

VOL. 1

FEBRUARY, 1940

NO. 1

NOVELETTES

- CHAMELEON PLANET** by Polton Cross 6
Life moved fast on Chameleon Planet—where an ape could become a Superman between meals!
- HALF-BREED** by Isaac Asimov. 38
Half of Earth, Half of Mars—the Tweenie!
- THE LIFESTONE** by Paul Edmonds. 70
For thousands of years the Desert Nations had worshipped the Lifestone. And when Lang stole it he made his biggest gamble—a billion dollars against ten thousand lives!

SHORT STORIES

- WHITE LAND OF VENUS** by Frederic Arnold Kummer, Jr. 26
Five million dollars in *solium* lay at the heart of the legendary White Land—but its guards were the blind and fearsome *kathals*.
- ELEPHANT EARTH** by Gabriel Barclay. 54
When all the living men had died, a dead man came to life again—and found the world ruled by elephants.
- ASTEROID** by Lee Gregor. 62
The monster came down on their homes, sucking them in to a hot and horrible death. And all they could do was to give the men a headache.
- AFTER THE PLAGUE** by Martin Vaeth. 88
Jim Gleeson disappeared, and a new man, the Titan Garth, was born. And after eleven years Jim Gleeson returned, to find a hemisphere devastated by the awful Red Plague, peopled by fugitives and savages.

READERS' FEATURES

- TRUE—NO DOUBT!** by Jon Blummer. 87
- EDITORIAL** 3
- FAN MAGAZINES** 4
- VIEWPOINTS** 103
- BOOK AND FILM REVIEWS** 109

WHITE LAND



Five million dollars in *solium* lay at the heart of the legendary White Land—but its guards were the blind and fearsome *kathals*.

THE thick Venusian jungle was like a steaming, stewing pot of spinach. Fantastic green growths loomed on every hand, towering as high as terrestrial redwoods, giant weeds sprouted in grotesque profusion, while vines, varying in thickness from the diameter of a lead pencil to that of a man's thigh, wove a well-nigh impenetrable barrier on all sides. The jungle was moist to the saturation point; rolling white clouds of mist formed ghostly veils about the masses of lush vegetation. Between the mist and the

canopy of vines overhead, the green hell was plunged into murky gloom, visibility limited to a few shadowy feet. Moreover it was hot, with the kind of heat that transforms a terrestrial's nerves into taut guy-wires.

Carl Dravot's nerves had been in the guy-wire state for days, and were now approaching the breaking point. Stagger-

OF VENUS

By Frederic Arnold Kummer, Jr.



ing along under his heavy pack, he peered with blood-shot eyes at the three figures ahead. Two of them, laden with all manner of camp equipment, were Venusians,

tall antennaed creatures whose stalked eyes and hairy bodies gave them a look of fierceness quite out of keeping with their timid dispositions. In front of the

Venusians was Jeff Vickers, wiry, bronzed, grim-faced, his damp shirt clinging to his muscular torso. Machete in hand he hacked a path through the green barrier, each stroke falling with a monotonous regularity that somehow suggested an automaton.

Dravot stared bitterly at his fellow-terrestrial. Didn't Vickers ever feel tired, he wondered. Wasn't he human? Three weeks he'd held the lead, since leaving the last outpost, driving forward inexorably. And for what? Where. . . .

A flicker of scarlet, seen from the corner of his eye, broke Dravot's reflections. A long tenacle-like vine, covered with brilliant reddish fuzz, lashed out toward him. Too late he recognized it as the wicked Venusian *quero*, that queer growth which has all the kick of an electric eel.

With a smothered gasp Dravot sprang back but, weighed down by the heavy pack upon his shoulders, he was not quick enough. Like a striking boa the scarlet vine curled about his throat, and surging, searing electric current swept through Dravot's body. Desperately he struggled, tried to tear the vine loose, but in vain. Then, as the *quero* poured out its charge, he became motionless, rigid.

"Jeff!" he choked. "Help!"

The two Venusian bearers were crouching upon the muddy ground, horrified. Past them Vickers plunged, his lean brown face tense. One swift stroke of the machete, slashing downward, severed the scarlet vine several feet from Dravot's body. Cut off from the source of current in its roots, the length of vine became limp, dropped from about the terrestrial's neck. Groaning, Dravot slumped to his knees.

"Here!" Vickers handed his companion a flask. "You must have been day-dreaming not to have noticed the *quero*." Then, as Dravot took a long pull at the canteen. "Okay, now?"

"Okay?" Dravot swayed to his feet,

eyes blazing. "Heat, boiling fogs, these devilish vines . . . and you ask me if I'm okay! I'm sick of it, Jeff! Already we've come further into this green hell than any other terrestrial. And why? Where are we heading? What's it all about?"

Vickers hooked his thumbs over his belt, regarded his companion coldly.

"You signed up blind, didn't you?" he said. "To follow me for three months, no questions asked. And you're to get a half share in any proceeds that may accrue from this expedition."

"Proceeds?" Dravot laughed harshly. "What proceeds can you get out of this steaming hot-house? I'm through, finished! Not another step forward do I take until I learn where we're going and why!"

Vickers' grey eyes were flinty. "I've been waiting for this. Well, I suppose we're near enough now." He wheeled to the two tall Venusians. "Make camp here. *Jao Latu!*"

Obediently the bearers commenced work. Ground was cleared, two tough fibroid tents pitched, an electric grill . . . for none of the damp green vegetation could be used as firewood . . . set up. A small but powerful atomic generator was taken from Dravot's pack, connected to the grill, and food placed on to cook.

While the Venusians were thus engaged, Vickers drew Dravot to one side, spoke swiftly, softly.

"You want to know where we're going," he began. "Maybe you think I've been acting mysteriously not to tell you, but I had my reasons. I was afraid . . . afraid you might forget, mention it within earshot of the bearers. One word of where we're heading, and they'd bolt like scared rabbits." Vickers' voice became even lower. "D'you know what's at the center of this damned jungle?"

A look of amazement crossed Dravot's face.

"You mean what they call the White

Land?" he muttered. "I've heard Venusian legends about it. Supposedly the home of the *kathals*, the evil spirits, or some such nonsense. But what do you hope to find. . . ."

"Listen!" Vickers whispered. "Did you ever hear of the *Astrella*?"

Dravot nodded, flicked a large yellow Venusian ant from his wrist. "Sticks in my mind somehow," he muttered. "Like the old terrestrial story of the *Titanic*."

"Both were big accidents," Vickers said, "even if separated by a couple of centuries. The *Astrella* was one of the first spaceships. Was loaded with a bunch of refugees from the Thelist wars of 2103. Over two hundred of them, all of the wealthy class, who were determined to make new homes for themselves as far from war-torn earth as possible. After hiring the *Astrella*, stocking it up with supplies, they found they had about five million dollars left over. Knowing this money would be commandeered if they left it on earth, the refugees converted it into *solium*, the smallest bulk possible, and took it with them. Figured that when things cooled off on earth, they'd use it to buy additional supplies. They took off hastily on the 19th of September, 2104, just beating a squadron of Thelist planes who'd been sent to intercept them, and headed for Mars. Halfway there, they learned via radio that the Thelists had sent a cruiser to Mars, still hot on the trail of that five million. So the refugees shifted their course and didn't say where they were bound for, not wanting to be pursued. On the 8th of December, nearly three months after the *Astrella* left earth the Lunar radio station picked up her call letters and a few disjointed words. And that was all. Two hundred terrestrials, five million in *solium* . . . gone!"

"FIVE million!" Dravot murmured. "And my share would be two and a half! But what makes you think they

crashed in the fabled White Land?"

"This!" Vickers reached into his pocket, drew out a curiously shaped bit of greyish metal, shaped like a nozzle. "Know what it is?"

Dravot examined the piece of metal, shook his head.

"It's a fuel jet!" Vickers exclaimed. "Made of sub-chromite! The kind they used in the firing chambers of the old ships! More, there's the name of a Dutch supply firm stamped upon it and the *Astrella* was built in the Netherlands! I found the nozzle six months ago, strung about the neck of a Venusian chieftain. He said it was a charm, had great powers because it had come from the legendary White Land, the place of spirits, in the center of this big jungle!"

"Good Lord!" Dravot stared excitedly at the bit of metal. "Then . . . then, if your guess is correct, we've only to reach the Whi. . . ."

"Quiet!" Vickers gripped his companion's arm. One of the tall Venusian bearers was teetering toward them, his antennae twitching, his stalked eyes motionless.

"What is it, Honu?"

"Food ready." The bearer motioned toward the array of pots on the electric grill. "You eat now?"

"Right." Vickers slipped the fuel jet into his pocket.

"Come on, Dravot!"

For the next three days the little party ploughed through the wet white mists, knee deep in mud, choked by the noxious vapors of the jungle, reeling from fatigue. Swarms of sharp-stinging ants, clouds of gnats, slimy snakes, beset them, and the vicious vegetation of the Venusian forests made every step a hazard—*queros*, acid-dripping *yaths*, the bright-blossomed, sweet-smelling, carnivorous orchids, huge editions of the prophetically named Venus fly-traps of earth. The heat was terrible, of the turkish-bath variety . . . steamy,

moist, choking. And with each mile forward the jungle grew darker, shadowed by thickening fogs, dense growths until they could see only a pace or so ahead.

It was on the morning of the fourth day that the change became noticeable. Vickers, hacking a path with his machete, studied the towering masses of vegetation with a triumphant eye. As the darkness increased the plant life began to take on a different aspect. The taller trees, the giant ferns that shut off the sun's rays remained the same; the change was in the undergrowth, the rank grass, the head-high weeds. They were, it appeared, becoming less green, whiter!

Pale, like human beings shut off from the sun, these lesser growths began to take on a fungoid appearance. Bleached moss, bone-white lichens, supplanted the tall grass; huge leprous plants, smooth, wan, reminded Vickers of overgrown terrestrial toadstools. Even the vines and creepers had become colorless, waxy, somehow unclean.

"Carl!" Vickers whirled about, his face exultant. "We—we've reached . . ." He broke off at sight of the two Venusians, shadowy figures in the gloom, standing like bizarre robots behind him; their quasi-human faces were drawn with fear, their slender antennae quivering nervously.

"The White Land!" Honu, the shorter of the two, whimpered plaintively. "This place of spirits, of the *kathals*, who live on blood! We no go on! Turn back! Now, before. . ."

"No sale," Dravot said sternly, tapping the atomite gun at his waist. "You try running and I'll blast you all over the jungle! I don't miss often, even in darkness like this!" He paused, wiping the sweat from his forehead. "How about taking five minutes breather, Jeff?"

"Right!" Vickers' voice issued from the shadows ahead. "I want to check my maps, anyhow. We ought to be near the

wreck of the *Astrella*, as I see it. The White Land isn't large, according to legend." He glanced contemptuously at the big shivering Venusians, drew a map-case from his pocket. "I'll need a flash. . ."

"Coming up." Dravot's electric torch cut a swath in the dark mists. "I. . ." He broke off, staring. In the path of the beam of light, the strange white fungus-like growing shriveled, wilted, drooped to the ground, dead! "Look, Jeff! It destroys. . ."

"No!" One of the Venusian bearers sprang toward Dravot, wrenched the flashlight from his hand, and hurled it into the misty darkness. "Never any light here! Never! *Kathals* no know what light is! They come find out!"

"Here you!" Vickers emerged from the gloom, machete in hand. "What's the big idea?"

"*Kathals*" the Venusian moaned. "Never see light here in blackness! Come find out what it is!"

"More of their nonsense," Dravot growled. "They think the evil spirits of the White Land will come to find out what light is!" He glanced about a trifle uneasily. "Can't say as I'd blame them. Between the mists and the foliage above, you can't see your hand before your face! Guess that's why the undergrowth here is so white, mushroom-like! As for these alleged evil spirits, these *kathals*. . ." His voice trailed off into tense silence. "What—what's that?"

JEFF VICKERS stiffened to attention. From the dense foliage about them came a soft rustling sound, like the movement of many moving bodies in the undergrowth. The two Venusians began to mutter invocations, their hairy forms trembling, their protruding eyes wide with horror.

Suddenly Dravot gasped, and Vickers felt as though an icy hand had gripped his stomach. Something was creeping

through the masses of fungi . . . something the like of which they had never in their wildest imagining conceived of. Vague, formless, it seemed partly transparent, part opaque, and it glistened wetly in the gloom. Like some monstrous jellyfish, the size of a barrel, the bloated shape dragged itself along by means of short tentacles, stumpy, boneless arms. No eyes, no mouth, no external organs of any sort were visible. The flaccid form exuded a sickening odor of decay.

All this the two terrestrials took in with one glance, as the nightmare beast crept toward them through the darkness. Suddenly a bubbling scream of terror broke from one of the Venusian's lips and he plunged forward into the jungle. Three steps he took and then his screams turned to cries of despair. Moving with surprising swiftness a slimy shape had wrapped itself about the bearer's knees, brought him tumbling to the ground. In an instant four other jelly-like creatures had emerged from the pallid foliage and the Venusian was buried beneath a mass of writhing, flabby flesh.

"God Almighty!" Dravot hardly recognized his own voice. With shaking fingers he drew the atomite gun at his waist. But before he could raise the weapon to fire, a shapeless opaque form dropped from the network of vines above, landed with stunning force upon his shoulders.

Knocked to his knees, Dravot lost his grip on the gun, dropped it. The thing on his shoulders was like a huge, shellless snail, a giant slug. Slippery tentacles passed about his neck, and the odor of decay was overpowering. Frantically Dravot tore at the tentacles but the slug did not relax its grip.

Vickers, armed only with the machete, dashed across the little clearing. One blow of the keen blade, and the bloated monstrosity on Dravot's shoulders, all but cut in two, fell to the ground.

"Th . . . thanks!" Dravot gasped, stag-

gering to his feet. His neck, he suddenly noticed, was streaming blood; the slug, apparently, like terrestrial leeches or ticks, was capable of penetrating the skin without pain to its victim.

The clearing presented a revolting scene. Both Venusians were down, marked by squirming mounds of slimy flesh. The forest seemed alive with the giant slugs. As Dravot groped about in the darkness for his lost gun, another of the jelly-like creatures dropped from above, landed beside him with a dull plop.

"Never mind the gun!" Vickers gripped his companion's arm. "Got to get out of here! Now! Come on!"

Across the clearing the two men ran, breathless. One of the great slugs attempted to bar their path, but a blow from Vickers' machete split it into two wriggling sections, each portion oozing a dark viscid fluid. Then, hacking, tearing a way through the clumps of white morbid vegetation, the terrestrials sought to escape.

As they plunged into the wan jungle, a ruthless sound was audible behind them. Great bloated shapes were following slowly, inexorably!

Gripped by sudden panic the two men redoubled their efforts. Hindered by the dense mushroom-like growths, weighed down by the packs they had had no time to unfasten, they floundered through the darkness. And always they could hear behind them the slither of unwieldy bodies, the rustle of undergrowth. Hearts pounding, breath coming in gasps, they staggered on, knowing that sooner or later they must drop from exhaustion, fall a prey to the great creeping slugs.

All at once Vickers, in the lead, gave a cry of warning. The ground beneath his feet had become suddenly soft, was oozing about his knees.

Deserately he tried to drag himself free. but the mud, like quicksand, sucked him steadily down.

"Dravot!" he gasped. "Help! A bog . . . !"

DRIPPING blood from his lacerated neck, Dravot stumbled in the direction of Vickers' voice. Advancing as far as he dared into the marsh, he clutched at his companion's hand, dragged him from the sticky black gumbo. Regaining dry ground, Vickers crouched, panting, by a clump of pallid growths. Behind them the rustle of the undergrowth grew louder and huge, ghostly shapes were visible in the shadows.

"Finished!" Dravot chuckled hoarsely. "Take your choice! Death by suffocation in the marsh or . . ."

"My fault." Vickers swayed to his feet, gazed about helplessly; he was empty-handed; the machete having been lost in the mud. "All my talk about a fortune in *solum!* We haven't a chance, now. Sorry, Carl. Those big white devils. . . ."

A rustle in the undergrowth not six feet away interrupted him. Panicky, both men spun about. The sound had come from the weed-grown marsh. Were they surrounded by the giant slugs, Dravot wondered. Fists knotted, eyes bleak, he stared at the masses of leprous vegetation. Suddenly Vickers gasped. The thick warty stalks of two huge weeds had parted and between them stood a girl!

Pale she was, as everything was pale in this White Land, with hair as dark as the sliding shadows and eyes like polished onyx. Her garments were a curious collection of broad leaves and vines.

"Who are you?" she whispered, staring at their muddy, disheveled figures.

"Terrestrials like yourself," Vickers gasped. Then, glancing over his shoulder at the livid, slimy shapes crawling toward them. "The *kathals!*"

"Oh!" The girl's voice broke at sight of the great creatures. "Come! Follow me! Quick!" She turned toward the swamp.

"But" . . . Vickers hesitated . . . "the quicksand . . ."

"There's a path," the girl flung over her shoulder, "that the slugs don't know! Anyhow, they're blind! Can't see! Hurry!"

Vickers, supporting Dravot who was weak from loss of blood, nodded, plunged into the morass after the girl. There followed a nightmare flight which in his exhausted condition he barely remembered. The marsh was overgrown with the eternal pale vegetation, great sprouts and stalks thrusting upward on every hand from the ooze. Huge plants and swirling mists plunged the bog into darkness, cloaked the fugitives in clinging shadows. The heat was stifling and a rank odor of decay permeated the steamy air.

Like a pale noiseless wraith the strange girl led the two fugitives through the weird Venusian fens, twisting, winding, yet always sure of herself. Leaping to a clump of solid vegetation, stepping assuredly into a pool of black mud which, despite its forbidding appearance was only a few inches deep, balancing herself lithely as she walked along the fallen trunk of a huge fern that bridged oily streams.

Vickers, blindly following her slim figure, had long since ceased to wonder. Who this strange, nymph-like terrestrial girl could be, what she was doing in the White Land of Venus—these things meant little now. It was only important that the giant slugs were lost in the distance, that their lives, for the time being, were safe.

Wearily he supported the reeling Dravot, followed his slender guide across the marsh.

At length, after what seemed hours of toil, Vickers noticed that the ground was growing firmer. They were, it appeared, emerging from the morass onto an island, a dry spot in the center of the bog. Suddenly the dark-haired girl paused, gave a shrill, peculiar whistle.

Shapes appeared in the swirling mists ahead.

"Zora?" a deep voice called. "That you, Zora?" A tall man, clad like the girl in leaves and vines, approached them. "I. . . Oh! Who are these?"

"Strangers. Terrestrials, the girl replied. "One of them wounded by the slugs. I do not know how they got here."

"Terrestrials!" The man's voice rose excitedly. "Then perhaps an expedition at last . . . ! Here!" He motioned to the other shadowy shapes. "Carry them to the camp!"

Wiry men, pale, and, Vickers thought, rather undernourished, picked them up, carried them through the clump of towering weeds. Suddenly the strain of the past few hours took its toll and Vickers went limp, dropping a thousand miles into the dark reaches of oblivion.

JEFF VICKERS awoke slowly, his body stiff, his every muscle aching. On all sides there was only the eternal gloom of the White Land and he wondered if he would ever see the bright sunlight of earth again. Then, as consciousness filtered into his numbed brain, he became aware of his immediate surroundings. He was, it seemed, in a bed, a bunk of some sort . . . and beside him rose an iron bulkhead! Rust-flaked, damp with moisture, yet unmistakably the bulkhead of a space ship!

Bewildered, Vickers sat up, glanced about. The cabin was dark but he could see that it was of antiquated design. In a bunk opposite lay Dravot's inert figure.

"Carl!" Vickers exclaimed. "We we're in a space ship! How, in this damned Venusian swamp . . . !"

"Dunno." Dravot raised himself feebly to one elbow. "I wondered myself . . . thought it was . . . hallucination. . ."

A patter of footsteps sounded and Zora, the dark-haired girl, entered the cabin

"You must rest." Very gently she

thrust Dravot back upon his cot. "You have lost much blood." Then, turning to Vickers. "Feeling better, now?"

"Stiff and hungry." He nodded. "But how—what's a space ship doing here?"

"Why, it crashed here. Years ago, before I was born. Dad and Mother used to tell me about it. More than half the people aboard were killed. The survivors had only one desire—to win clear of this marsh and reach civilization, or at least some pleasanter spot for founding their colony. They worked tirelessly, day after day, testing the quagmire for a path that would lead to dry land. Took them months, old Hawkins says. And when they at last mapped out the path, the one along which I led you, and crossed onto the firm ground beyond, the things you call *kathals* fell upon them, drove them back. Many were killed and the rest retreated here to the ship once more. They were only peaceful refugees and had no weapons. . . ."

"Refugees!" Vickers echoed. "Then this is the *Astrella*?"

"Of course!" the girl spoke as though there were no other ships. "Come! The others are waiting outside."

Vickers followed her from the cabin, along a dim corridor. Between the crash and the rust, the ship was a hopeless wreck. Its entire forward section was crumpled like an accordion, its hull cracked in a score of places, its plates all but rusted away. At the end of the corridor the girl stepped through a battered air-lock, swung down to the sodden ground.

In a small cleared space were perhaps a dozen pale scrawny figures, young people for the most part. Descendants, Vickers realized, of the original ship-load of refugees. At sight of him, they came forward eagerly, their faces lit with hope.

"Is it a rescue party at last?" an old man quavered. "Are there other terrestrials beyond the marshes?"

Vickers paused a moment before replying, awed by the strange scene. The towering masses of livid vegetation, the rusty skeleton of the space ship, the wan, semi-savage terrestrials. . . .

Drawing a deep breath, he plunged into his story.

WHEN he had concluded, a hopeless silence fell over the group of refugees.

"Ah, so!" Old Hawkins, a grey-bearded, long-haired ancient, sighed. "Then none knew of your destination, and your bearers killed by the *kathals*! You and your friend are trapped . . . like us!"

"But" . . . Vickers frowned . . . "isn't there some way of fighting clear? If we could overcome the giant slugs. . . ."

"No way." The old man shook his head. "There is no source of power and the ship is a rusty wreck. What weapons have we that can overcome thousands of the *kathals*? One atomite gun could—but we have nothing. Even our food," he pointed to several slabs of mushroom-like vegetation—"must be eaten raw, since there is nothing to burn in this wet, steaming swamp. Three parties we sent to try and carry a message through to civilization, and not one returned. Blind though they are, the *kathals* have great powers of smell, can scent humans, kill swiftly." The old man paused, his far-away eyes on the clouds of mist. "Of the original crew of the *Astrella* I alone survive. For fifty years I have been in this foggy darkness, watching my friends die one by one, watching these children grow to maturity as savages, leaf-clad creatures of the marshes. Our children,"—his gaze swept the circle about him—"weak, pale things from lack of sunlight, knowing only how to hide, cringe, avoid the great slugs! Savages! And we had such great hopes of a splendid colony, a place of science and advancement where all of our race might live in peace, honor, and hap-

piness, far from the intolerance and hatred of war-torn earth! Such a fine dream . . . and such a bitter awakening! Even yesterday, when you and your companion arrived, I had hopes of a rescue party at last, of leaving this gloomy swamp and starting anew in some place of green fields, bright sunlight, clean, cool air. . . . And now, instead of helping us, you and your friend can only become what we are. Sun-starved savages, doomed to this terrible White Land until you die!"

"Until we die!" Vickers' gaze swept the circle of pallid faces and he shuddered. "But there must be some way . . . some weapon to destroy the slugs! Some way to get out of this. . . ." He broke off as a man came racing through the shadows toward them.

"Quick!" Stumbling wearily, the man clutched at old Hawkins' arm. "The *kathals*! I was out foraging and. . . . They've found the path across the swamps! The blood of the wounded stranger left a trail they could scent, follow! See!" He swung about, pointing.

Among the livid stalks of the tall growths, formless shapes were visible, inching relentlessly toward them. A dozen, a score, a hundred, of the big slugs were dragging themselves across the dry isthmus toward the wrecked *Astrella*. Watching, Vickers felt the hair at the back of his neck bristle. A nightmare, it seemed, horrible even on this nightmare planet of Venus.

"Quick!" Zora's voice broke the tense silence. "Into the ship!"

Frantic, the gaunt refugees crowded through the air-lock, slammed it shut. Within five minutes the *Astrella* was surrounded by the slimy shapes . . . shapes that clambered clumsily over the hull, sought to squeeze through the cracks in its rusted plates.

"Oh!" Zora, peering through a port hole, shuddered. "No escape!" She began to sob.

Vickers, detaching himself from the group of panicky refugees, placed an arm about her slight shoulders. "It's all right." He tried to sound encouraging. "We'll pull through somehow."

But in spite of Vickers' attempts at encouragement, the long hours stretched into days without hope of escape. Cut off from their supplies of food and water, the refugees tottered about the wrecked ship like living spectres. Dravot, weakened by the loss of blood, lack of nourishment, babbled incessantly of bright sunlight, of the cool winds of earth. The *Astrella* was like a great metal mausoleum, those days, echoing hollowly to broken voices, to the sound of shuffling, dragging footsteps. The sun's rays blotted out by the rolling clouds of mist above, there was only darkness, peopled by the moist, jelly-like shapes that waited with grim stubbornness about the locked ship. From time to time the half-starved refugees would weep like children, or glare sullenly at Vickers and Dravot whom they held responsible for this calamity. Weakened by years of malnutrition, lack of sunlight, they had little strength or courage with which to face an emergency.

Zora alone seemed to retain any

strength of character, bravery. Daily she guided Vickers about the ship in search of a weapon of some sort; her eyes, accustomed to darkness from childhood, were able to see when he could only grope. From room to room he wandered, poking among the rusty rocket machinery, the empty fuel and food holds, the almost unrecognizable remains of the radio. Odds and ends of every sort were to be had . . . old-fashioned tools, rusty galley equipment, a huge copper landing light, corroded navigators' instruments—all useless.

Once Vickers stumbled upon a square lead chest, was about to open it when Zora stopped him.

"Solium," she said, moistening her cracked lips. "It's pretty, but useless. The older people seem to value it, but I don't know why."

VICKERS threw open the lid of the chest, stared down at the glittering blue grains. Five million dollars worth of the precious metal, enough to hire a fleet of rescue ships. . . . Five million, and they'd gladly trade it for one atomite gun! Laughing harshly, he closed the chest, moved on.

The packs which he and Dravot had worn when attacked by the big slugs were equally useless. His own had been full of medical supplies, a water-purifying unit. Dravot held the atomic generator they had used to run the electric grill; it was a source of almost unlimited power, but what use was power without some method of utilizing it? For a time Vickers toyed with the idea of electrocuting the huge slugs, but the thought of spearing them with live wires was ridiculous. In despair he abandoned his search of the ship.

On the morning of the fourth day old Hawkins died. The other refugees were barely able to crawl. Licking off the moisture that condensed on the rusty plates of the ship helped in some measure to assuage their thirst, but the gnawing pangs of hunger would not be stilled. Thought of the big mushroom-like plants, their staple article of food, not a hundred feet from the ship, brought them to the verge of madness.

Vickers, peering through a porthole into the darkness beyond, shook his head helplessly. The dim white shapes still ringed the ship; they had ceased to climb over the hull, now, and lay like giant blobs of gelatin about the battered hull, waiting for hunger to drive the terrestrials into the open. Beside Vickers stood Zora, her face drawn, pinched. On his bunk across the cabin Dravot was muttering incoherently.

"My fault, all this," Vickers muttered. "My greed. Bringing death to Dravot, to you, to all the others. . . . If only I hadn't tried to find the *Astrella!*"

"If you hadn't," Zora whispered. "I'd never have seen you. It . . . it doesn't matter so much, Jeff, now that I'm with you."

Vickers refused to be consoled.

"No matter what you think," he said slowly, "the others'll die blaming me, hating me. There must be some way to

save them! Some method of . . . but it's hopeless! No escape!" Shoulders sagging, he fell into a despondent silence.

Zora made no reply. The room was quiet except for Dravot's feverish muttering. "Light," he was saying. "Light in a world of darkness! Light that destroys!" "Poor boy," Zora whispered. "Unless he gets food soon. . . ."

With a swift gesture Vickers motioned for her to be silent. Face tense, he bent over Dravot.

"Light destroys!" the wounded man said thickly. "Pretty white flowers gone! All withered . . . gone!"

"Jeff!" Zora whispered. "What is it? What's he saying?"

"Saying?" Vickers squared his shoulders. "Good God! And to think I didn't remember until his delirium! Wait here!" Revived by hope, he ran from the cabin.

When Jeff Vickers returned some five minutes later he was swaying under the weight of the atomic generator and the big copper landing light he had unearthed among the *Astrella's* supplies. Of old-fashioned design, the beacon was no more than two thick carbon sticks placed before a burnished reflector some three feet across. Working swiftly Vickers removed the glass front of the light scraped the reflectors to a gleaming brilliance, and connected the terminals of the generator to the sticks of carbon. At length he bent down, touched a lever, and the powerful little dynamo began to hum.

INSTANTLY a beam of dazzling, blue-white light cut out across the cabin.

"Oh!" Zora staggered back, shielding her eyes. "What is it?"

"What is it?" Vickers repeated, puzzled. Then, smiling, "Of course! I'd forgotten you were born in this darkness, never seen bright light!" He waved back the other emaciated refugees who were crowding through the door of the cabin. "Stand clear! If this works, we're saved!

If it doesn't. . . ." Instead of finishing the sentence he crossed the cabin, pulled open the big air-lock!

As the massive metal door swung open, a dozen of the giant slugs, scenting human life, crawled forward. Zora screamed and the gaunt refugees stood frozen with horror. With a swift movement Vickers swung the big searchlight about, swept the great formless shapes with its beam. And at the touch of the ray of light a strange thing happened. The snail-like creatures began to wither, to shrivel! Great red blotches appeared on their slimy white bodies and they thrashed about with their short tentacles as if in agony! From one to the other Vickers swept the beam of light, until the space about the old ship was strewn with twisting, writhing shapes. In less than ten minutes the entire band of pulpy creatures was destroyed!

"Jeff!" Zora, half-blinded by the dazzling light, stumbled toward him. "How . . . how is it that this white shining thing kills them? I—I don't understand. . . ."

"Simple." Vickers grinned. "It's a matter of conditioning. You see, in this place of darkness, a light, except for the feeble glow that seeps through the clouds of mist, is unknown. And the vegetation, the slugs were unused to it. Even on earth strong sunlight will kill mushrooms, or terrestrial slugs and snails; such things need darkness. And certain insects such as the *grylloblatta campodeiformis* will

die if exposed to a small flashlight's rays. Even human beings, whose skins are toughened to sunlight, can be badly burned, even killed, by sunlight, though they feel no heat."

"These giant slugs were a product of this dark Venusian swamp, had evolved without need of light waves. Wet, translucent, they were like the human eye, which, unshielded by its lid of skin, is highly sensitive to light. The slugs had never been exposed to strong light and it was fatal to them. Just before they jumped us back in the jungle we noticed the white vegetation wither and die before Dravot's flashlight. And when he muttered something in his delirium about light destroying flowers, I remembered." Vickers paused, smiling. "You see? Light is a ray, a radiation. It's just as though human beings were to be subjected to some ray to which they were unaccustomed, for which nature had not given them protection. Light, a normal, necessary radiation to us, was a death ray to the giant slugs!"

"Then . . . then. . . ." Zora murmured. "After we've regained our strength, we'll be able to cross the swamps to civilization."

"More than that, Zora," Vickers whispered. "We're going back to earth. Going home! The Thelist wars are forgotten now, and your people will be heroes rather than refugees. There's a new life ahead for them—and for you and me!"