

SUPER SCIENCE STORIES

25¢

THE BIG BOOK OF SCIENCE FICTION

VOL. 6

MARCH, 1950

NO. 3

A TRAIL-BREAKING NOVEL

ROGUE SHIP.....*A. E. van Vogt* 10
 What cosmic irony had brought the Hope of Man back to Earth, scant hours before the planet's utter destruction? What forces had twisted its crew into nightmare caricatures of men? For the answers, Hewitt risked not only his life—but the future of the race, millenia distant and beyond the farthest star!

TWO POWERFUL NOVELETTES

A STEP FARTHER OUT.....*Raymond Z. Gallun* 48
 Knowing himself eternally lost, Harvey Vallis set out alone on man's most dangerous journey—not to Venus or Mars, but—a step farther out!

WORLD WITHOUT DARKNESS.....*Nell R. Jones* 100
 The terrible Kljelljigs of the twilight world told Professor Jameson, "There is no escape in death—for as long as the stars shall last, your life is ours!"

SHORT STORIES

OUTCAST OF THE STARS.....*Ray Bradbury* 41
 "You can deny a man everything but his heritage—the stars!"

THE ULTIMATE ONE.....*John D. MacDonald* 72
 It was the strangest bedtime story ever told—told when all Earth's children were asleep—in a night that held no dawn!

THE WHEEL OF TIME.....*Robert Arthur* 75
 Master of time, Jeremiah Jupiter found a moment he could live over again—to his timeless regret!

EXILE OF THE EONS.....*Arthur C. Clarke* 86
 Banished to an utterly remote future, Trevindor thought he suffered the ultimate punishment—until he met the second exile—and learned that the Universe holds things more fearful even than loneliness!

DEPARTMENTS AND FEATURES

FANDOM'S CORNER.....*Conducted by James V. Taurasi* 6

A MARTIAN ODDITY.....*E. E. Stuck* 37

THE SCIENCE FICTIONEER.....*Conducted by Frederik Pohl* 97

MISSIVES AND MISSILES.....*The Readers* 119

Cover by Saunders

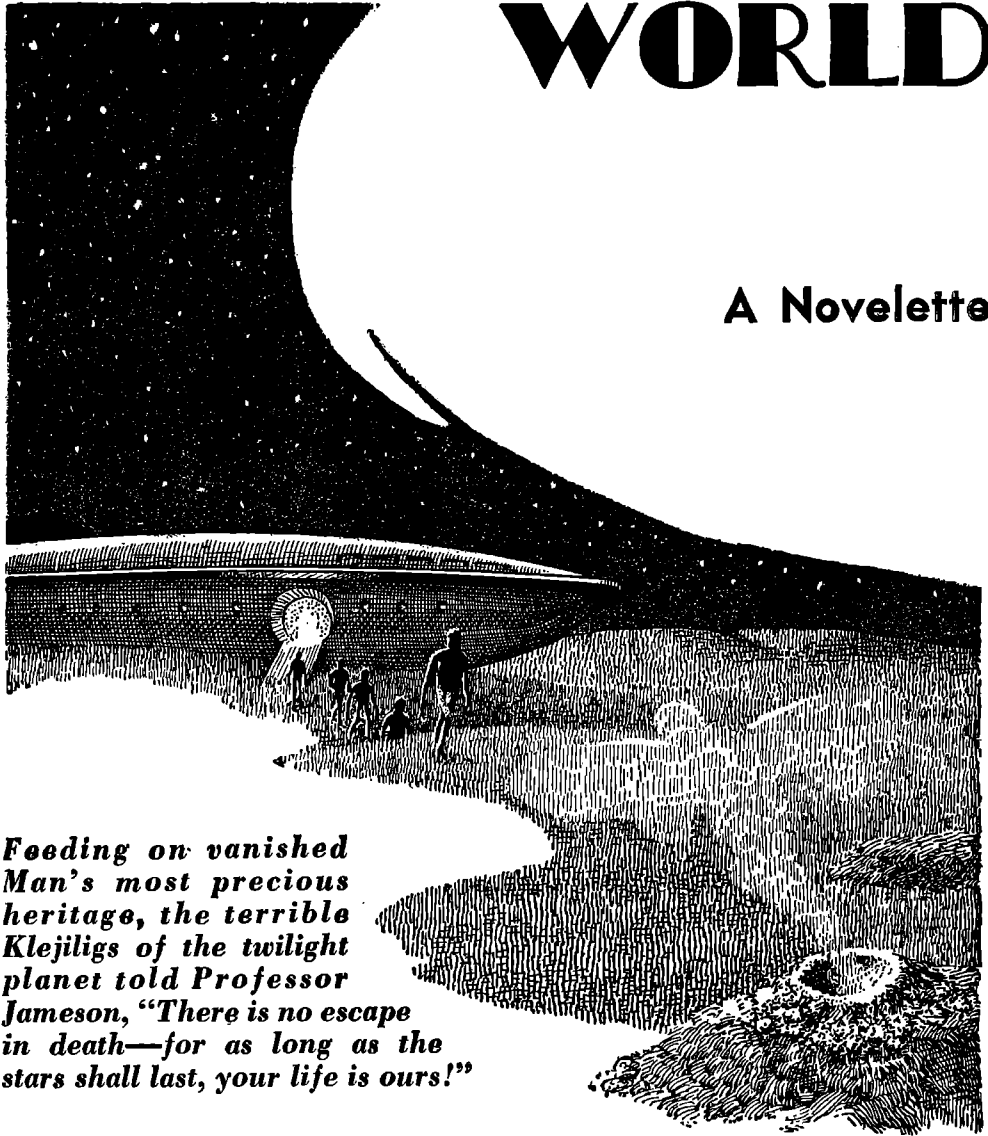
Illustrations by Bok, Collé, Lawrence, Leydenfrost and Van Dongen

Any resemblance between any character appearing in fictional matter, and any person, living or dead, is entirely coincidental and unintentional.

Published 4-monthly by Fictioneers, Inc., a subsidiary of Popular Publications, Inc., at 1145 E. Valle Ave., Kokomo, Indiana, Editorial and Executive Offices, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Henry Blosser, President and Secretary. Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice-President and Treasurer. Entered as second-class matter at the Post Office at Kokomo, Indiana, Copyright, 1950, by Fictioneers, Inc. This issue is published simultaneously in the Dominion of Canada. Copyright under International Copyright Convention and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction, in whole or in part, in any form. Single copy, 25c. Annual subscription for U. S. A., its possessions and Canada, \$1.50; other countries, 38c additional. All correspondence relating to this publication should be addressed to 1225 E. Valle Ave., Kokomo, Indiana, or 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts, enclose stamped, self-addressed envelope for their return if found unavailable. The publishers will exercise care in the handling of manuscripts, but assume no responsibility for their return. Printed in U. S. A.

WORLD

A Novelette



Feeding on vanished Man's most precious heritage, the terrible Klejliligs of the twilight planet told Professor Jameson, "There is no escape in death—for as long as the stars shall last, your life is ours!"

INTRODUCTION

PROFESSOR JAMESON'S first love had been the age-old science of preservation of the dead. He had looked upon the best the Egyptians could do, including the remarkably preserved General Ossipumphnoferu. There must be a better way, he argued. It was not until he cultivated his later interests in rockets that the perfect answer blazed into his imagination.

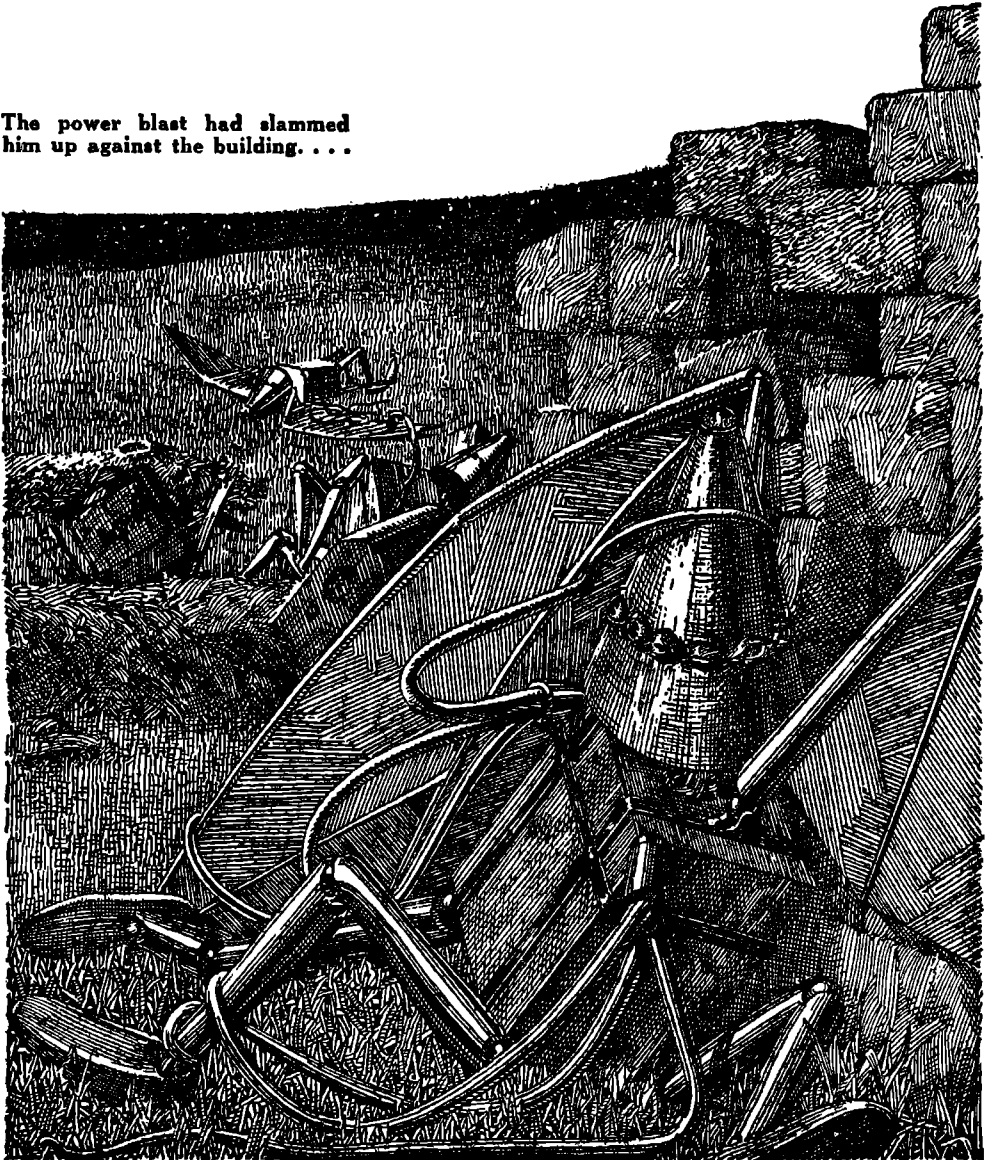
Interment in space. No bacteria, no

earthquakes, no fire or water, and no danger from the ever-questing spade of the archaeologist. The Egyptians had striven for achievement measured in thousands of years, and their results, though impressive, had been found wanting. The professor's ambitions encompassed millions of years. He determined to be his own guinea pig. He would build a funeral rocket for himself and have his body shot into the cosmic void to become a second

WITHOUT . . . DARKNESS

by NEIL R. JONES

The power blast had slammed
him up against the building. . . .



satellite of the Earth. On the privacy of his estate near the little village of Grenville, he built the rocket. It lay at the foot of its long ejector tube in a leaning tower. Instructions were left with a nephew.

Professor Jameson died early one December morning. It was not until then that Douglas Jameson became aware of the sealed plans which were left for him. Mystified, he did what he was told. He robbed the grave vault at night, placed the body in the rocket, set off its mechanism, retreated to a safe distance and watched the glistening projectile take off in a blaze of glory. He then set fire to the laboratory and buildings as directed.

Forty million years after, in the shadow of a dying world from which humanity and subsequent cycles of life forms had long ago departed, cosmic wanderers from the planet of another star chanced upon the Jameson satellite in their eternal explorations throughout the universe.

These strange adventurers appeared to be machines, with their metal cubed bodies, four metal legs, six metal tentacles and a metal coned head, but they were not entirely so. Beneath the mechanical eye which stared straight up from the apex of the coned head, and within the circle of similar eyes surrounding the head, an organic brain transferred from what had been an intelligent organism directed the functions of the mechanism. They were from the planet Zor. Professor Jameson had found immortality of the body in death. The Zoromes had done better than that. They had found conscious immortality in brain transposition to deathless machines. When a part wore out, it was replaced.

Approach of their spaceship to the rocket satellite was difficult, the machine men found. The professor had planned well, and the installation of proximity detectors automatically operated the radium repulsion rays which were a safety device against wandering meteors. Telepathic

thoughts flew thick and fast among the excited machine men as they found it necessary to use gravitational force and proximity nullifiers to close with the elusive coffin.

Opening the professor's rocket satellite, they found him as perfectly preserved as on the night of his pilgrimage out into the depths of interplanetary space. They effected a brain transposition to one of the machines and recalled to life his long-dormant brain. In this manner Professor Jameson became a Zorome, one of the cosmic crew always in search of the unusual as they traveled from star to star. He took a new name—21MM392.

In the years that followed, Professor Jameson became a seasoned mariner of the interstellar spaceways, and his adventures were innumerable. Once, he and his companions returned to the planet Zor, and a new expedition was outfitted under the leadership of the professor and 744U-21. Strange worlds and strange forms of life occasionally punctuated the scientific routine of their travels. It is one of these occasions which the reader will find chronicled.

CHAPTER ONE

Doom Planet

THE BLAZING star which the machine men were approaching grew larger. They watched the blue-white giant expand as the spaceship raced into its planetary system. "Planetary system", however, was almost an overstatement. There was only one planet, moving away from them toward opposition.

The ship of the Zoromes sped onward. They soon came near enough for the planet to take form.

"It seems quite bright and full for the position it holds," Professor Jameson observed. "Its position is little more than past quadrature, and by rights all that

should be visible would be scarcely more than a sunlit first quarter."

This oddity became more noticeable as the planet loomed larger. Not only did the sunlit side of the world gleam brightly, but what they were able to see of the hemisphere away from the sun was also illuminated, though with a more subdued glow. It was like moonlight, yet the planet had no moon. Also, as 6W-438 pointed out, the light was stronger than moonlight.

"What we see from this particular angle is probably a refraction of light from the sunlit half," ventured 744U-2I. "The atmosphere of the planet is probably of a peculiar quality which enhances the refraction."

This seemed a reasonable theory until the spaceship came closer. There was the usual refraction, but it was not abnormal, and the strange illumination continued. Moving over the darkened half, the machine men found this night light of a steady, uniform quality. The soft glow was not strong enough, however, to encourage telescopic observation of the darkened hemisphere, so the Zoromes focussed their attention on the sunlit side of the slowly rotating world. The period of rotation slightly exceeded that of Professor Jameson's own Earth at the time of his death, he found.

"Is there life on the planet?" 744U-2I wanted to know.

"Yes—and evidently intelligent life, too," 29G-75 concluded from his telescopic observation. "There are cities, or at least some kind of communities."

Skirting the vicinity of what appeared to be a city of major size and importance, the machine men selected a smaller group of dwellings. It would be well to become acquainted with a few of the planet's inhabitants and find out how they would be received.

On the daylight side of the planet, 20R-654 piloted the ship to a stop near a group

of low, dome-shaped buildings which were not very high and appeared to be interlocked and cross-connected with one another by corridors. From a distance, these habitations were a dull red in color. The machine men found later that they were made from small pieces of rock cemented together. The cement was red. High, narrow doors and triangular windows characterized the dwellings.

6W-438 was first out of the ship. "There is no one about."

"I feel thought waves now and then," Professor Jameson said.

"I get it, too, 21MM392," 744U-2I assured him, "yet the quality of the thoughts is not that of a frightened or hostile populace. In fact, they are thoughts from creatures who seem not yet aware of our presence."

"They must be in those buildings," said 12W-62. "If they do not come out, let us go and look for them."

Several machine men entered the domes through doorways much higher than their heads. To those outside, they radiated the impressions of what they saw. There were evidences of interrupted daily life, yet they found no life of any kind.

"The thought impressions are a little stronger," 41C-98 radiated. "We seem closer to them now. I think that they have subterranean retreats here. The thought impressions are of a character which suggests a sleep period."

From all the habitations entered, the same report emanated. No one at home.

"Do not seek them out further," the professor advised. "We shall wait for them to come to us. Let us see what their period of night brings forth. We shall see then, too, how it stays light on this world after the sun is gone."

But the Zoromes did not have to wait for the illuminated night to come. As afternoon grew old, and while a cooling, subdued sun still hung above the horizon short of sunset, the machine men saw

something emerge from a doorway and walk wonderingly towards them. Others, of a like appearance, followed on the heels of the first.

As the machine men had previously surmised from the height of the doorways, these upright creatures were a good eight feet in height. A pair of jointed, stalk-like legs supported the small body of pale green over which was worn a scanty tunic and various bright-colored straps. A pair of long, thin arms ending in three-fingered claws hung almost to the knee-joints. Large, bulging eyes stared curiously at the Zoromes from a round head. The mouth was but a thin slit, and instead of hair a horny growth projected from the head. What the space wanderers supposed to be organs of hearing were several short and angular antennae on each side of the head, slightly above and behind the large eyes.

A ROUGH, grating jangle of sound vibrated from the lips of the foremost giant.

"Are you come from the Klejiligs for those who die?" the machine men gathered in the thought.

"No, we are not from your world at all," Professor Jameson impressed on their brains. "We are strangers, peaceful visitors from space."

He waved a tentacle which took in the ship and the sky illustratively along with his silent thought impression, but the creatures did not entirely comprehend. They only gathered that the machine men were not from the source they had mentioned and that they came in peace and meant no harm. They were confused to find they understood something they had not heard. The professor sought to allay this confusion in order to learn from them what the machine men wanted to know.

"We are speechless and without the ability to make sounds like you," he told them, "but our thinking is so strong that

talking is made unnecessary and we can put our ideas into your heads as well as read what is in your minds."

This both relieved and reassured the creature. Others of the species were coming out of the buildings to join the little gathering, and a crowd slowly collected and grew larger during the subsequent exchange of thoughts.

"I am Zryp." The chief spokesman spoke his name emphatically several times. "Why do you come to a village of the Bronimids?"

"To learn about you and your ways of life."

"They are none too happy ways," Zryp said dolefully. "It is time for those who must die to be taken by the Klejiligs."

"What sort of sacrifice is this?" asked Professor Jameson. "Why must they go and die?"

"They would die anyhow, even if they hid and did not go with the Klejiligs," said the Bronimid, staring down at his metal audience. "I have seen this happen once the marks of death appeared, and we know such a one to be doomed."

"But why do they go with these Klejiligs, which I gather from your thought impressions are a scientific race of beings smaller than yourselves?"

"They do a great many good things for us if we let the condemned go with them," Zryp replied simply, "and they can do us much harm if we do not go when we are marked by death."

"But why do they want you dead and dying?"

"They do not tell us that."

There was something resigned and fatalistic in the Bronimid's attitude towards the mysterious transaction. It had always been so. It was. It would always be.

"We thought you came from the Klejiligs to get those of us who will soon die. We know that they create many machines and thought that you were a new kind."

"Where were you when we came?" 744U-21 inquired. "We saw no one about and even looked into your houses and could not find you."

"Most of us were asleep down below. We all go below during the time of much light."

"Why then?"

"It is always so."

Now another of the creatures stepped forward.

"I am Ajik," he announced. "I have been to Greoow. There are those in Greoow who say we have always kept in out of the brighter light because we live longer if we do. Is it not so, Blopk?"

Ajik's nearby companion, who had also been to Greoow, not only admitted the truth of the other's statement but added to it. "We do live longer by staying in out of the period of greater light, but it is because we live slower this way. Those who live too much in the greater light die more quickly. Their life span is cut short sooner by the signs of the coming death."

"What is this coming death like?" Professor Jameson asked.

Ajik called into the crowd, and four of the Bronimids slowly elbowed their way out of the crowd and stood before the machine men.

"Look at their eyes," directed Ajik.

The machine men saw that their eyes were of varying shades of red pigmentation. By contrast the normal color of the eyes was a dull blue.

"Look at their skins," continued Ajik.

The machine men now clustered around the four who were to die and noticed that their skins had taken on a bluish cast. The natural color was light brown, almost yellow.

It was becoming a little more difficult for the machine men to see. The sun had gone down. They wandered back and forth among the Bronimids, noticing the differences between those in health and those marked by the premature death

which was taking them out of the prime of their lives. The Bronimids, with their unusually large eyes developed from having lived in the lesser light all their lives, did not notice the change in visibility. The machine men gathered that coming out at all during the later hours of the day had been a luxury indulged in by the Bronimids because of the curiosity they had aroused. Philosophically, they expected to pay for this extra time by losing that much time from the ends of their lives.

"Look!" 12W-62 suddenly announced. "These poor devils they say are soon to die show another symptom! Look at the soft glow of light coming from him!"

"Yes," 119M-5 said, "and the other three are commencing to glow a bit, too."

"But how about this one?" 6W-438 demanded, designating still another Bronimid. "He is not among those who are supposed to die. His eyes and skin are natural, yet he is glowing, too."

"If you will look around you," said Professor Jameson, waving a sweeping tentacle, you will notice that all these creatures are starting to glow."

The machine men, who had been engrossed in those near to them, looked around them. It was so.

6N-24 made a further discovery. "Their houses are glowing, too!"

"The very ground we are standing upon glows!" exclaimed 240Z-42. "Everything in sight but ourselves and the spaceship sheds this glow!"

"Then that explains the night-side illumination," 41C-98 summed it up. "The planet itself and everything which grows here has a phosphorescent character."

THE MACHINE men decided to wait for the coming of the Klejiligs, inasmuch as they were expected. Meanwhile, they learned something more of their strange hosts. They reached maturity, but very rarely died of old age.

Those who were lucky enough to escape an early death were hustled away by the Klejiligs once the latter discovered them. In this entire village of almost a thousand individuals, the machine men saw no more than two old Bronimids. The Zoromes estimated that the strange death was robbing these creatures of better than half of their lifetimes, or most of the adult stage. Besides the four Bronimids they had already seen marked for death, the machine men found that there were eleven more awaiting the coming of the Klejiligs. All fifteen, on examination, showed a complex syndrome which the machine men found puzzling. Without having had their subjects under observation over a long period, they found it difficult to separate cause from effect.

The machine men were also unable to find out much about the Klejiligs. The Bronimids seemed disinclined to discuss them. A small minority of the populace betrayed a resentment and a disciplined antagonism towards the Klejiligs, but fear, too, was always present, partly because of the grisly errand the Klejiligs came upon and partly because of their superior knowledge.

"No wonder they know more than these people," the professor said. "They have a chance to live out their lifetimes and progress; these people do not. What is more, the Bronimids have no ambition for the same reason—they are fatalists, because they know their lives will be too short to accomplish anything of value."

The following night, if night it could be called on this planet which the Bronimids called Ilinikit, the Klejiligs came in a large airship which was dwarfed in size, however, by the spaceship of the Zoromes. The airship circled above the spaceship several times before landing almost inside the village.

Out of the airship walked seven figures which the machine men took for Klejiligs. They were little more than half the size of

the creatures they held in subjugation. It seemed clear to the Zoromes that the two races had descended from a common ancestor, for there were marked resemblances. As the Klejiligs walked into the village where the machine men and the villagers awaited them, the differences between the two species stood out more strongly. The Klejiligs were a physically weaker but mentally stronger race than the Bronimids. Their features, although resembling those of the Bronimids, were more refined.

The greatest difference the machine men found between the two races was in their mental structure. In the minds of the Klejiligs, the open simplicity and direct honesty of the Bronimids had no place. Suspicion, distrust and fear of the great spaceship and of the machine men lay in the minds of the newcomers. And once they became aware of a probing intelligence comparable or superior to their own, they betrayed another of their accomplishments which the machine men did not often find among intelligent life-forms in their travels. The Klejiligs instantly threw an impenetrable veil across their thoughts.

"What are these things?" they asked of the Bronimids.

"Strangers who come in peace among us," Zryp told them.

"And in search of knowledge," Professor Jameson radiated strongly.

"You are machines," one of the Klejiligs spoke mechanically as he felt his unguarded thought instantly picked up and understood. "Who made you? Where are you from?"

"From out among the stars," the professor told him. "We made ourselves, for once we were flesh and blood, even as you. Now, only our brains remain; the rest of each of us is a machine guided by the brain."

The Klejiligs were visibly impressed but they also divined that the coming of

another intelligent race to Ilinikit boded no good to them. "We are glad that you come in peace, and we hope that you will depart so. We come to befriend these larger but less fortunate creatures than ourselves."

"By burying their dead for them?" 744U-21 asked.

An embarrassed and irritated frame of mind among the Klejiligs resulted from this remark. Conversation buzzed among them momentarily. The machine men found that the leader and spokesman for them was named Gnoob.

"We also use them in scientific experiment," Gnoob informed them. "It is for their good as well as ours."

"It does not seem to have extended their lives beyond reach of the strange sickness," Professor Jameson pointed out at once.

"They die when it is time for them to die," came the censored thought impression from Gnoob. "They do not live as long as we do, it is true; our natural span of life is longer than theirs. Their death is marked by these preliminary symptoms which you metal things have mistaken for sickness. On this world, we all must die eventually. There is no antidote for death."

Gnoob turned to the business at hand which consisted of taking aboard the airship all those marked with the symptoms of approaching death.

"How many are there?"

"Fifteen."

"Gather them here and let us be gone back to Greow."

Word was quickly passed around, and soon the silent little group marked for death stood ready beside the airship. Heads were counted.

"There are only thirteen," Gnoob said. "Two are missing. See if they are not already dead. Bring their bodies."

A thorough search was made, but no sign of them was found.

CHAPTER TWO

Winged Death

IT WAS a taciturn and gloomy Bronimid among the condemned group by the airship who finally threw light on the whereabouts of the missing pair.

"I saw Gilik and Mig near the big flyer of the metal ones."

"They are hiding from their destiny and duty in that thing, then," one of the Klejiligs said. "Let them be removed and brought here. Such a thing cannot be allowed."

The machine men alerted their companions inside the spaceship, and a search was made. The luckless stowaways were found by 199Z-073 and brought forth.

"Come—this is against law and tradition," Gnoob sternly counseled them.

"Whose law—theirs or yours?" Professor Jameson asked. "It is their privilege to stay here and die if they wish."

"And pollute the air with the stench from their rotting bodies?" Gnoob demanded.

"They will be buried in the ground after they die."

This seemed an entirely new idea to the Klejiligs. Gnoob parried the suggestion.

"What difference? They will die anyway. It seems to me that you metal things take too much upon yourselves. You would be better off not to interfere with our customs. All but two of these people come willingly."

"I wonder," said 744U-21, then directed a mental radiation to the doomed group. "You need not go with the Klejiligs in their airship unless you wish to. You have the privilege of staying here and dying in your own village. Those among you who would stay, go and join Gilik and Mig."

Confusedly, the thirteen Bronimids considered the thought. Two of them broke the uncertainty by joining Gilik and Mig.

Another straggled over soon afterwards, and finally another. The remaining nine appeared bound by tradition, or else did not see any difference either way.

"This sacrilege has gone too far!" raged one of the Klejiligs.

For the first time, the machine men noticed that the superior race carried weapons. A metal rod was whipped from the Klejilig's harness and aimed quickly at 744U-21, who was knocked down in a clattering heap. The Klejilig had no opportunity for further damage as Professor Jameson raised a fore tentacle which carried a built-in heat ray. The belligerent Klejilig was quickly burned into a smouldering mass of ashes as his companions and the startled Bronimids looked on. Meanwhile, 744U-21 arose to his feet and announced himself unharmed.

"Some kind of force gun," he said. "It has considerable power and would probably kill one of the Bronimids."

"Take those among the dying who would go with you and begone," Professor Jameson told the Klejiligs. "Otherwise, we shall destroy all of you as well as your ship."

The angry Klejiligs hurriedly gathered the nine Bronimids into the airship, fearing that more of them might change their minds and stay in the village. Also, they were impressed by Professor Jameson's threat. As they left, however, the machine men caught veiled thoughts of reprisal. They expected to have more trouble with the Klejiligs.

The machine men took the six doomed Bronimids into the spaceship and put them under the observation of 65G-849 and 168P-75, who had already been examining the condemned creatures prior to the arrival of the Klejiligs.

In the days that followed, first one of the Bronimids died, then immediately afterwards another one. This left four. Both 168P-75 and 65G-849 were examin-

ing healthy Bronimids in various stages of their interrupted lifetimes, as well as those marked for death. They also had one of the rarities of the village, old Hilig, under observation.

"I have to hide when the Klejiligs come," he confided, "else they would take me away. It is against the law and customs for any of us to be old."

"What happened to you?" 168P-75 asked. "Why are you different from the others?"

"I don't know. There are some of us who do not die like the others; but no one knows why."

The intelligence of Hilig and the other oldster was higher than that of the other Bronimids, they discovered. The wily old dodger had learned to efface this advantage. He wanted to remain inconspicuous and live.

"There is something strange about their bloodstream," 65G-849 reported. "It seems to have a kind of corpuscle which remains dormant until they attain maturity. Then it becomes activated, and we see the various symptoms preceding their death."

"What about old Hilig?" the professor asked.

"He does not have the corpuscle at all. Probably he never had it. As the Bronimids approach closer to death, there seems to be a congestion of these corpuscles around the heart. Several other organs also undergo change during the symptomatic period."

The two dead Bronimids were buried outside the village in the shadow of a ruined building. The living Bronimids watched this unheard-of ritual at the new graveyard. There was an uneasy muttering that the Klejiligs would not permit it. Old Hilig offered a strange prophecy.

"They will not stay dead that way. . . ."

Then three more of the condemned group died almost at the same time. The machine men buried them also.

Finally, the last of the six Bronimids died. It was during the last burial that the machine men noticed that the first grave had been tampered with. The ground at one point was loose and disturbed.

"The grave could not have been robbed," was 6W-438's opinion. "The point of entrance is too small. It looks as if a small creature had scented the body and dug down to it."

Questioning of the Bronimids shed no light on the matter. They knew of no animal capable of digging down into the ground, even though it was easy digging where the soil had recently been turned. The machine men thought little more of the matter until a Bronimid reported to them a day later that he had found two more of the graves in the same condition as the first. The bodies of all three disturbed graves were exhumed. It was found that something had eaten into the bodies.

"The hearts of all three are gone and nearby organs and tissue have been partly consumed," 168P-75 reported. "It is exactly the same in all three cases."

"We shall set a guard over the remaining three graves," the professor decided, "and be on the watch for these things, whatever they are."

FROM that time on, five Zoromes kept constant vigil by the graves through both periods of varying light. Nothing happened until two days afterwards. It was during the lesser period of light, when the sun lay on the opposite side of the world.

"Look!" 119M-5 called to the other four sentinels.

The machine man waved a tentacle towards one of the graves. There was a strange agitation of the ground, like a tiny earthquake. As the five watched, the ground belched upward slightly in a small

area near the middle of the grave and something emerged and shook the dirt from itself. The five Zoromes were not entirely in agreement over what happened next. There was not much to see in the first place; and it happened too quickly.

"It was small," 119M-5 remembered. "And after shaking off the dirt, it was difficult to see."

"It was colorless, almost invisible," 12W-62 added.

"Whatever it was," said 284D-167, "the thing ran off so swiftly I could scarcely see it go."

"No—it flew," 27E-24 said. "At first it went close to the ground, but I saw it rise and veer upwards."

On one thing they all agreed. The thing had come from the ground. It had not entered the ground at any point within their vision and burrowed down to the grave. A close search of the vicinity, including the ruins, showed no other entry or betrayed any burrows, either old or new.

"One point is clear," Professor Jameson summarized. "Something in the ground is desecrating these graves and feeding on the dead—possibly a worm or grub which undergoes a physical change once it has eaten. It could possibly develop wings. We know of such things in our travels. On my own world, a common fly developed in much the same manner."

"We must catch one of the things," 744U-21 decided. "It seems certain that it will happen with the two remaining graves. The sentinels will wear the metal wings this time. And also, a pair of X-ray machines will be mounted over the graves, and we shall see what goes on down there, and where these things come from."

Everything was done as 744U-21 had suggested. Professor Jameson selected 6W-438, 47X-09, 5ZQ35, 6N-24 and himself to handle the assignment. All five wore the metal wings. Two of the ma-

chine men were always at the X-ray machines, watching the shadowy outlines of the two buried Bronimids and on the alert for any alien forms burrowing into their field of vision. Although they watched carefully, they saw nothing.

"Although we have seen nothing enter the bodies from the outside, there nevertheless seems to be activity inside them," 6N-24 reported.

"It is the usual gathering of the strange corpuscles in the bloodstream," 47X-09 offered in explanation.

"But they are dead," Professor Jameson pointed out.

"To my knowledge, neither 65G-849 nor 168P-75 kept the Bonimids under observation after death," 6W-438 hinted. "It might have been well had they done so instead of burying them so soon."

While they digested these thoughts, 6N-24 made a further discovery. "Something is forcing its way out."

The others looked. It was so. Something small had left the body and was burrowing upward.

"Get the trap!" exclaimed the professor. "Be ready to catch it when it breaks through the surface!"

The machine men held a metal box ready to clap down and release a sliding panel once they had their quarry.

"Watch the other corpse," the professor warned.

Slowly but steadily, the thing burrowed upward, holding the attention of the five Zoromes. 5ZQ35 kept a wary eye upon the other grave, and the first thing had almost reached the surface when he excitedly announced the emergence of the second one from the grave of the last Bronimid.

So engrossed were the five machine men at what went on below them, they did not notice a large, shadowy oblong shape glide above them in the night sky like a phosphorescent ghost. They were almost ready to lay the trap over the thing

which was making little quakes in the soil, when a terrific blast of power sent the five Zoromes, their trap and X-ray machines flying in all directions.

Professor Jameson picked himself up some distance from the graves. The blast of power had slammed him up against the crumbling old building near the graveyard. He saw the shadowy ship of the Klejiligs land softly. He saw his four metal companions lying about helter-skelter, dazed and disorganized. He saw the wreckage of the X-ray machines, and he saw something else. It was the strange thing from out of the ground, emerging from its ghoulish feast on the inner organs of the dead Bronimid they had buried many days ago.

The thing shook the dirt from its body, and then he saw that it was almost transparent. While he stared fixedly at this strange demon from the ground, he scarcely noticed the aperture in the airship which had opened noiselessly to let out several of the Klejiligs. His mechanical eyes never left the thing from the grave, and he saw it rise and fly on almost invisible wings straight into the opening of the airship where the Klejiligs had emerged. The Klejiligs saw it, too, but gave it only passing attention. These ghoulish flying animals, then, were minions or emissaries of the master race of Ilinikit.

6W-438, near the airship, staggered to his feet but instantly went down from a power blast wielded by a Klejilig. Four Bronimid lackeys leaped out of the ship to secure the machine man with chains and dragged him back inside a prisoner. The act was quickly repeated with 5ZQ35 and 47X-09. Professor Jameson tried to rise to his feet and forestall the capture of the machine men but the force of the blast which had thrown him against the building had bent three of his mechanical legs, and he could only drag himself in a small, futile circle.

IN SWIFT, workmanlike manner, a Klejilig now led the four servile Bronimids to secure the professor. Professor Jameson recognized the Klejilig as Gnoob, but Gnoob did not recognize him. Gnoob raised his power tube a split second too late as Professor Jameson flicked his tentacle ray blazing a charred circle through the Klejilig's head. Gnoob fell dead, and the terrified Bronimids fled to the airship. The ship took off in the night, the door slamming shut.

Only the professor and 6N-24 remained. After carefully noting the direction the airship had taken, Professor Jameson found that although his metal legs were crippled he could still fly with the metal wings, and he glided over to where 6N-24 lay. He found the machine man recovering from a mental confusion occasioned by a severe blow to his head.

Bronimids from the village came running on their long legs, and the machine men were not far behind them. They had heard the screams of the burned Bronimids. The professor found 6N-24's wings crumpled and his legs bent, his tentacles tangled with the wreckage of an X-ray machine through which he had been watching the upward progress of the thing out of the ground. Watching the ghoulish creature dig upward had been the last thought on his mind when the power blast came; it was his first thought when he recovered his senses.

"See, 21MM392!" he cried. "The ground over the last grave!"

The professor looked and saw the last thing from the ground shaking the dirt from its body. Then it flew into the sky. Quickly, Professor Jameson turned and flew after it in fast pursuit above the heads of the running machine men and taller Bronimids beneath him. The thing flew rapidly, but not too quickly for the professor to follow. He was glad that it flew a straight, direct route. Otherwise, he might have lost sight of it, so vague

and wraithlike, a mere foggy halo against the sky. He flew behind and underneath to keep from losing it against the luminosity of the landscape.

It was his first intention to capture and return the thing to the spaceship, but on second thought he recognized the wisdom of letting it guide him to the airship's destination, which he suspected was somewhere in Greoow. He was confident that the flying ghoulish would instinctively go wherever the other one had gone in the airship. So he slowed his flight, keeping the white, ghostly blur within a safe distance.

It was not a long journey by air flight, he found. Greoow soon expanded upon the horizon.

Not until they were over the center of the city did the thing swoop downward. The machine man almost lost it, but recovered in time to see it glide down towards a broad, high building in the center of the city which the professor guessed to be the headquarters of the Klejiligs. The building sprawled like a great, flattened giant over the center of Greoow and made the other buildings around it appear dwarfed by contrast. The thing from the ground flitted down into a courtyard where the professor lost sight of it.

Professor Jameson flew low above the gloomy pile. He had a double purpose. He wanted to reconnoiter against a later return, and he desired to find where his three metal comrades had been taken and if they were safe. He kept up a continual mental radiation as he coursed back and forth, ignoring the fact that members of both races had sighted him and were running excitedly over the roofs.

He finally received a reply. It was 6W-438, deep in a subterranean retreat of the forbidding stronghold. "We are in a dungeon deep down in this building, 21MM392. All three of us are safe but heavily chained and locked up."

"I am alone, but I shall return with the

spaceship and free you," the professor radiated.

He veered in his flight as he neared a group of Klejiligs and their slaves grouped around a long tube which they swung in his direction. He was too late to escape the terrific blast of power as the end of the giant tube glowed warningly. He was hurled off into the sky.

Where the air had screamed past him in his forced flight, it now sobbed on a rising scale as his fall accelerated. The machine man realized that had he hit anything during his flight upward, it would have meant his end. It would still mean death unless he gained control of his flying apparatus. Buildings on the outer edge of the city rushed up at him sickeningly; then his desperate efforts at control of the wings commenced to brake his descent. But it was too late; he realized that it was no use trying to recover his flight in the air. Frantically, he put every effort into braking his downward plunge. The city rushed up at him, and a sloping roof smashed into and around his metal body as he cut through it and ended up inside the building. With a shock, Professor Jameson jarred into something soft.

A babbling sound greeted him. He recognized the voices of Bronimids as he caught their excited thought impressions. With his tentacles, he threshed his way out of a vegetable mass of leaves and stalks. He had fallen into a food warehouse. He found that his wings still worked after a fashion, and he lurched here and there as frightened Bronimids fled from his path and ran out of the building. Following them, he found himself in the open after some difficulty in which he had flown uncontrollably into many objects.

With difficulty, he lifted himself into the air and pursued an erratic course above and out of the city, several times almost falling to the ground again. He

deemed himself fortunate that only the Bronimids saw him and that word did not get back to the Klejiligs who might have pursued him. They would have found him an easy prey. One leg was gone entirely, the others smashed and bent. He had lost a tentacle, and although he still had the one with the heat ray, it did not function. The bottom of his cubed body had received a great dent. It was a badly battered and wrecked machine man who staggered back to the village and the spaceship after more than a day of slow, off-the-course flying.

CHAPTER THREE

The Secret of the Klejiligs

HIS STORY was soon told and repairs made to his metal body. 6W-438, 5ZQ35 and 47X-09 were captives of the Klejiligs and had to be released. That their captors would not give them up easily, the machine men were convinced. Preparations were rapidly made for departure. Several of the Bronimids were taken along, including Ajik, Blopk and old Hilig.

The spaceship rose and left the village behind. Greoow was quickly reached, and the spaceship veered low over the broad sanctuary of the Klejiligs, thought amplifiers groping for mental activity among the captured Zoromes. The spaceship was expected, however, by the enemy as well as by the three prisoners, and the force cannons opened their barrage. Close shots buffeted the ship.

"We are safe but heavily chained," 6W-438 radiated. "They haven't had time to decide what to do with us."

At the end of the long building stood a broad battery of the force cannon, the big tubes focused ahead of the spaceship. Through it they raced, and Zoromes went reeling off their feet and clattering into each other. The three Bronimids, already frightened by their first trip of this kind,

made their peace with the forces of life and death, convinced that it was the end. A few bad bruises were their only injuries. The ship was more badly shaken up than its occupants.

"That doesn't do the ship any good," said 744U-21. "A good thing those cannon don't shoot solid projectiles."

"They have never had any opposition to use weapons on," Professor Jameson pointed out. "Force charges were sufficient to quell any possible revolt by the Bronimids."

"We should take a few of the Klejiligs prisoner. They may come in handy. We can find out more about this place."

"And ask them a few questions about those things out of the ground," the professor added.

"Let us return and knock out one of the isolated force cannon and capture the gun crew."

"Using flying machine men?" Professor Jameson suggested.

744U-21 agreed. "Six should be enough."

20R-654 was acquainted with the strategy, and the veteran pilot and bombardier turned back towards the end of the sanctuary which they had first approached. Six machine men stood ready at an opened port to leap out at the right moment. The gun crew, comprising several Klejiligs and as many more Bronimid cannons, recognized the maneuver as a return across their position and waited, confident as they saw the spaceship gradually slowing its speed. But before the ship came within range of the lone force cannon, a stab of destruction leaped out and fused the Klejiligs' gun and mechanism, killing two or three of the crew.

Then out of the spaceship leaped six Zoromes, their metal wings settling them down among the stunned survivors. Bronimids were disregarded, and the three surviving members of the over-race

gathered up. Meanwhile, 20R-654 had swerved the ship in a curving arc which brought it almost level with the roof-top. With their burdens, the machine men flew back into the ship which rose high into the sky, yet never out of reach of the mental radiations of their three comrades.

"You are Klejiligs," the professor addressed the three prisoners. "We told you, even as your people hold three of us. We can take more of you and also rescue our companions. You saw what we did to your weapons. What were those things who dug themselves out of the graves of the Bronimids and flew back here to Greoow? Why are the Klejiligs interested in Bronimids who are about to die before their lives are half over?"

"We three might better die than to tell you our secrets," replied one who identified himself as Hruung.

"We have ways of probing this out of your minds," 744U-21 told them.

Klyyv, another of the three Klejiligs, expressed disdain. "Klejiligs have guarded secrets for ages and no one can learn anything we are not willing to tell."

"They have concentrated on this for limitless generations," said the professor in an aside to 744U-21. "That is why we learned nothing from them before. They are able to close up their minds. They must indeed have something to guard."

"We may be able to operate on their brains and dig out the information later, if it is necessary. Lock each one up in a separate compartment until we have 6W-438, 47X-09 and 5ZQ35 safely back in the ship."

The professor and two more of his metal companions led the three Klejiligs to little cells.

"Are we dying then, because we will not betray our race and civilization?" sneered Klyyv, half in defiance and half in fear.

"It will be the easiest way," the professor replied.

"We shall go bravely then, and join those who have gone before us," Klyyv resolved, fully believing he was to be executed.

On the chance that one of them might relax his mental vigilance, Professor Jameson waited hopefully outside the three cells, his brain alert to the thoughts which rambled through the minds of the captives. But the three were far too intelligent to fall into this error. The professor gathered that the Klejiligs possessed a quasi-scientific religion, and Klyyv was already looking forward to a life after death. But though he waited patiently, the professor found no thoughts of the Bronimids in the minds of the captives.

PROFESSOR Jameson was about to turn away and rejoin 744U-2I in the observation chamber when the spaceship careened wildly and sent him crashing against the wall. There followed the elevating feeling he had felt twice before, once when he was all alone with only a pair of battered metal wings between himself and a terrifying drop to the ground. Why, he wondered, had 20R-654 driven through that barrage of force cannons again? The lights flickered and went out, leaving him in the dark. Weird thought emanations emerged from Klyyv beyond the metal door of his cell. The three Klejiligs must have taken some nasty knocks. He could get no spark of thought from Hruung. Blouv seemed the only one still rational, and he was mystified at the darkness around him. It suddenly occurred to the professor that darkness was something entirely new and alien to a creature of this phosphorescent world. Nowhere was there such a miracle as darkness on this planet.

"They did kill me. I really am dead."

It was Klyyv, recovering his senses and finding himself in the dark. The professor listened, fascinated.

"Who is come to guide me? Who will take me with them?" pleaded Klyyv. "I have just arrived."

"I will guide you," the professor suddenly radiated as inspiration struck him. "Are you Bronimid or one of us?"

"I am not a Bronimid!" was Klyyv's somewhat disgusted reply.

"Both come this way in the hereafter ere their paths divide," was the professor's solemn rejoinder. "If you are a Bronimid, then I must leave you to wander through the darkness alone. We only guide our own species. I take it that you can prove yourself to be a Klejilig?"

"Yes—yes!"

"Why are Bronimids important to you?"

"Our race would die out without them."

"Why do Bronimids die so quickly once they are full grown?"

"That we may be born—that the end of their lives may be the beginning of ours."

"In what form were you before you were born, before the death of the Bronimid from which you came?"

"A part of the bloodstream."

"How did you become a part of the bloodstream?"

"Why—elements of my beginning were always there, ever since the Bronimid was bred animal-like. The blood content of a Bronimid always becomes one of us when it reaches maturity. We are the sublimated perfection of their lower beginning."

"How did this evolutionary process get started?" the professor queried.

"Only a few of the highest among the Klejiligs know that, as you must realize," pleaded Klyyv. "Why don't you come and guide me? Why are these metal walls still hemming me in?"

"You are condemned to eternal confinement in the dark," Professor Jameson replied. The professor was the only one

of the machine men with a sense of humor. "You are so condemned for confiding so readily all the secrets you once vowed never to reveal."

Professor Jameson hurried to the observation room with the answers to most of the enigmas which had puzzled the machine men since their landing on the phosphorescent world. He found that all the force cannon mounted on the sanctuary had been destroyed. Quickly he told what he had learned from Klyyv.

"It is a strange state of affairs," 744U-21 remarked. "How could it have happened?"

"I do not believe by natural means," said the professor. "Why are the Klejiligs without means of propagation?"

"They could not have been an alien race from another world," 744U-21 said. "They bear a resemblance to the Bronimids. It seems that the Klejiligs represent the latter half of the Bronimids' life cycle."

"Old Hilig lived the rest of his own lifetime," the professor reminded him. "And we know that there are others like Hilig whom the Klejiligs immediately destroy when they find them."

The details remained unanswered as plans went forward to rescue the captured machine men. Professor Jameson decided to take ten machine men with him, all armed with ray projectors. The spaceship blasted a hole in the roof of the gloomy sanctuary, not far from where the three captive machine men lay in a subterranean chamber. The professor and his task force of ten climbed out of the ship as it settled down on the roof, and entered through the hole in the roof.

They found themselves in a broad, dimly lit chamber amid fallen debris. At first, they could not see well, their mechanical eyes being accustomed to the daylight outside. 41C-98 pointed to the head of a dead Bronimid projecting from under the blasted rubble.

"Killed when the hole was made."

"There's another," said 29G-75.

"They have been dead a long time," said Professor Jameson, drawing their attention to the telltale complexion and red eyes of the strange death.

"Look!" cried 27E-24. "This broad room is full of them! They are lying everywhere!"

The machine men walked down among orderly rows of dead Bronimids, most of them waiting for a fledgling Klejilig to escape from them. Several had already fulfilled their destiny, as was evidenced by their emaciated and deflated bodies.

It was 19K-59 who first saw the flying things. Several of them flitted about the ceiling or perched somewhere on the grisly cadavers they had recently quitted. The machine man raised his ray projector, and a pencil stab of light knocked one of the things to the floor. Eagerly, the machine men examined it. The thing was small, colorless and translucent. Its inside organs were visible through transparent skin and tissue. A pair of transparent wings fitted the ugly-looking little parasite for flight. At a later stage of development, evidently, these wings dropped off. The fledgling itself was a weird, undeveloped caricature of a Klejilig which it more closely resembled than the Bronimid from which it came.

"COME," Professor Jameson urged. "Our three companions lie in chains below us. We shall have opportunity later to examine these things in detail."

Through two more such chambers as those above the machine men hurried before they discovered a ramp leading downward. In the chambers below, they found the young Klejiligs in a later state of development. Here, the wings were commencing to deteriorate and gradually shrivel up and disappear. Only a few of the occupants were able to use their wings

any more for flying, and then imperfectly like the short flight of chickens on the professor's world of long ago. Most of them walked about on their legs and showed a childish intelligence.

The eleven Zoromes wasted no time here but hurried down to the next level. Something whirred out of the darkness and 948D-21 was tumbled back against his fellows.

"Force guns!"

Another stab of power from a concealed tube whirled 41C-98 around dizzily.

The room in which they now found themselves had once been used for dead Bronimids. The empty stone pallets were laid out in orderly rows. It was from behind these that the Klejiligs and their Bronimid slaves fought a delaying action. In the simpler minds of the Bronimids, the machine men detected a fear of them which the Klejiligs had placed there. The Bronimids believed they were fighting for their own lives as well as those of their masters. The machine men tried to convince them that they were there to help all Bronimids get their freedom from the Klejiligs, but the Bronimids had been too long under their masters to accept such a radical thought at this crucial moment.

The machine men made one mistake they did not repeat—rushing across the chamber in a body. They became a focal point for every power tube and were staggered, knocked down and rendered an ineffectual tangle of cubed bodies and appendages. During this temporary debacle, one Klejilig was emboldened to leap out from his concealment and seize a disengaged ray projector which went clattering across the floor. He was almost back to his vantage point with the prize when a quick shot from 41C-98 cut him down. No other Klejilig or Bronimid made for the strange weapon the dead Klejiligs still held, and the machine men

retrieved it as they recovered themselves and advanced slowly.

The eleven machine men took a heavy toll of their enemies and the latter's allies. Those still concealed in the chamber among the many pallets finally ceased firing and let the machine men pass into the next chamber. If the Zoromes, however, expected decreased resistance, they were disappointed. They knew that they were close to their metal companions, and getting closer. Thought communications flew back and forth. The captive Zoromes were unharmed and waiting. A few Klejiligs in passing by to join the resistance had sent spiteful flashes of power at them from their tubes, but aside from knocking them down violently and rattling their chains no harm had been done.

The Klejiligs and their servants in the next chamber had erected a long pile of stone blocks clear across the middle of the room, and they opened fire on the first machine man to step over it. The concentrated volley hurled 27E-24 so violently back among his companions that he lay stunned where he had fallen, one of his metal legs bent beneath him.

"We must get in there and hide behind the stone mounts which were not used to make the barricade," said the professor.

"It will be hard getting through the doorway," 41C-98 pointed out.

"If only a few of us could get in there first. They have to show some part of themselves in order to aim their tubes."

"Let us use hostages," offered 29G-75. "The Klejiligs who are still in here hiding. We can line them up and send them in ahead of us."

"Good. Hunt them out."

An intensive search was made for skulking Klejiligs. The thought that they would not be fired upon by the machine men but must give themselves up and act as message-bearers to their companions behind the barrier produced half-hearted results. Although the Klejiligs did not

come out of their own will, when discovered they offered no resistance.

"March into the next room," Professor Jameson ordered them.

"We shall be killed with the force tubes," they protested.

"Call in and tell them you are coming and to hold their fire."

Ray projectors were lifted and pointed significantly at the laggards. The Klejiligs called in shrill accents to their brethren behind the barrier.

The seven Klejiligs walked through the narrow doorway and towards the barrier. Behind them, four Zoromes gained the inner chamber and dove quickly in as many directions for refuge, dividing up the barrage from behind the barrier.

As the professor had pointed out, to use the power tubes, the Klejiligs had to show some part of their bodies. For the fearless, coolly sniping machine men with their ray projectors, this was all they needed. Partly concealed, they had little to fear. Only a direct hit by one or more of the power tubes could knock them over. A stabbing thrust by one of the ray projectors showed the Klejiligs the futility of defense by flesh against metal.

IT WAS the beginning of the end when more machine men, in pairs, filtered into the chamber of last defense. The Klejiligs, showing themselves to form a barrage with their power tubes, were vulnerable to the four machine men already inside and awaiting such a target as an exposed head or arm. It was not long before all eleven of the machine men were in the room.

The Klejiligs reached a quick decision and retreated. They left softly behind their barricade, but the Zoromes sensed the sudden absence of their mental radiations and were in quick pursuit. The over-race did not stop to try another defense, and the machine men let them go. Ahead lay the ramp to the lower level and the three imprisoned machine men. Down it they raced. Huge, massive chains, heavier than the machine men they held to the wall and to each other, festooned the metal bodies of 6W-438, 47X-09 and 5ZQ35.

"Quick, 21MM392!" 6W-438 urged him. "Get to the next dungeons beyond this and guard the prisoners there! They are Bronimids—wise, old Bronimids who know much of what puzzled us!"

Professor Jameson waved his metal minions on as he personally burned through the chains of his three fellow sentinels of the graveyard vigil.

"We know much already, 6W-438, but not all," the professor told him. "Here is my ray projector. Protect yourselves if you must while I join the others."

Into the further dungeons Professor Jameson raced, but he found his ten machine men well in command of the situation. Here were many Bronimids in smaller chains than those which had held the three Zoromes. The faces of these Bronimids showed something other than the effects of imprisonment. They showed advanced age, wisdom and intelligence. As the professor and his machine men went around and released nearly a hundred of these unfortunates, they learned the story which the Bronimids had already told 6W-438, 47X-09 and 5ZQ35. Once more, the machine men heard what the professor had learned from Klyyv, with additional enlightening detail. One of the prisoners, Jipit, told it to them. Jipit and Koloft were Bronimid scientists of a secret society.

"Ages ago, we Bronimids were the only intelligent species here on Ilinikit. We built cities, had machines to work for us and rose high in science. Too high! My ambitious ancestors were not satisfied with the long lifetimes they already enjoyed. In trying to achieve immortality, they blundered upon a biochemical change in the bloodstream. This change created a sublimated but coldly selfish fission of life."

"We know much of that already," the professor told Jipit. "But how did all Bronimids get this way, and how did the Klejiligs gain their power?"

"A microorganism was used to create the change. It proved to be contagious, slowly at first and then more rapidly. The malady spread before the danger was realized, finally all over Ilinikit. The

newly-created Klejiligs we prized as scientific achievements were actually heralds of the doom of our race. As the change spread, all Bronimids died soon after maturity, and from their dead bodies sprang the Klejiligs. The Bronimids naturally degenerated to what you see today, and we have become the slaves of the Klejiligs. You can well understand that in a measure the Klejiligs are concerned over the health and welfare of the Bronimids. The Klejiligs are sexless and can never propagate."

"You—why didn't you die at maturity and transfer your life to a fledgling Klejilig?"

"A tiny fractional percentage, probably less than one out of two thousand, is immune to the change. I am one of these. So is Koloft. So are all of us here. All of us who are like that are either imprisoned or killed when caught. A few of us escape, and others remain in hiding. Among the minority who escape and remain fugitives are those who carry on and hand down the old sciences and secrets. Koloft and I are among those."

"There must be a way to halt this disease and let the race of Klejiligs die out," the professor remarked.

"There is!" Koloft exclaimed, his eyes blazing with a determination and intelligence which seemed unnatural to the machine men after knowing the dull, beaten Bronimids so long. "I know where to get the formula! It is in the safe and competent hands of those among us who have eluded the Klejiligs and who have had it handed down to them from generation to generation!"

"Then you have in us powerful friends and allies who will help you put this cure into effect before we leave this world of yours," Professor Jameson told them. "Your race has suffered enough. We shall help you free yourselves from these monsters you unwittingly created from your own blood!"