. He realized with a start of surprise that the admission did not evoke the feeling of self-loathing and disgust he had foreseen and dreaded.

Instead, a paean of joy and exultation rang through his heart, dulled only by the

sorrowful realization of the insurmountable barriers existing between two creatures of different planets—and of alien genera!

But were the barriers so insurmountable? Was not there some solution—some requirement for a love so great it transcended racial differences as wide as the vast abysses of the heavens?

Udeen's emotion overcame restraint, and tumbled from his lips in a flood of words that tore aside Kaldee's aloof reserve—and revealed a replica of the Earthman's transcendent devotion.

Okar, busy at his work across the laboratory, caught the import of the scene, and slowly crossed the room to stand solemnly before the two.

"My children," was his compassionate message, "I realize and sympathize with your dilemma. I know, far better than you imagine, the magnitude of your emotion—" The savant paused for a moment, and Udeen caught a glimmer of strange, incredible episodes in the scientist's past, then he continued, "And I know far better than you, the magnitude of the barrier between you!"

Udeen nodded in sorrowful understanding, but Kaldee's delicate antennae vibrated with emotion, and a flood of protest lashed the savant.

"Why is the barrier between us insurmountable?" was Kaldee's vehement query. "Why cannot our barrier be dissolved—as was another long ago—in your own past?"

Okar started perceptibly, and Udeen caught another glimpse of an incredible drama in the savant's past.

The aged Venusian drew himself erect, and his reply was stern.

"That was a mistake, a mistake so grave that our civilization trembled on its foundations because of it!"

Udeen caught the savant's terrible sorrow as he continued.

"A mistake which under no circum-

stances will I see duplicated so long as there is life within me!"

Kaldee's vehemence was replaced by a wistful sorrow as the Venusian pled their case.

"But why, Okar, why? Need an unforeseen tragedy in your case be duplicated in our own? Tell me why!"

The savant's answer was grim, "Because a love so great can never be barren! Because it is the vicarious happiness of two beings against the destiny of a great race—perhaps of intelligent life in the entire universe! No, Kaldee, it can not be done!"

## CHAPTER V

### Okar's Story

**I**N THE lonely days that followed his temporary reunion with Kaldee, the Earthman's sorrow was mingled with a puzzled wonder concerning Kaldee's reference to a strange episode in Okar's past—and his own sketchy glimpses of the Venusian savant's secret thoughts. He plied the scientist relentlessly with a thousand queries, until at last the Venusian acceded to his demands for an explanation.

"Long ago," he began, "perhaps two hundred Earthly years, I made the discovery which started me on the road to scientific preeminence." Okar paused, then continued bitterly. "And incidentally it also brought about a tragedy which has eaten away my very soul in the long dreary years of my unhappy, friendless existence.

"If it had been only my happiness at stake, it would not have been so horrible. But, you see, in my blindness, I jeopardized the future of my race—even the existence of sentient life!

"I created a chimera which had to be destroyed to save a planet—and with that destruction went my hopes and dreams—all my chances for joy and happiness. At



least in this life," the Venusian added slowly.

Udeen's impatient, "Well?" brought the savant from his reverie, and he continued:

"Long ago the Volons were not the only race on Venus, nor were they even the most advanced.

"A strange type of life was produced and nurtured in the vast caverns which we now occupy, far back in the primal days of Venus' youth, and reached the peak of its advancement long before the Volons on Venus' surface had developed the first rudiments of intelligence.

"When Volon civilization began to

reach a period of scientific curiosity, an exploratory party discovered an entrance to this vast series of caverns. They entered and found the remnants of a once-mighty race living amidst crumbling and decaying grandeur.

"There was a great battle, which, by reason of the softened decadence of the troglodyte race, ended in favor of the Volons. The victorious Volons returned to the surface, and in time persuaded their race to forsake the rigorous climatic conditions of the planet's surface for the safety and comfort of the great caverns.

"The Volons, by reason of their inherent racial vigor and greater numbers

soon crowded the remaining troglodytes from the major caverns into small secondary caves, where the 'Drali', as we came to know them, continued their progressive deterioration.

"At last, when I had just reached maturity, there remained but two of the once all-powerful Drali, and while I was struggling with the first rudimentary glimmer of my Great Idea, the last of the troglodytes was born. Within a month after the birth of the strange bit of life, the two parents succumbed to the inevitable, and the fantastic infant was left alone—a helpless and pitiful fragment of a race which once had attained to inconceivable heights!

"The strange infant was removed to a magnificent nursery building created by a sympathetic Volon populace especially for the queer little waif.

**“YEARS** passed, and my Great Idea was evolving slowly into accomplished fact. I had been eagerly following an involved cytological research which gave promise of astounding results—results which meant an almost infinite control over Life itself!

"It had begun with my discovery that the hormone and enzyme secretions of body glands held the key to the formation and replacement of all tissue, and in fact—the secret of protoplasmic formation!

"I found that male could be transformed to female, and vice versa, through an exchange of the gonads, or by injection of the opposing hormones. I found that parts from one animal, when grafted upon even another species, soon attained all the characteristics of their new host, and in time became indistinguishable from the original parts—if a high enough rate of metabolism were maintained.

"After extended experimentation, I prepared a composite of the hormones of one species of lower animal. I injected this composite, which contained hormones

of all the vital glands in correct proportions—into the body of another species.

"The results surpassed my wildest hopes—the second animal within a week attained all the characteristics of the species from which the hormones had been derived!

"A hundred repetitions of the experiment only served to establish its infallibility—and I was ready for my supreme gesture!

"I called a conference of all the able scientists of that day and put my proposition before them for consideration. I asked that I be allowed to prepare a hormone composite of our—the Volon species—and inject it into the body of the 'Drali' waif, who was now attaining maturity!

"My proposal brought a storm of protest and condemnation, but I staunchly maintained my stand. I repeated my experiments on lower animals before them. I displayed my tabulated records of previous experiments. I dramatized the lonely existence of the last descendant of a race which the Volons had helped to destroy. I called upon their sentiment, their pity, their sense of fair-play—and at last I won them over!

"I worked day and night in the preparation of my hormone composite. I calculated and recalculated the proportions down to the last decimal place, and then repeated the entire procedure to obviate any possibility of error.

"Finally I was ready, and the strange lone survivor of the Drali race was injected with the hormone composite.

"Perhaps it was mere chance; perhaps it was an obscure and esoteric plan of Fate—but whatever the reason—the Dralimetanorph developed into a delicately formed and transcendently beautiful Volon female!

"Not only were her physical characteristics unsurpassable—but she showed unmistakable evidence of possessing a mind far above the Volon average!

"Naturally it fell my lot to supervise the subsequent education of the metamorph in preparation for her entry into Volon life. She proved an exceedingly apt and diligent student, and eventually—what has happened to many a tutor—happened to me:—I fell in love with my pupil!"

**O**KAR paused and regarded Udeen with wistful, sympathetic eyes. "That will not seem so fantastic to you, my friend of an alien world, for you too have found that species is not an inalienable barrier to affection!"

"However," he continued, "it is only too surely an utterly unalterable barrier to happiness!"

"To resume my story, Lanil, my pupil, returned my affection, and in time we registered our contract of union with the authorities and began our conjugal life.

"I was sublimely happy in my life with Lanil—the blind unseeing happiness of a sublime fool!"

"It was not until I knew that Lanil was with young, that I began to discover the hideous, the unspeakably horrible chimera I had actually created. It was only by accident that I discovered something which eventually led to the revealing of the whole hideous truth.

"I discovered some notes in our private laboratory which indicated that Lanil was dabbling in the chemics of venoms—venoms so virulent that a billion to one dilution would still be instantly fatal to any life!"

"When I questioned her, she vehemently denied all knowledge of the notes. I said no more of the matter, and bided my time, watching her carefully without her knowledge.

"A short time later, Lanil gave birth to our offspring."

Okar paused, shuddering with an infinite horror of the memory.

"The sight of that hideous monstrosity

is seared in my brain with an indelibility which a thousand years of cleansing time could never erase!"

"You see, I had brought about a metamorphosis of the physical aspects of Lanil's body—even to the form and number of nuclear chromosomes with their gene-determinants—but I could not alter the inherent characteristics contained in the cytoplasm of the germ cells—characteristics which are determined by some esoteric quality of cytoplasmic molecular structure."

The Earthman nodded slowly as he recalled various experiments which had been conducted on Earth, in the field of cytoplasmic inheritance. He remembered that one of the first such was made by Dr. Ethel Harvey of Princeton, who disproved the theory that the chromosomes of the germ-cell nucleus are the sole carriers of distinctive features of heredity. She had taken the eggs of sea-urchins and completely removed the nuclei with the contained chromosomes. Yet the eggs had started development without the slightest vestige of a chromosome!

Okar continued, and his thoughts were laden with an infinite sorrow,

"It was at this time that I discovered the whole ghastly reason behind Lanil's dabbling in venoms. She had been living a life of lies,—living and working with the sole fanatical goal of revenge for the destruction of her race!

"She was almost prepared to loose on Venus a self-perpetuating vaporous venom which would erase the last trace of life from the planet—and would inevitably filter into space to eventually traverse the void on the wings of light-pressure to all habitable worlds!"

Udeen waited with bated breath for Okar's message. At last it came.

"Forzani—" the Venusian savant continued wearily, "Forzani is the vast flaming tomb of Lanil and her child. I de-

stroyed them! And with her died all my capacity for joy—for love knows no sin, even treachery!

"Now you know," Okar completed slowly, "why I will not accede to Kal-dee's request that one of you be metamorphosed to the superficial characteristics of the others."

## CHAPTER VI

### Irreversible!

A YEAR dragged by like an infinite eon to Dale Udeen, who pursued his work in the laboratories with a listless routine, while his soul cried out against the agony of eternal separation from Kaldee.

Time after time he besought Okar to give him one last chance for happiness by subjecting him to the composite hormone treatment. Each time, upon Okar's refusal, he threatened to eventually discover the process for himself.

But he knew his threats were abortive; knew that endless years of research would be required to grasp even the rudiments of a usable knowledge of the intricate enzymes.

Heart sick, he returned to his periodic pleas to the Venusian savant, and, to his infinite surprise,—one day Okar acceded to his demand!

"All right," the scientist reluctantly agreed, "but do not blame me for the consequences. Remember that, whatever happens, I have only done what I thought best."

The Earthman pondered often and long on Okar's enigmatic and ambiguous statement while he helped the scientist in the laborious preparation of the hormone composite.

At the last, after the strange enzyme solution had almost been completed, Udeen felt a queer hesitancy in submitting to the injection. Some esoteric in-

ner voice seemed to warn him of an unforeseen climax to this almost metaphysical tampering with Life. It was like a warning. . . .

Impatiently he thrust aside that psychic unease, and urged Okar to speed the consummation of their efforts.

Finally came the time when the Earthman's body was immersed in a complex solution of organic salts, and his veins injected with the precious hormone composite.

His mind was dulled to a semi-stupor by sedative drugs,—but even through the protective anesthesia of their influence, the terrible,—the soul-rending pangs of a cataclysmic transformation tore at his nerves like malignant, utterly corrosive acids.

Every fibre,—every atom of his body and soul quivered and flinched from the unendurable agony of a thousand tortured deaths.

Every nerve fought to resist the searing twisting pain of a thousand alien and conflicting impulses.

Time raced through a millenia of centuries for Udeen's tortured consciousness during the hour of the metamorphic transition,—and at last the agony faded to an occasional sharp twinge which told of last-minute adjustments in delicate neural chains.

Weak, and deathly sick from an hour of terrible suffering, Udeen was, of necessity, lifted bodily from the liquid bath by a solicitous Okar.

After an extended period of rest on the resilient mound which was a Volon couch, Udeen at last felt strong enough to determine the success of the transition.

HE TOTTERED weakly to his feet—and found that he was standing on six limbs! He paused, undecided,—then felt the twitching of twin nerves at either side of his head, and knew that he pos-



sessed a pair of the delicate Volon antennae.

Udeen turned to the intently watching scientist, and he telepathed his thoughts with an ease and facility which amazed him.

"It's successful! Oh, Okar—It's come true!"

The Venusian's thoughts came back with an unprecedented clarity, and Udeen was puzzled at the complete lack of satisfaction;—at the compassionate sorrow in the other's message.

"Yes, my son. The transformation was successfully completed."

A sudden movement at the entrance to the laboratory drew their attention, and the two turned to face—a human being!—A girl!

She walked hesitantly toward them with slow, graceful steps, and Udeen marvelled at the beauty,—the consummate loveliness and perfection of every delicate feature,—of every soft curve of her exquisite figure!

Suddenly he knew;—knew that this lovely girl who stood before him was—Kaldee!

A myriad of puzzled questions swarmed through his brain in torrential confusion. A thousand garbled solutions for this enigma struggled for supremacy in his bewildered mind.

Then he saw the look of utter terror on the girl's face;—saw the finger of accusation she pointed at Okar. As in a dream, he caught the import of her condemnation.

"Okar,—Okar! Why did you do it! You knew! Knew that another had discovered the secret of your hormone composite! Knew that I planned to utilize it to attain human form!"

The irrevocable horror of his forever-lost love gripped him. Kaldee continued, piteously, her whole soul apparent in her words.

"You knew that one transition is all the metabolism of living protoplasm can withstand; knew that when we both had once undergone the metamorphosis, neither could return to his former state! Oh God! How could you do this to us?"

Okar's answer came slowly; weighted with an infinite compassion and pity for them.

"Yes, my child. I did. I know that you revile my action as the vilest collusion,—the most unspeakable treachery. But, you see, I could not allow a few moments of questionable happiness for two creatures to alter—perhaps destroy—the destiny of a Universe!

For it is not in the plan of Fate that we lowly ones should tamper with immutable Life!"

**F**ORZANI flamed in all its molten glory.

And on the vast circular rim of that fiery pool of Venus' heart stood an aged and weary figure.

Strange was this creature, Okar the Venusian who swayed unsteadily on his three pairs of limbs, while delicately tapering antennae wavered slowly at either side of the hideous skull.

Stranger still were the thoughts of the alien creature as he gazed long and sorrowfully into the vast flaming pit whose two most recent voluntary sacrifices were by far the strangest it had ever received.

"Beautiful Forzani, grave of all the hopes and joys and sorrows of my dreary and frustrated existence. Forzani—the molten tomb of two lovers whose like no world has ever known! A human of Venus, and a Volon of Earth.

"Forzani the Beautiful. Forzani the Terrible!

"God help me!—I have done thy will as I have seen it."