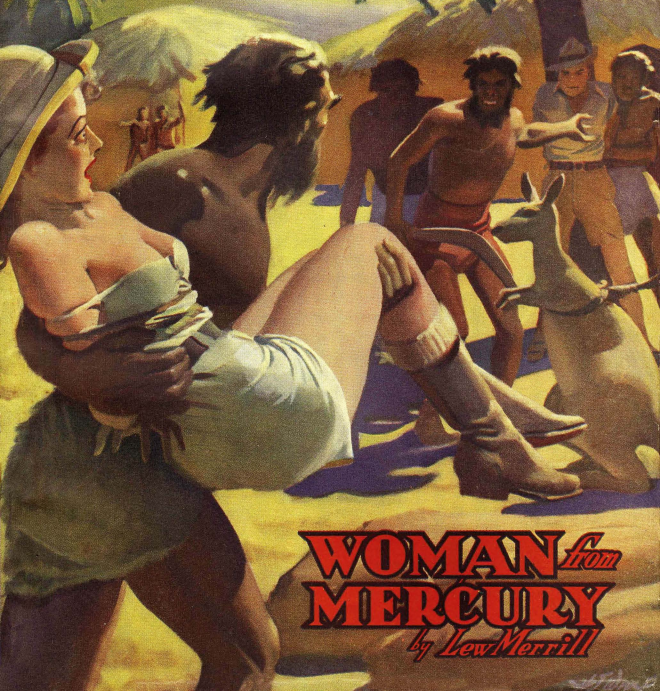


JULY ★

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SPICY-ADVENTURE STORIES



WOMAN *from*
MERCURY
by Lew Merrill

By LEW MERRILL

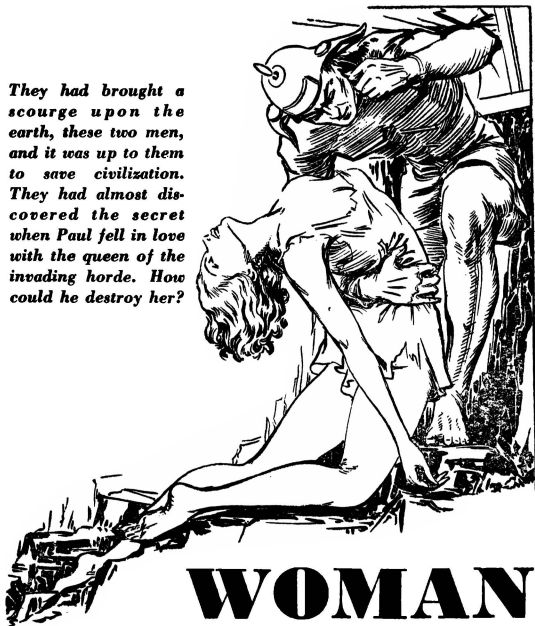
They were suffocating now, but the instinct was to run outside the cave to die. . . .



PAUL LEAVITT'S radio call from the vicinity of the United Space Airport was the first intimation that anything was wrong. It came from his licensed personal transmitter, and reached the *Times-Call* reporter who was assigned to that frequency.

"Something wrong at the Space

They had brought a scourge upon the earth, these two men, and it was up to them to save civilization. They had almost discovered the secret when Paul fell in love with the queen of the invading horde. How could he destroy her?



WOMAN from Mercury

Airport," said the editor. "Go out and see. Try to contact Professor Hartman."

Hartman was in the office of United Space headquarters with the superintendent. He could make nothing of Leavitt's message. "Everything was okay when we

landed from Mercury last night," he said. "Paul decided to sleep at the port. Probably a case of space-shock. Leavitt was acting a little queerly."

"Anything queer happen to you, beyond that difficulty in clearing Mercury, when your gravitational

warp calculations went astray?" asked the superintendent.

"Nothing that I can think of. But Mercury's a tough proposition. There's nothing there, not even fossil plant-life. And the temperature gets one, even through one's vacuum-shell. And that's not the handiest thing to go exploring in—a tin shell that would weigh a couple of tons on Earth.

"There was nothing out of the way, except that difficulty in taking off, and then our landing about two kilometers across the light line, in perpetual darkness. Maybe that got Paul's nerves—"

Hartman was visualizing as he spoke. As one of United's scientific staff, he had accompanied several of the pilots to Mars and Venus. He had made a reputation by his sensational landing on tiny Eros two years before. But Mercury was the *bête noir* of space travel.

Mars was bad enough, having no atmosphere. Mercury had one, but it was too rarefied to be breathable. And while one side, in perpetual sunlight, had a temperature six times the boiling point of water, the other, in perpetual darkness, approached absolute zero.

They had landed two kilometers inside the dark hemisphere, instead of on the narrow, twilight zone where the temperature was tolerable. They had struggled into the sunlight. Gone back to their ship, too, after a geologic survey. But there had been trouble taking off. And Paul Leavitt was high-strung.

Well, all pilots cracked up sooner or later, and Leavitt was close to the deadline of thirty. There

was no place for old men in the pilot service.

Hartman went up to the roof, where a number of old-fashioned gas-taxiplanes were resting with idle props. For cruising, nothing had been invented better than these machines of fifty years before. Hartman cursed softly. He had hoped to spend the evening with his girl, Norma.

HE WAVED away a chauffeur, and leaped into the pilot's seat, the reporter, who had followed him, jumping in behind. Hartman gunned the motor, and they swept out above the canyons of New York toward the north shore of Long Island.

Nothing seemed changed; planes were going their ways; beneath them, the lines of ground traffic were moving toward and from the metropolis. To the left the Sound lay like a sheet of blue glass. The airport came into sight, the immense landing-field, curiously hard, as if etched upon the face of the land, with its many buildings, and the lines of taxiplanes outside.

Then suddenly that hard etching was blotted out by wavering clouds that seemed to rise up from the ground, enveloping trees and buildings.

Hartman shot up, ruddered banked, cut his gun, eased out his rotors. The plane began to flutter down through the mist, which rolled along, heavy and sluggish, like vapor almost at the point of saturation.

"We didn't bring that back from Mercury," muttered Hartman.

As they landed, something came shrieking through the fog. It was

something that had been a man, and still resembled a man. But it was a living mummy-man. The skin was plastered on the face like some transparent tissue on a death's head. The thing was bone and skin. The clothing hung in tattered strips, dry as the centuries-old binding of a mummy's carcass.

The thing threw up its arms, plunged into the fog, and vanished.

Something plopped down from above and landed at Hartman's feet. It was a largish bird, a flicker, still feebly flapping with one bony wing. A shower of feathers strewed the ground. Hartman picked up a desiccated skeleton.

The reporter seized him and dragged him out of the line of a falling tree, which crashed down amid a shower of dried up leaves. The dried soil crumbled from the bone-white roots like sand. Other trees were falling.

Hartman saw the reporter gibbering, and heard a strange piping whisper come from his lips. Then a mighty hand seemed to constrict his chest. He drew in a modicum of unsatisfying air. And then suddenly he saw the panorama before him.

Through a rift in the vapor wall he saw the airport. All about the rim of the field were the bodies of dead men. In the hard light, it looked as if they had become skeletonized. And all about the field strange things were tumbling—things that might have been tumbleweeds.

Some of these things were globular, others elongated, like giant cucumbers. The longest were snapping into sections, and the sections kept on rolling.

One of these sections, comparatively near him, was budding limbs, and at the summit was the travesty of a leering human face. Clumsily the thing was raising itself to an erect position, while the short, sausage-like legs straddled for purchase on the ground.

Hartman, panting for breath, glanced at the newspaper man, and a cry, strangely thin, broke from his parched throat. For the reporter's face was growing skull-like, and his clothing was beginning to rip along the seams.

He grabbed the reporter and staggered back toward the plane. He forced his companion inside, and followed. He spun the starter. The engine coughed and died.

Then suddenly, out of the vapor, a crowd of creatures broke, men, women who clutched at children, cats, dogs, cattle. Gaunt, horrible, death-like things with horror in their staring eyes, and gasping mouths rimmed with livid, swollen lips. They saw the plane and rushed toward it.

"It's the Day of Doom! It's God's Judgment!" piped a gray-beard, clutching at the fuselage.

Suddenly the motor caught. The frenzied mob snatched at the two men and tried to drag them from their seats. Hartman battled with desperate resolution. The mob fought madly, but their clutching hands seemed to possess no power. The plane was kicking against the automatic brake-chocks. Hartman gunned her.

She started down the field and rose. Behind, the cluster of screaming humanity, trying to follow, arms upraised. . . .

Sitting in his cockpit, the

pinched ghost of a man, somehow Hartman managed to direct his flight. He was over the East River when a thought struck him like a thunderbolt.

"That swarm of glutinous stones—like snails—I saw on the space-ship," he whispered. "We must have—brought that back—from Mercury. I thought they—were aerolites that had adhered through—atmospheric pressure—and would roll off—in flight—"

WITHIN two days New York was depopulated. It was a city of the dead, hidden behind that circle of ever widening mist, in an inferno of alternating heat and cold that neither human being nor machine could face, except the space-ships, which could not be slowed down for investigations within that narrow radius.

There was no air in that inferno. Nothing could live in it. Vegetation vanished. Skeleton trunks of trees lay everywhere. Streams and ponds dried up. Even the bones of man and beast crumbled.

Perhaps half the population of New York succeeded in joining the horde of refugees that poured out along every artery of traffic. The rest died instantly as the inferno of heat struck them, in streets, in cellars, or among the pyramids of corpses outside the railroad terminals. The terror was advancing at the rate of about thirty miles a day, circling outward and always preceded by that cloud of sluggish vapor.

Within a week the main points outside the arc of the terror were Providence, Brattleboro, Troy, Binghamton, Wilkesbarre, Phila-

delphia. But every day the circle spread. The legislators at Albany, sitting to enact a law against the menace, died in their seats almost instantly.

Trains ran no longer. Ships fled to mid-ocean, to escape the terror. All life was disorganized.

Bombardment by heavy artillery proved useless. So did backfiring, spraying, and the digging of ditches. Congress appointed a committee of investigation, and Hartman and Paul Leavitt were summoned to appear before it.

It was proposed to ring the zone with pumps, to play compressed air upon the menace. "Let in air," was the cry, "and the plague will vanish." That fiery Southern Senator, Mr. Jackson Harrison Street, proposed to arm everybody with revolvers and send out the populace to shoot down the unseen invaders, who were described as man-cucumbers.

Paul Leavitt had escaped miraculously, burned, numbed, choked, dazed. He remembered nothing except stumbling away with his transmitter still on his chest, and trying to radio the warning.

Hartman accepted a post as scientific investigator, with the understanding that he was to have a free hand. Since there were a dozen other scientists at work, all with elaborate staffs, and all of them disliked Hartman, a mere exploring chemist, as they dubbed him, nobody bothered him. He and Paul disappeared immediately.

"We're going into the heart of things," said Hartman.

"In two-ton vacuum shells? They're bad enough on Mercury.

With an effort he thrust the creature into the safe.



On Earth we'd be crushed to pieces."

"I'll tell you my plans later. You've guessed what the trouble is, of course."

"It's something we brought back from Mercury, Bill?"

"I think so. I didn't tell those people all I've surmised. I don't think I should enjoy being lynched, Paul."

Paul grasped his arm. "If we can control the plague, don't you see we can gain all the power in the world?" he cried.

Hartman saw that Paul's nerves were still shattered.

HARTMAN, Paul and Sam Douglas headed for Lake Champlain. Sam was one of the Corporation's oldest employees, and the faithful old colored man had attached himself to Hartman in a personal capacity ever since his return from Eros, and refused to leave him.

In Northern New York State fruits were ripening in the fall sunshine, but the farm-houses were deserted, the cattle running wild in the fields. Ghastly stories about the "man-cucumbers" were circulating among the few who clung to their homes.

When they reached the lake, Hartman elucidated his plans to Paul.

"I've discovered one thing from the reports," he said. "The plague moves more slowly when it encounters considerable bodies of water."

He unfolded a map and pointed to an island near the northern border of the lake.

"That's the island, over there,"

he said. "I don't believe the monsters can dry up Lake Champlain. The centre of that island is a hundred feet above the water. That, and the heavy growth of timber, should protect us against any floods that they raise. We're going to burrow underground, with a glass roof and periscope."

"But where are we going to get our equipment?" asked Paul.

"It's coming from Montreal by truck. It should be here today. I've made all the arrangements."

Within two hours the truck arrived, driven by a fear-struck French Canadian, who could hardly wait until it was unloaded before scurrying back. There were a number of heavy cases, and the whole outfit was transported to the island in an old, abandoned flat-bottomed scow.

Hartman reckoned that they had three days before the plague would strike them. Actually there were five. Those were days of the most desperate kind of work, blasting the rock with atomite and constructing the dugout. Fortunately, four feet beneath the surface, they came upon a limestone cave, conveniently divided into two by walls of jutting granite. In the rear chamber, Hartman set up his laboratory. In front they placed their cots and their supplies.

They roofed the opening above with glass, through which the periscope protruded.

In answer to Paul's questions, Hartman explained.

"My opinion is that the invaders extract the oxygen from air and water. When they extract it, the volatile nitrogen and hydrogen are diffused into space, creat-

ing a vacuum. This diffusion of gases constitutes the vapor curtain that we have seen, while the lack of atmosphere accounts for the extremes of heat and cold, as upon Mars and Mercury."

"Then those—those things extract the fluids from human and animal bodies too?" cried Paul. "Oh God, Bill, those bones I saw—those faces! Do you think they are intelligent beings? How could we have brought them back with us?"

"Did you see those stones that we thought were aerolites?" asked Hartman. "We picked them up—as a dog picks up fleas. As for intelligence—I think they have an instinct, stronger and more dreadful than that of the insect."

"WHAT are they, in heaven's name?"

"Colonies of protozoans, as you and I and Shakespeare once were. Protozoa like the sponges, which feed on sea-water. These feed on oxygen. That's the only difference.

"Paul, do you remember the Greek legend of King Cadmus, who sowed a crop of dragon's teeth, from which armed warriors sprang? Perhaps a crop like that has been lying in the sands of Mercury since the days when she was a living, watered planet, with an atmosphere like ours, waiting for the chance to germinate. Seeds from Egyptian tombs are credibly said to have germinated, you know.

"Picture, then, another phase of human life. The life process has tried many experiments, from the tyrannosaur to the egg-laying mammals of Australia. Picture, I say, a human race developed, not

like ours, but by budding from the parent stock, as among plants, or by division, like the emeba. Buds, shriveled human buds, waiting to germinate in ages to come, when they find a more hospitable home, with a moist, oxygen-laden atmosphere.

"Picture such buds, I say," Hartman went on, "developing on earth with incredible swiftness, feeding on all the oxygen in the air, in the streams, in human and animal bodies, in the plants. They'd have a glorious time on Earth, wouldn't they? It would take centuries before all the oxygen had been extracted from the earth, and then—why, then they'd just shrivel back into their stone-hard pericarps to await the arrival of two more fools of space-explorers, aeons hence, perhaps from some planet not yet born, perhaps from Jupiter or Saturn, when they have grown cool and produced life and humanity—"

Sam, who had been dozing beside the two, outside the cave, sat up and rubbed his eyes.

"Glory Mighty, boss," he grinned, "us ain't afraid of dem conjurin' dirt-dobbers."

Then a yelp came from his lips. He leaped to his feet in terror as something crashed through the underbrush.

A girl was coming toward them. A girl in strips and tatters, through which could be seen the soft curves of her breasts, and the gleam of milk-white thighs.

Hartman leaped to his feet. "Normal!" he cried.

She tottered toward him. "I guessed you were coming up here," she said faintly. "You spoke about

—the island— at the north end of the lake. I've been walking—along the shore—three days—trying to find you, and—I'm hungry and tired, Bill."

Bill caught her in his arms and felt her slight body strain to his. For the moment he almost forgot the task that lay before him.

NORMA was sleeping in the front part of the cave; against the rock wall opposite Sam was extended, snoring. Hartman touched Paul on the arm. "I've got something to show you," he said. "One of those stones. It's changed into something else, I think.

In the rear of the cave, by the light of a lantern, Hartman saw a folding-table, rigid in its steel clamps, a circular bowl on a pedestal, and a dozen long copper cylinders. Hartman had unpacked the cases, which were piled against a wall. There was also a large safe of the octave-magnetic type, controlled by means of musical vibrations. A boy could have lifted it, but only a charge of atomite could have shattered it.

Hartman stepped up to it and touched the chord-combiner.

The musical note rang faint, yet resonant, through the cave. The thin sheet front vibrated; Hartman's finger touched the control-knob, and the front swung open. From the interior Hartman drew an elongated stone of a drab white color.

"Not much change yet," he said to Paul. "Look at those buds." He pointed to some excrescences, something like the knobs on a po-

tato. He set the stone down in the bird-bowl.

"God!" shouted Paul.

For the thing seemed instinct with life. It was moving, doubling over, growing soft and leathery.

"Light and atmospheric oxygen—" said Hartman. "Incredible swiftness of development. I kept that stone in my pocket until—"

The thing was moving slowly around the bowl, rising erect upon one rounded end, flopping over, rising again. And it was growing, elongating. It was budding!

Four prominences appeared, two near the top, two at the bottom. The thing was elongating fast. Five toes and fingers came into view on a lower and upper limb. Then twenty grasping digits, created out of the amorphous, jelly-like substance that had broken through the shell, which now lay in chips about the thing.

Now the hideous caricature of a head was emerging. Each second showed some change. That mossy growth had a horrible resemblance to coarse hair. That cleft that opened across the face was the caricature of a mouth. And, from the sides of the head—ears! Two black specks, slowly being moulded by some invisible power into eyes!

"Paul, we've got to get it back! Shouted Hartman suddenly afraid of his own Frankenstein.

A scream came from the entrance to the inner cave. Norma was standing there, her hands clasped to her breasts. She screamed again, and toppled over in a dead faint. Hartman ran to her and caught her.

From every side the agglutinated balls came rolling downhill after them.



A raging thirst began to parch his throat. Before his eyes there hung a faint, nebulous wall of vapor. Beside him he heard Paul

gasping; in the outer chamber, Sam moaning in his sleep.

Hartman knew what was happening. The monster was drawing in all the oxygen in the cavern, to build itself into human form. He must get the thing back inside the safe, where, in the darkness, development might be suspended.

HE leaped at it and tried to gather it in his arms. It squirmed and writhed. It was like slippery jelly in his grasp, the body cold as a slimy snake's. From the mouth came a thin wail of protest, like the cry of a newborn infant. The stumps of limbs were not quite formed as yet, the muscles, flaccid, and, as it were, dumped onto the cartilaginous bones, squirmed like the tentacles of an octopus.

Hartman had the thing at the safe now. He tried to seat it on the edge of the shelf, preparatory to hurling it backward. The creature piped again, but with a more human cry, and the arms tightened about his neck.

The thing hung there with tremendous tensile strength, the child-length body swaying against his own, the arms cold from the reptilian fluid within them that had not yet turned to warm human blood. Shuddering, Hartman managed to look into the face by the light of the lantern.

Even as he looked into them, the features seemed to be forming. Two mournful eyes looked into Hartman's own. The face was no longer horrible or grotesque. Seen through a faint film of water-vapor, it was the face of

a whimpering, frightened child, clinging to him from love, for safety. The face of a thing aspiring to humanity, groping its way out of the unconsciousness in which it had lived. Even in his horror, Hartman was conscious of a feeling of pity.

Then suddenly the last stage came. Suddenly the arms about Hartman's neck grew warm. The body, tensed against his own, grew warm. And Hartman felt his strength leaving him, for he was holding a woman in his arms.

Nude, soft, and exquisitely rounded, with a flood of hair that swept between the curves of her breasts, and over her milk-white shoulders, she still clung to him. His fiercely drumming heart seemed to be pumping water through his veins. The thing was drawing him toward her, seeming to storm the citadel of his being, drawing him so that Norma was all but forgotten.

With a mighty effort, Hartman caught the creature in his arms again and thrust it into the safe, doubling it over so as to get it inside. It whimpered again. . . .

He flung it in with all his might. It toppled backward, and the wail was cut off as he touched the control-knob and shut the door. He found the chord combination, and from the timbre of the note that ran through the vault, he knew that the air had grown nearly normal again. He staggered toward the front of the cave.

Norma was lying where he had left her, her rounded limbs outlined beneath her rags. Beside her stood Paul Leavitt. He was staring at the safe, and there was

a singular look in his eyes. Suddenly Sam Douglas staggered forward, gibbering. Hartman pushed the negro away, and, taking up the dipper, took a long drink from the pail beside the pool of water in the limestone floor. But Sam still tugged at him and shouted in his ear.

"Sam, what's the matter with you?"

"They're comin', boss, they're comin'! Them damn dirt-dobbers! Lord help us, boss, they're goin' to eat us all up!"

STRIDING through the twilight, Hartman put up his hand to the glass skylight, and found that it was fogged with moisture.

He tried to clear a peep-hole, but the moisture, fluid as quicksilver, trickled between his fingers. Swirls of gray mist were passing overhead. **H a r t m a n** thrust up the periscope tube. He could see the surface of the lake, and a patch of sunlight in the distance.

Again that raging thirst began to torture him.

Sam came staggering toward him. "Gimme a drink! I'm burning up!" the negro shouted.

Paul leaped toward Sam and snatched the dipper from his hand. "To hell with the water! Bring out the woman!" he yelled at Hartman.

He ran into the rear chamber. Hartman followed him. The lantern had gone out, but he didn't need a lantern. He was choking, dying, reeling and colliding with Paul and Sam. Hartman snatched up one of the copper cylinders,

which contained oxygen, and pressed the lever that unfastened the vacuum cap. There was a faint hiss as the gas escaped. Instantly he began to breathe more freely. For a while that would stave off death. . . .

Afterward, Hartman remembered going back again and again to open a fresh cylinder, as the old one became exhausted. Hours seemed to pass. Sometimes Hartman came back to himself out of a sort of coma, sometimes Paul was shaking him like a maniac and demanding the woman in the safe; sometimes he was trying to arouse Norma from the stupor into which she had fallen. Then he discovered that he was squatting on the floor, staring into the lower mirror of the periscope.

And then suddenly he saw the swarm!

Suddenly it flashed into his field of view over the lowered surface of the lake. The waters must have dropped several feet, exposing shoals and rotting stumps of trees. And the swarm came into view.

Caricatures of humanity, leap-frogging over one another in the mud beside the shore. Things that might some day be human. Things released from Mercury, after aeons of slumber there, into a life that was as instinctive as the responses of the insect-playing in sheer exuberance of living.

Palsied with horror, Hartman watched them. He saw them scooping up fish, raising them to their shapeless mouths, impelled by the instinct to devour, and not knowing how to do so.

Rotund and globular and

dwarfed, and caricatures of man. Sporting and frolicking, they moved across the shoals toward the island. A creature leaped upon the glass roof and crouched there, peering down. Hartman could see the wise, inquiring little black eyes, the tufted ears.

Another and another leaped upon the glass, with soft, padded feet. One of them seized the periscope tube, and bent it double. Through the glass pane came the faint, piping chatter of the monsters.

The air was almost exhausted. The faces of the monsters, flattened against the glass, seemed the last things that Hartman was likely to see on earth.

One cylinder more—wasn't there one cylinder more?

Hartman reeled back through the opening. One cylinder of the precious gas remained. Hartman grasped it, and pressed the lever. He drew in a deep breath, and his brain began to clear. Then he saw Paul lurching toward him.

PAUL caught him by the shoulders. "I'm wise to you!" he shouted. "Wanted to get that woman and make yourself king of the earth. Open that safe! She's mine!"

His voice rose into a wild scream. "Open it, or I'll kill you!"

There was the strength of a madman in Paul's hands, as he grasped Hartman by the throat. Hartman fought desperately, but Paul was a younger man, and had three times his strength.

He felt himself choking. A cloud of blackness enveloped

him. "This is the end," was the last thought that flashed through his mind before unconsciousness supervened.

Paul flung the inanimate body to the ground, and a peal of insane laughter broke from his lips. In his crazed mind the idea persisted that Hartman was keeping the woman in the safe to make himself king of the world. The sight of the nude woman in Hartman's arms had aroused all the latent instincts of his nature. He turned to the safe, and began fumbling with the combination of musical notes that would loosen the magnetic tension that held the front plate rigid. The wave-lengths of the chord had to be in octave-relationship to the magnetic waves, to break that tension.

Paul had watched Hartman carefully when he opened the safe before, and felt certain that he could duplicate the movements of his fingers. Nevertheless, at each twist only a faint medley of discords was audible. Then suddenly the chord rang out, followed by the vibration of the metal as the magnetic tension ceased.

From within, Paul heard the thin, plaintive, piping note of the imprisoned woman.

"Three years space-chasing," snarled Paul. "They'd have turned me adrift next year. It's my turn now. You and me together, old girl!"

He leered at the vibrating door. Slowly he turned the control-knob. The door swung open.

An immense body seemed to be jack-knifed inside the safe. As the door reached its fullest ex-



Suddenly, out of the squirming mass of monsters, now an almost shapeless mass of protoplasm on the floor, there emerged the head and torso of a young man, striving for life.

tent, the thing tumbled to the ground, flinging Paul upon his back.

Paul struggled from beneath it. Then a cry broke from him. It was a nearly nude woman, more beautiful than any that Paul had ever seen before. Her hair, now fully grown, hung about her like a garment, and the perfectly formed breasts showed through the silky strands.

Paul had seen her before, but, in the darkness of the interior, had thought it was imagination. Now a flame of desire burned in him. His mind crossed the dark chasm between sanity and madness. They'd put him out of the Corporation, would they, because he was nearing the deadline of thirty! He'd show the world!

THEY stared at each other, the madman of Earth and the woman from another globe, another age. There was no longer a trace of the grotesque cucurbitaceous life about her. The cheeks and forehead were of palest ivory, the lips curved in what seemed to be a questioning smile. The dark eyes were fixed wistfully on Paul's face.

It was a human being looking back at him. It was humanity, reaching its goal of incarnation by another route than Earth. Not through the lemur, monkey, ape, not up from some marine organism, subsisting on plankton and crawling up between low and high-water marks, but through the vegetable world.

What did she know? Had she a mind? Speech? This woman of mystery, hatched from a small

gourd that had hardened into stone—had she a soul, or was she an automaton?

Paul put out one hand, parted the strands of silky hair, and touched one breast. Yes, it was warm with pulsing blood. "In God's name!" he burst out.

"In God's name!" The piping tones were a very parody of Paul's. He laughed wildly, and the woman's piping laughter answered him.

"We're going places, you and me!" Paul shouted.

"We're going places, you and me," came back the parrot-cry.

Suddenly a look of awful fury came into the woman's eyes. But she wasn't looking at Paul. Over his shoulder—at Norma, who was standing behind him, frozen with horror. She poised herself to leap, her haunches rippling with sleek muscle, her hair flung back, displaying the soft curves of her breasts and body. Arms went out taut. Paul caught her as she sprang.

Her arms went around his neck convulsively. Her lips sought his. Yet there was something in the rigidity of her that told Paul that the human way of love was unknown to her. To understand this would be to break the last barriers between the animal and vegetable kingdoms. It was Nature's legendary struggle, typified in the story of Eden—self-knowledge, the becoming as gods.

Suddenly Paul was aware of Sam shrieking in his ear, and tugging at his arm. "Boss, we got to git away!" he yelled. "Them dirt-dobbers is drownin' us!"

Paul realized that he was standing knee-deep in water. With a mighty effort he detached himself from the woman's clasp. He turned, and, in the dim light saw Hartman upon his knees, the water about his waist.

Hartman got up and ran toward the woman. Paul intervened with a snarl.

"We're gittin' out!" screamed Sam. He caught at Hartman, who seized Norma as she leaned back, half-conscious, against the rock wall. Paul picked up the Mercury woman in his arms and followed them.

IN THE front part of the cave the moonlight was streaming through the glass. The brilliance of the satellite, and of the stars, showed that there was practically no atmosphere. Inside the cave the last cylinder was almost exhausted. Death within and without—but the instinct of all was to rush out to die, rather than be suffocated like rats beneath the ground. Water was trickling through the cracks about the panes and periscope, and brimming up from the well. They were waist-deep now.

Sam scrambled up the rock ledges at the side of the cave, reached up, and drove his elbow through one of the panes.

It came down with only the faintest tinkle of shattered glass. There was not enough air to conduct sound. Then, with prodigious strength, the negro swung Hartman bodily up, and dragged him up through the hole.

With a wild cry, that sounded no louder than squeak of flutter-

mouse, Norma followed them. Paul, still carrying the woman from Mercury, forced his way up in their wake. And the five stood staring at one another—for they were drawing deep breaths of satisfying air into their lungs.

On Paul, this acted perhaps as a shot of insulin on the insane. He looked at Hartman in bewilderment, as if he had forgotten his attack on him.

Hartman seemed to have forgotten too. "I've got it!" he cried. "Don't you see? The swarm inhales oxygen only by day! By night it gives it out again. Nobody ever attempted to enter the zone of the pestilence by night." He grasped Hartman, who had set down his burden. "On Earth the vegetable organisms take in oxygen by day, manufacturing carbohydrates by the process of photosynthesis. By night they exhale carbon dioxide. There's a rhythm, Paul. We've got leeway till sunrise."

"Well?"

"We're going to fly to Washington and tell Congress of our discovery. And we're taking that—that—lady!"

His heart began to thump again, as he looked at the woman of Mercury in her nude loveliness.

"Glory Mighty, boss, I'm going to throw that dirt-bobber in the lake!" yelled Sam, approaching the woman with violent gesticulations.

"Dirt-dobber in the lake," she echoed.

"Shut up and keep quiet, or

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Woman From Mercury

[Continued from page 33]

"I'll set the dirt-dobbers on you!" Hartman threatened.

Sam came to a standstill, mumbling.

"We're taking her to Washington in the plane," said Hartman.

"Come on then!" shouted Paul.

"Come on then!" echoed the woman.

"Glory Mighty, boss, lookit!" yelled Sam.

OUT of the intensity of shadow behind the rocks something came tumbling. It was an immense ball, perhaps twelve feet in diameter. A yell of terror broke from the negro's lips.

"It's them dirt-dobbers come back! They're gangin' up on us!" Sam shrieked.

Even Hartman, cold-blooded scientist though he was, looked in fear at the slowly revolving thing that was approaching them. The ball consisted of a great number of the swarm, once more shrunken to the size and aspect of giant cucumbers. The limbs had shriveled to mere excrescences. The creatures were reduced to a single, shapeless mass of units, yet all animated by the same infernal intelligence as they directed their course toward the woman.

"They've agglutinated to regain vitality, like the paramcium, the slipper animalcule, when the vitality of the race is waning," shouted Hartman.

"Hold her!" yelled Paul.

He grabbed at the woman. But she was making no effort to escape. She was leaning toward the ball in an attitude suggestive of a protective mother.

"She's the queen of the swarm!" cried Hartman, suddenly undertsanding.

Sam uttered another screech of terror. For, in the presence of the queen, the outer shell of the ball began to swell. It bubbled; the clustered things upon the rim of it began to stir. Out of the amorphous tissue, pseudopods appeared and were withdrawn. Buds began to round themselves into heads, which displayed black dots of eyes and gashes of leering mouths. And the whole mass was pulsating with a dreadful synchronization, as if attempting to disintegrate into its separate monads, and yet lacking the power.

Now, from every side, other balls appeared, all moving toward the queen. There was something nerve-racking in the slow and deliberate motion of those masses, dipping into the hollows of the ground, stretching over rocks, changing shape each instant, to cover the irregularities of the ground, yet always resuming their globular shape.

The little group was almost ringed. The queen was sneding out a twittering, plaintive call through the curtain of shimmering vapor that hung before her.

"The scow!" shouted Hartman.

He grasped the queen and raced over the rocks toward the water, the rest following. From every side the agglutinated balls came rolling downhill after them.

HARTMAN dashed through a gap between two immense balls, from the sides of which stumps of limbs protruded toward him, and shapeless stumps of fingers twitched. Sam was howling at the top of his lungs. In front of him, Hartman saw the scow. It had been stranded and mud-filled, and tossed by the flood that the advent of the swarm had created in the lake, but the rope had held.

Paul leaped in front of him and snatched the queen from him. Hartman released her. Norma was at his side, holding him on the balance of sanity. He slipped his arm around her. He stumbled on.

The three men leaped aboard the scow. Hartman thrust Norman into the bow. Paul was holding the queen. Sam seized the long pole, which fortunately still lay in the bottom of the boat. Paul unfastened the rope that moored her to a large rock. Sam dug the pole into the oozy bottom and pushed off.

The rocks above were rimmed with the great balls, squirming and squeezing one another. Others, rolling up from behind, mounted upon those already in position. Then suddenly the whole mass came bouncing down toward the scow.

Sam poled like a madman

toward the shore. He thrust the scow into the bank, and they ran inland. Behind them the balls were bobbing on the water. The air was clear and fresh, but all the trees were dead, and the ground was littered with dry leaves.

Sam darted for the barn, flung open the door, and began to drag out the plane. Suddenly the queen leaped at Norma, fingers extended like claws. She struggled so fiercely that it was all Paul could do to hold her.

"Get her into the plane," yelled Hartman.

"Into the plane," she echoed.

The balls were bobbing along the shore. Hartman glanced back, saw them rolling through the dry leaves. But Sam had got the motor started. It spluttered and died, and then began to purr smoothly.

Hartman swung Norma into the rear seat. Paul dumped the queen in front beside him. Sam clung to a wing. One of the balls was close beside the plane, and a figure seemed to detach itself from the agglutination, and evolve into a dwarf youth, perfect save for the head. The queen twittered, and tried to break from her place.

But Paul gunned the motor. The plane dashed two of the balls aside, ran through a glade, reached a strip of flat land beside the water, and took off.

She rose into the air, free upper air, under the brilliant moon.

SEATED beside Norma, feeling her warm body against him, Hartman seemed to be recovering from a nightmare. He had been

on the track of the problem from the first. He had guessed that the swarm might exhale oxygen at night, as the plant exhales carbon dioxide. But he hadn't known that it was the queen he held captive. Now everything was growing clear. The life of the swarm depended upon that form in the front cockpit. It was incredible, but it was true.

On the analogy of the bee, she would be the mother of the swarm, but analogies were always dangerous things. And reproduction was by budding. Nature had an infinite number of tricks up her sleeve. Nevertheless, Hartman was confident that the swarm was dependant upon the queen.

She looked substantial enough. Flesh, bone, and blood, to all outward appearance, though Hartman believed that she was actually composed of oxygen in some compressed form, on the analogy of the dwarf stars, in which a cubic inch of matter may weigh a hundred tons.

Hartman saw Paul slip one arm around her. He saw the queen's eyes fixed on Paul's. He saw the stark despair upon her face. He knew that she was torn between desire for the swarm and that human love that she had never known. He knew this was one of those turning-points of Nature, as when she made the bird from the reptile, and the mammal from the marsupial. And he knew that the queen must die, that human life might not be diverted from the form that it had taken.

The expression on Paul's face

was fanatical. What was passing through his mind?

"We're going places, old girl!" Paul shouted.

"Going places, old girl," answered the queen.

Hartman knew that they must be outside the zone of the swarm by dawn, or death would be almost instantaneous. He wondered whether the swarm had reached Washington. He realized that they had been cut off from all contact with the world for days. And he hadn't even brought a radio transmitting set with him. He had wanted to work out the problem alone. There were points that were still obscure.

"The queen is the balance-wheel of a single organic body," he mused. "She must give out sufficient oxygen by night to keep the swarm from shrinking back into the primitive nucleus. That is why it clusters about her. Oxygen, for them, means life and a kind of primitive consciousness. But then—"

The plane was flying slowly, at about two hundred and fifty miles an hour. Those old-fashioned gas planes, archaic survivals though they were, had proved their worth. They were slow, but they were steady. Hartman's plane had belonged to his father, who used to commute from Kingston to New York. Hartman looked down. They were flying along the edge of what seemed to be the straight line of the swarm's resting-place, though in reality it was an immense circle.

That line cut off the ravaged from the unravaged territory as if it had been drawn with a giant

ruler. It was the line between the desert and the sown, between the combed and civilized earth and utter desolation. On the one side were fields of corn, on the other desert, or the dead stumps of leafless trees. Even the plaster had fallen from the exterior of houses, and the black huddle of towns was unlighted and deserted.

Hartman's apprehensions increased. He must get Congress together, notify them that he was on the track of the problem but hadn't solved it.

But suppose the swarm had overcome Washington? In that case Hartman could foresee only the complete disintegration of society. There would no longer be a national nucleus of resistance.

His plan was to have the capital removed to the Middle West, to ask to be made head of the various bodies of scientists, and to work out the problem before the swarm arrived. Perhaps the Mississippi would stay it. Would it be necessary to go so far?

That was Baltimore, that great senseless mass of brick and stone beside the sea. The seaward portion of the town seemed to be in ruins, as if struck by a tidal wave. They were flying over Maryland, and now there was nothing but destruction underneath; they had left the edge of normal life behind them.

Then of a sudden lights appeared in the distance. Here and there pin-pricks of light, surrounding a blazing cluster in the centre. The brown of death had given place to grass and foliage again. It was as if a hand had

traced the demarcation with pencil and ruler. Washington was still alive. That blaze of lights indicated the Capitol, and Congress must be in session.

An exultant cry broke from Hartman's throat. He could see a small crowd gather about the plane as it swooped down. There was a scattering, and the plane came to rest under the massive buildings and the great dome.

IN the Senate, under the glare of the electric lights, President Thompson was saying: "When the Gauls had invaded Italy, and were threatening Rome, I have read that the senators refused to join the multitude in flight, and awaited the appearance of the barbarians in their seats. I believe they were all massacred.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the Senate of these United States, we have a great tradition behind us. Let us be worthy of it. Let us await our destiny here. That destiny may be upon us at any moment now."

But the Senators sprang to their feet as loud cries were heard. Next morning Hartman, Paul Leavitt, and black Sam were ushered in, together with Norma and the queen.

"It's terrible!" shrieked the lady senator from Connecticut. "I can't stand it! Take her away!" And promptly fainted.

Senator Burton, of Florida, was on the job. He tore off his overcoat and flung it about the queen.

Hartman shouted, "I'm Hartman! You remember me! I'm

bringing news. I've discovered —"

President Thompson held up his hand for silence. "Please step forward," he said. "But we can't permit this—er—lady—"

"She ain't no lady," yelled Sam Douglas. "She's a ha'nt. She's leadin' that gang of dirt-dobbers that's been stirrin' up all this trouble. Lady? Huh, I've seed too many ladies."

"Shut up!" said Hartman, and black Sam slumped into silence.

"Mr. President," said Hartman, "I have been making my investigations at Lake Champlain. I believe I am on the track of a discovery that will rid the world of this menace. These organisms, which, I may now admit, seem to have entered our space-ship on the occasion of our recent visit to Mercury, live upon oxygen. Quiescent on Mercury for countless aeons, after that planet lost its atmosphere, they have been galvanized into activity on Earth.

"This woman is their queen. But she is not human. She is the queen of the swarm, and approximates more closely to the human organism than any of them. Nevertheless, I repeat, she is not human. She is Nature's effort to approximate to the human type as—to give a single instance—Nature attempted to reproduce the camel in the deserts of Peru, and only got as far as the llama. Nature is imitative, but blind, and not always successful.

"In some way the fate of the swarm is bound up with the queen. We must hold her and investigate."

"I'll do the holding," inter-

rupted Paul, with a loud laugh. "I'll see to it. She's mine."

"I'll see to it. She's mine," echoed the queen, leaning against Paul Leavitt's shoulder.

On their feet, the stupefied Senators looked from one man to the other. Some of the younger ones looked at the queen's shapeless legs beneath the overcoat.

Hartman, disregarding the interruption, continued: "For the present, I see no remedy. But I have made one discovery. The swarm remains quiescent at night, shrinking back into an innocuous nucleus. By daylight it will again be in full activity. By daylight it will be upon Washington. Everybody who is left in the capital must evacuate it instantly, and make his way westward. I propose to establish a new center of research across the Mississippi, which may stay the advance of the invaders—"

He broke off as cries of terror sounded all about the Capitol. The Senators, silent in their places, waited. All guessed what these portended. All were awaiting the sudden inrush of flameless heat, the swift and mercifully instantaneous suffocation.

"You must all flee," Hartman shouted. "The pest advances no more swiftly than a man can walk. There is no time to waste. Mr. President, I—"

A door burst inward with a crash. There were other crashes, screams, shouting—

And, as if self-propelled, and exercising an irresistible momentum, a huge agglomeration of the man-cucumbers rolled along the

floor toward where the queen stood.

THERE were others. There were innumerable balls of the agglutinated monsters, breaking through every door and lower window, followed by no one. Huge, moving masses that were horribly alive.

Above the tumult the calm voice of President Thompson was heard, "Gentlemen, we will remain in our places."

"There's still time," cried Hartman desperately. "They'll be innocuous till the sun rises!"

But the balls were rolling down the aisles, they were choking every exit, they were beginning to clamber upon one another, so that the Senators sat half-concealed behind mounds composed of squirming holothurian humans. And always the balls proceeded toward the queen, throwing out pseudopods that moved them forward, until the three men were surrounded by a mounting wall. And out of this wall leering faces appeared and vanished, and stumps of malformed arms were extended, to be drawn back into the texture of the primal mass.

Paul's cry rang through the House. "He's right. Escape, all of you, while you can!" he shouted wildly. "This woman is mine. I love her, and I'll take my chance with her."

"I'll take my chance with her," piped the queen.

Paul flung himself on Hartman. "She's mine, I say!" he raved. "You wanted her for yourself, and hid her away, but I saved her. This is my love from the dawn of

time. I'm going to rule the earth with her. King and queen! No more people!"

A ball that had been clambering above a little pile, and formed the apex of a pyramid, suddenly dropped. It made a hollow, splashing sound upon the floor. Sam's fear-crazed voice rang out:

"Boss, boss! They're dyin'! Them dirt-dobbers is dyin'! They're witherin' away!"

It was true. Suddenly, almost in a moment, it could be seen that the globular masses were shrinking, losing vitality. They were lessening in size, their contour was growing ragged. The movements within their masses were growing weaker. The features of the knob-like heads could no longer be distinguished. There was an internal bubbling, like a fermentation, that was reducing the balls to a sort of amorphous magma, like the chrysalis before its reconstruction into the imago.

Suddenly Hartman sprang forward, flinging off Paul, and his voice rang loud and triumphant through the Senate hall.

"We're saved!" he shouted.

"Glory Mighty be!"

"We're saved, I tell you! I half envisioned this, but I dared not let myself believe. These things come from that part of Mercury that is in alternate light and darkness. Then they would have a life cycle roughly proportioned to the period of light on that portion of Mercury. That life cycle has ended. It was not the night, it was the approach of death that brought about the agglutination, as in the paramecium.

Then the secret lies with the queen. She alone can produce a new swarm of these holothurian monsters. She alone—"

Paul leaped before her. "You shall not harm her!" he shouted. "She's mine! She's mine, I say!"

There was none among the stunned Senators but would remember that scene for the remainder of his days. The two men facing each other before the wraith-like queen, who again seemed to be growing misty, Sam trembling behind Hartman—and something more that not everybody saw.

For, out of the squirming, dying mass of monsters, now almost shapeless protoplasm upon the floor, there emerged the head and torso of a young man. To the waist he presented clean-cut, well-formed flesh; below, he was one with the universal substance of the dissolving ball. Muscles were knotted, as if it was only with a herculean effort that he had succeeded in attaining to materialization.

SOME there were who saw, and remembered long afterward how, for a few moments, that rigid head and torso of the young man, with features like a Greek god's, stood out from the dissolving mass of the ball. They saw the queen slowly turn her gaze from Paul Leavitt's face and fix it on the youth's. They saw the youth look back at her.

And it was as if the queen was torn in twain between longing for the earth man, of the earth life she had never attained to, and remembrance of the youth who

might, on Mercury, aeons before, in some way incomprehensible to mortals, have been her lover.

It lasted only two or three moments. Then the torso dissolved, and the balls were no larger than footballs, still writhing feebly, but dissolving into splotches on the carpet.

Paul cried, "She's mine! Get out of here, all of you! Get out, I say!" He shook his fist at President Thompson, who watched him gravely and silent from the Vice-President's seat.

And he grasped the queen about the waist and drew her toward him.

The scream of horror that broke from black Sam's lips was taken up by all the Senators. They sprang from their seats, arms outstretched, faces frozen to stone.

For the slender queen elongated, and suddenly broke into two pieces at the waist.

Two pieces that almost instantly budded into the full stature of humanity. Two women now, identical, looking at Paul, who recoiled, thrusting out his hands before him.

Hartman sprang forward. "Kill them!" he shouted.

The horror held all motionless. And then, with unbelievable swiftness, the two queens elongated and divided. There were four queens. There would be eight in a moment, all identical, a new swarm. . . .

"Kill them!" came in faint throaty mimicry from four women's throats.

Hartman shouted, "They reproduce by fissure. There will be a whole colony in fifteen minutes,

a fresh swarm, ready to overrun the earth. Kill them!"

It is not for nothing that the gigantic statue of that fiery Senator, Jackson Harrison Street, which stands before the Senate House, is inscribed, "He Saved Humanity." The Senator was a conservative gentleman who believed in Southern customs, among which he enumerated the carrying of a six-gun, an item indispensable—he claimed—to the wardrobe of every gentleman.

It was Senator Street whose

gun rang sharp staccato through the House, and each slug found its target. Before the four queens could become eight, they lay lifeless on the floor, among the vestiges of the balls.

Paul, gibbering insanely, crouched among them. Hartman held the swooning Norma in his arms. Then Sam's voice shrilled:

"Glory Mighty! I knowed dem old dirt-dobbers couldn't down you, boss. I knowed you'd lay dem ha'nts. Glory Mighty, it's mornin'!"