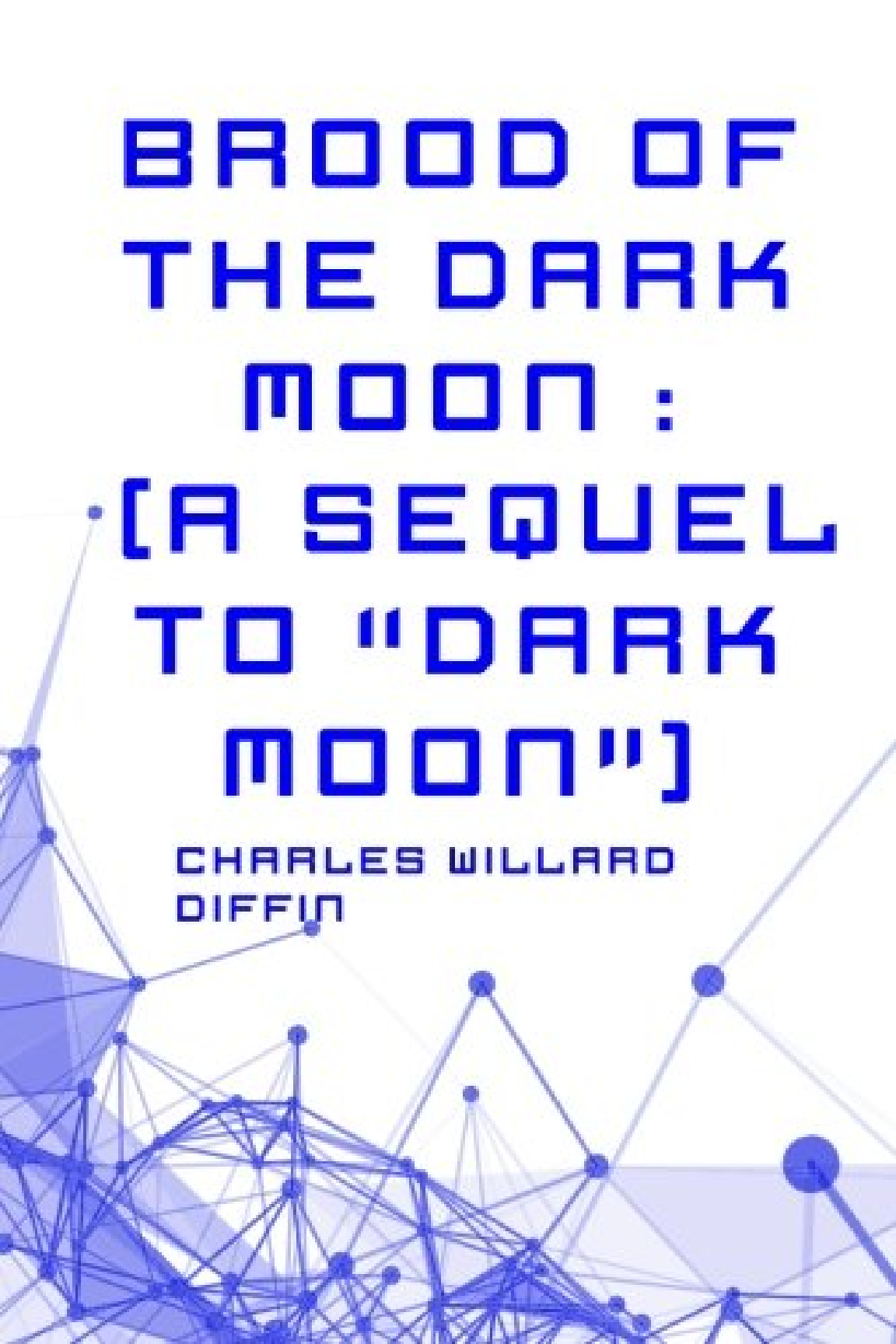
BROOD OF THE DARK MOON : [A SEQUEL TO "DARK MOON"]

CHARLES WILLARD DIFFIN



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Brood of the Dark Moon

(A Sequel to "Dark Moon")

By Charles Willard Diffin

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He landed one blow on the nearest face.

One, swifter than the rest, dashed upon him.

The inky waters were ablaze with fire.

With the free hand he shot over a blow.

CHAPTER I

The Message

Once more
Chet, Walt

and Diane are united in a wild ride to the Dark Moon —but this time they go as prisoners of their deadly enemy Schwartzmann.

In a hospital in Vienna, in a room where sunlight flooded through ultraviolet permeable crystal, the warm rays struck upon smooth walls the color of which changed from hot reds to cool yellow or gray or to soothing green, as the Directing Surgeon might order. An elusive blending of tones now seemed pulsing with life; surely even a flickering flame of vitality would be blown into warm livingness in such a place.

Even the chart case in the wall glittered with the same clean, brilliant hues from its glass and metal door. The usual revolving paper disks showed white beyond the glass. They were moving; and the ink lines grew to tell a story of temperature and respiration and of every heart-beat.

On the identification-plate a name appeared and a date: "Chet Bullard—23 years. Admitted: August 10, 1973." And below that the ever-changing present ticked into the past in silent minutes: "August 15, 1973; World Standard Time: 10:38—10:39—10:40 —"

For five days the minutes had trickled into a rivulet

of time that flowed past a bandaged figure in the bed below—a silent figure and unmoving, as one for whom time has ceased. But the surgeons of the Allied Hospital at Vienna are clever.

10:41—10:42—The bandaged figure stirred uneasily on a snow-white bed....

A nurse was beside him in an instant. Was her patient about to recover consciousness? She examined the bandages that covered a ragged wound in his side, where all seemed satisfactory. To all appearances the man who had moved was unconscious still; the nurse could not know of the thought impressions, blurred at first, then gradually clearing, that were flashing through his mind.

Flashing; yet, to the man who struggled to comprehend them, they passed laggingly in review: one picture followed another with exasperating slowness....

Where was he? What had happened? He was hardly conscious of his own identity....

There was a ship ... he held the controls ... they were flying low.... One hand reached fumblingly beneath the soft coverlet to search for a triple star that should be upon his jacket. A triple star: the insignia of a Master Pilot of the World!—and with the movement there came clearly a realization of himself.

Chet Bullard, Master Pilot; he was Chet Bullard ... and a wall of water was sweeping under him from the ocean to wipe out the great Harkness Terminal buildings.... It was Harkness—Walt Harkness—from

whom he had snatched the controls.... To fly to the Dark Moon, of course—

What nonsense was that?... No, it was true: the Dark Moon had raised the devil with things on Earth.... How slowly the thoughts came! Why couldn't he remember?...

Dark Moon!—and they were flying through space.... They had conquered space; they were landing on the Dark Moon that was brilliantly alight. Walt Harkness had set the ship down beautifully—

Then, crowding upon one another in breath-taking haste, came clear recollection of past adventures:

They were upon the Dark Moon—and there was the girl, Diane. They must save Diane. Harkness had gone for the ship. A savage, half-human shape was raising a hairy arm to drive a spear toward Diane, and he, Chet, was leaping before her. He felt again the lancet-pain of that blade....

And now he was dying—yes, he remembered it now—dying in the night on a great, sweeping surface of frozen lava.... It was only a moment before that he had opened his eyes to see Harkness' strained face and the agonized look of Diane as the two leaned above him.... But now he felt stronger. He must see them again....

He opened his eyes for another look at his companions—and, instead of black, star-pricked night on a distant globe, there was dazzling sunlight. No desolate lava-flow, this; no thousand fires that flared and smoked from their fumeroles in the dark.

And, instead of Harkness and the girl, Diane, leaning over him there was a nurse who laid one cool hand upon his blond head and who spoke soothingly to him of keeping quiet. He was to take it easy—he would understand later—and everything was all right.... And with this assurance Chet Bullard drifted again into sleep....

The blurring memories had lost their distortions a week later, as he sat before a broad window in his room and looked out over the housetops of Vienna. Again he was himself, Chet Bullard, with a Master Pilot's rating; and he let his eyes follow understandingly the moving picture of the world outside. It was good to be part of a world whose every movement he understood.

Those cylinders with stubby wings that crossed and recrossed the sky; their sterns showed a jet of thin vapor where a continuous explosion of detonite threw them through the air. He knew them all: the pleasure craft, the big, red-bellied freighters, the sleek liners, whose multiple helicopters spun dazzlingly above as they sank down through the shaft of pale-green light that marked a descending area.

That one would be the China Mail. Her under-ports were open before the hold-down clamps had gripped her; the mail would pour out in an avalanche of pouches where smaller mailships waited to distribute the cargo across the land.

And the big fellow taking off, her hull banded with blue, was one of Schwartzmann's liners. He

wondered what had become of Schwartzmann, the man who had tried to rob Harkness of his ship; who had brought the patrol ships upon them in an effort to prevent their take-off on that wild trip.

For that matter, what had become of Harkness? Chet Bullard was seriously disturbed at the absence of any word beyond the one message that had been waiting for him when he regained consciousness. He drew that message from a pocket of his dressing gown and read it again:

> "Chet, old fellow, lie low. S has vanished. Means mischief. Think best not to see you or reveal your whereabouts until our position firmly established. Have concealed ship. Remember, S will stop at nothing. Trying to discredit us, but the gas I brought will fix all that. Get yourself well. We are planning to go back, of course. Walt."

Chet returned the folded message to his pocket. He arose and walked about the room to test his returning strength: to remain idle was becoming increasingly difficult. He wanted to see Walter Harkness, talk with him, plan for their return to the wonder-world they had found.

Instead he dropped again into his chair and touched a knob on the newscaster beside him. A voice, hushed to the requirements of these hospital precincts spoke softly of market quotations in the far corners of the earth. He turned the dial irritably and

set it on "World News—General." The name of Harkness came from the instrument to focus Chet's attention.

"Harkness makes broad claims," the voice was saying. "Vienna physicists ridicule his pretensions.

"Walter Harkness, formerly of New York, proprietor of Harkness Terminals, whose great buildings near New York were destroyed in the Dark Moon wave, claims to have reached and returned from the Dark Moon.

"Nearly two months have passed since the new satellite crashed into the gravitational field of Earth, its coming manifested by earth shocks and a great tidal wave. The globe, as we know, was invisible. Although still unseen, and only a black circle that blocks out distant stars, it is visible in the telescopes of the astronomers; its distance and its orbital motion have been determined.

"And now this New Yorker claims to have penetrated space; to have landed on the Dark Moon; and to have returned to Earth. Broad claims, indeed, especially so in view of the fact that Harkness refuses to submit his ship for examination by the Stratosphere Control Board. He has filed notice of ownership, thus introducing some novel legal technicalities, but, since space-travel is still a dream of the future, there will be none to dispute his claims.

"Of immediate interest is Harkness' claim to have discovered a gas that is fatal to the serpents of space. The monsters that appeared when the Dark Moon came and that attacked ships above the Repelling Area are still there. All flying is confined to the lower levels; fast world-routes are disorganized.

"Whether or not this gas, of which Harkness has a sample, came from the Dark Moon or from some laboratory on Earth is of no particular importance. Will it destroy the space-serpents? If it does this, our hats are off to Mr. Walter Harkness; almost will we be inclined to believe the rest of his story—or to laugh with him over one of the greatest hoaxes ever attempted."

Chet had been too intent upon the newscast to heed an opening door at his back....

"How about it, Chet?" a voice was asking. "Would you call it a hoax or the real thing?" And a girl's voice chimed in with exclamations of delight at sight of the patient, so evidently recovering.

"Diane!" Chet exulted, "—and Walt!—you old son-of-a-gun!" He found himself clinging to a girl's soft hand with one of his, while with the other he reached for that of her companion. But Walt Harkness' arm went about his shoulders instead.

"I'd like to hammer you plenty," Harkness was saying, "and I don't even dare give you a friendly slam on the back. How's the side where they got you with the spear?—and how are you? How soon will you be ready to start back? What about—"

Diane Delacouer raised her one free hand to stop the flood of questions. "My dear," she protested, "give Chet a chance. He must be dying for information."

"I was dying for another reason the last time I saw you," Chet reminded her, "—up on the Dark Moon. But it seems that you got me back here in time for

repairs. And now what?" His nurse came into the room with extra chairs; Chet waited till she was gone before he repeated: "Now what? When do we go back?"

Harkness did not answer at once. Instead he crossed to the newscaster in its compact, metal case. The voice was still speaking softly; at a touch of a switch it ceased, and in the silence came the soft rush of sound that meant the telautotype had taken up its work. Beneath a glass a paper moved, and words came upon it from a hurricane of type-bars underneath. The instrument was printing the news story as rapidly as any voice could speak it.

Harkness read the words for an instant, then let the paper pass on to wind itself upon a spool. It had still been telling of the gigantic hoax that this eccentric American had attempted and Harkness repeated the words.

"A hoax!" he exclaimed, and his eyes, for a moment, flashed angrily beneath the dark hair that one hand had disarranged. "I would like to take that facetious bird out about a thousand miles and let him play around with the serpents we met. But, why get excited? This is all Schwartzmann's doing. The tentacles of that man's influence reach out like those of an octopus."

Chet ranged himself alongside. Tall and slim and blond, he contrasted strongly with this other man, particularly in his own quiet self-control as against Harkness' quick-flaring anger.

"Take it easy, Walt," he advised. "We'll show them. But I judge that you have been razzed a bit. It's a pretty big story for them to swallow without proof. Why didn't you show them the ship? Or why didn't you let Diane and me back up your yarn? And you haven't answered my other questions: when do we go back?"

Harkness took the queries in turn.

"I didn't show the old boat," he explained, "because I'm not ready for that yet. I want it kept dark—dark as the Dark Moon. I want to do my preliminary work there before Schwartzmann and his experts see our ship. He would duplicate it in a hurry and be on our trail.

"And now for our plans. Well, our there in space the Dark Moon is waiting. Have you realized, Chet, that we own that world—you and Diane and I? Small—only half the size of our old moon—but what a place! And it's ours!

"Back in history—you remember?—an ambitious lad named Alexander sighed for more worlds to conquer. Well, we're going Alexander one better—we've found the world. We're the first ever to go out into space and return again.

"We'll go back there, the three of us. We will take no others along—not yet. We will explore and make our plans for development; and we will keep it to ourselves until we are ready to hold it against any opposition.

"And now, how soon can you go? Your injury—how soon will you be well enough?"

"Right now," Chet told him laconically; "today, if you

say the word. They've got me welded together so I'll hold, I reckon. But where's the ship? What have you done—" He broke off abruptly to listen—

To all three came a muffled, booming roar. The windows beside them shivered with the thud of the distant explosion; they had not ceased their trembling before Harkness had switched on the news broadcast. And it was a minute only until the news-gathering system was on the air.

"Explosion at the Institute of Physical Science!" it stated. "This is Vienna broadcasting. An explosion has just occurred. We are giving a preliminary announcement only. The laboratories of the Scientific Institute of this city are destroyed. A number of lives have been lost. The cause has not been determined. It is reported that the laboratories were beginning analytical work, on the so-called Harkness Dark Moon gas—

"Confirmation has just been radioed to this station. Dark Moon gas exploded on contact with air. The American, Harkness, is either a criminal or a madman; he will be apprehended at once. This confirmation comes from Herr Schwartzmann of Vienna who left the Institute only a few minutes before the explosion occurred—"

And, in the quiet of a hospital room, Walter Harkness drew a long breath and whispered; "Schwartzmann! His hand is everywhere.... And that sample was all I had.... I must leave at once—go back to America."

He was halfway to the door—he was almost carrying

Diane Delacouer with him—when Chet's quiet tones brought him up short.

"I've never seen you afraid," said Chet; and his eyes were regarding the other man curiously; "but you seem to have the wind up, as the old flyers used to say, when it comes to Schwartzmann."

Harkness looked at the girl he held so tightly, then grinned boyishly at Chet. "I've someone else to be afraid for now," he said.

His smile faded and was replaced by a look of deep concern. "I haven't told you about Schwartzmann," he said; "haven't had time. But he's poison, Chet. And he's after our ship."

"Where is the ship; where have you hidden it? Tell me—where?"

Harkness looked about him before he whispered sharply: "Our old shop—up north!"

He seemed to feel that some explanation was due Chet. "In this day it seems absurd to say such things," he added; "but this Schwartzmann is a throw-back—a conscienceless scoundrel. He would put all three of us out of the way in a minute if he could get the ship. *He* knows we have been to the Dark Moon—no question about that—and he wants the wealth he can imagine is there.

"We'll all plan to leave; I'll radio you later. We'll go back to the Dark Moon—" He broke off abruptly as the door opened to admit the nurse. "You'll hear from me later," he repeated; and hurried Diane Delacouer

from the room.

But he returned in a moment to stand again at the door—the nurse was still in the room. "In case you feel like going for a hop," he told Chet casually, "Diane's leaving her ship here for you. You'll find it up above—private landing stage on the roof."

Chet answered promptly, "Fine; that will go good one of these days." All this for the benefit of listening ears. Yet even Chet would have been astonished to know that he would be using that ship within an hour....

He was standing at the window, and his mind was filled, not with thoughts of any complications that had developed for his friend Harkness, but only of the adventures that lay ahead of them both. The Dark Moon!—they had reached it, indeed; but they had barely scratched the surface of that world of mystery and adventure. He was wild with eagerness to return—to see again that new world, blazing brightly beneath the sun; to see the valley of fires—and he had a score to settle with the tribe of ape-men, unless Harkness had finished them off while he, himself, lay unconscious.... Yes, there seemed little doubt of that; Walt would have paid the score for all of them.... He seemed actually back in that world to which his thoughts went winging across the depths of space. The buzz of a telephone recalled him.

It was the hospital office, he found, when he answered. There was a message—would Mr. Bullard kindly receive it on the telautotype—lever number four, and dial fifteen-point-two—thanks.... And Chet

depressed a key and adjusted the instrument that had been printing the newscast.

The paper moved on beneath the glass, and the type-bars clicked more slowly now. From some distant station that might be anywhere on or above the earth, there was coming a message.

The frequency of that sending current was changed at some central office; it was stepped down to suit the instrument beside him. And the type was spelling out words that made the watching man breathless and intent—until he tore off the paper and leaped for the call signal that would summon the nurse. Through her he would get his own clothes, his uniform, the triple star that showed his rating and his authority in every air-level of the world.

That badge would have got him immediate attention on any landing field. Now, on the flat roof, with steady, gray eyes and a voice whose very quietness accentuated its imperative commands, Chet had the staff of the hospital hangars as alert as if their alarm had sounded a general ambulance call.

Straight into the sky a red beacon made a rigid column of light; a radio sender was crackling a warning and a demand for "clear air." From the forty level, a patrol ship that had caught the signal came corkscrewing down the red shaft to stand by for emergency work.... Chet called her commander from the cabin of Diane's ship. A word of thanks—Chet's number—and a dismissal of the craft. Then the white lights signaled "all clear" and the hold-down levers let go with a soft hiss—

The feel of the controls was good to his hands; the ship roared into life. A beautiful little cruiser, this ship of Diane's; her twin helicopters lifted her gracefully into the air. The column of red light had changed to blue, the mark of an ascending area; Chet touched a switch. A muffled roar came from the stern and the blast drove him straight out for a mile; then he swung and returned. He was nosing up as he touched the blue—straight up—and he held the vertical climb till the altimeter before him registered sixty thousand.

Traffic is north-bound only on the sixty-level, and Chet set his ship on a course for the frozen wastes of the Arctic; then he gave her the gun and nodded in tight-lipped satisfaction at the mounting thunder that answered from the stern.

Only then did he read again the message on a torn fragment of telautotype paper. "Harkness," was the signature; and above, a brief warning and a call —"Danger—must leave at once. You get ship and stand by. I will meet you there." And, for the first time, Chet found time to wonder at this danger that had set the hard-headed, hard-hitting Walt Harkness into a flutter of nerves.

What danger could there be in this well-guarded world? A patrol-ship passed below him as he asked himself the question. It was symbolic of a world at peace; a world too busy with its own tremendous development to find time for wars or makers of war. What trouble could this man Schwartzmann threaten that a word to the Peace Enforcement Commission would not quell? Where could he go to elude the

inescapable patrols?

And suddenly Chet saw the answer to that question —saw plainly where Schwartzmann could go. Those vast reaches of black space! If Schwartzmann had their ship he could go where they had gone—go out to the Dark Moon.... And Harkness had warned Chet to get their ship and stand by.

Had Walt learned of some plan of Schwartzmann's? Chet could not answer the question, but he moved the control rheostat over to the last notch.

From the body of the craft came an unending roar of a generator where nothing moved; where only the terrific, explosive impact of bursting detonite drove out from the stern to throw them forward. "A good little ship," Chet had said of this cruiser of Diane's; and he nodded approval now of a ground-speed detector whose quivering needle had left the 500 mark. It touched 600, crept on, and trembled at 700 miles an hour with the top speed of the ship.

There was a position-finder in the little control-room, and Chet's gaze returned to it often to see the pinpoint of light that crept slowly across the surface of a globe. It marked their ever-changing location, and it moved unerringly toward a predetermined goal.

It was a place of ice and snow and bleak outcropping of half-covered rocks where he descended. Lost from the world, a place where even the high levels seldom echoed to the roar of passing ships, it had been a perfect location for their "shop." Here he and Walt

had assembled their mystery ship.

He had to search intently over the icy waste to find the exact location; a dim red glow from a hidden sun shone like pale fire across distant black hills. But the hills gave him a bearing, and he landed at last beside a vaguely outlined structure, half hidden in drifting snow.

The dual fans dropped him softly upon the snow ground and Chet, as he walked toward the great locked doors, was trembling from other causes than the cold. Would the ship be there? He was suddenly a-quiver with excitement at the thought of what this ship meant—the adventure, the exploration that lay ahead.

The doors swung back. In the warm and lighted room was a cylinder of silvery white. Its bow ended in a gaping port where a mighty exhaust could roar forth to check the ship's forward speed; there were other ports ranged about the gleaming body. Above the hull a control-room projected flatly; its lookouts shone in the brilliance of the nitron illuminator that flooded the room with light....

Chet Bullard was breathless as he moved on and into the room. His wild experiences that had seemed but a weird dream were real again. The Dark Moon was real! And they would be going back to it!

The muffled beating of great helicopters was sounding in his ears; outside, a ship was landing. This would be Harkness coming to join him; yet, even as the thought flashed through his mind, it was

countered by a quick denial. To the experienced hearing of the Master Pilot this sound of many fans meant no little craft. It was a big ship that was landing, and it was coming down fast. The blue-striped monster looming large in the glow of the midnight sun was not entirely a surprise to Chet's staring eyes.

But—blue-striped! The markings of the Schwartzmann line!—He had hardly sensed the danger when it was upon him.

A man, heavy and broad of frame, was giving orders. Only once had Chet seen this Herr Schwartzmann, but there was no mistaking him now. And he was sending a squad of rushing figures toward the man who struggled to close a great door.

Chet crouched to meet the attack. He was outnumbered; he could never win out. But the knowledge of his own helplessness was nothing beside that other conviction that flooded him with sickening certainty—

A hoax!—that was what they had called Walt's story; Schwartzmann had so named it, and now Schwartzmann had been the one to fool them; the message was a fake—a bait to draw him out; and he, Chet, had taken the bait. He had led Schwartzmann here; had delivered their ship into his hands—



He landed one blow on the nearest face.

He landed one blow on the nearest face; he had one glimpse of a clubbed weapon swinging above him—and the world went dark.

CHAPTER II

Into Space

A pulsing pain that stabbed through his head was Chet's first conscious impression. Then, as objects

came slowly into focus before his eyes, he knew that above him a ray of light was striking slantingly through the thick glass of a control-room lookout.

Other lookouts were black, the dead black of empty space. Through them, sparkling points of fire showed here and there—suns, sending their light across millions of years to strike at last on a speeding ship. But, from the one port that caught the brighter light, came that straight ray to illumine the room.

"Space," thought Chet vaguely. "That is the sunlight of space!"

He was trying to arrange his thoughts in some sensible sequence. His head!—what had happened to his head?... And then he remembered. Again he saw a clubbed weapon descending, while the face of Schwartzmann stared at him through bulbous eyes....

And this control-room where he lay—he knew in an instant where he was. It was his own ship that was roaring and trembling beneath him—his and Walt Harkness'—it was flying through space! And, with the sudden realization of what this meant, he struggled to arise. Only then did he see the figure at the controls.

The man was leaning above an instrument board; he straightened to stare from a rear port while he spoke to someone Chet could not see.

"There's more of 'em coming!" he said in a choked voice. "*Mein Gott!* Neffer can we get away!"

He fumbled with shaking hands at instruments and

controls; and now Chet saw his chalk-white face and read plainly the terror that was written there. But the cords that cut into his own wrists and ankles reminded him that he was bound; he settled back upon the floor. Why struggle? If this other pilot was having trouble let him get out of it by himself—let him kill his own snakes!

That the man was having trouble there was no doubt. He looked once more behind him as if at something that pursued; then swung the ball-control to throw the ship off her course.

The craft answered sluggishly, and Chet Bullard grinned where he lay helpless upon the floor; for he knew that his ship should have been thrown crashingly aside with such a motion as that. The answer was plain: the flask of super-detonite was exhausted; here was the last feeble explosion of the final atoms of the terrible explosive that was being admitted to the generator. And to cut in another flask meant the opening of a hidden valve.

Chet forgot the pain of his swelling hands to shake with suppressed mirth. This was going to be good! He forgot it until, through a lookout, he saw a writhing, circling fire that wrapped itself about the ship and jarred them to a halt.

The serpents!—those horrors from space that had come with the coming of the Dark Moon! They had disrupted the high-level traffic of the world; had seized great, liners; torn their way in; stripped them of every living thing, and let the empty shells crash back to earth. Chet had forgotten or he had failed to realize the height at which this new pilot was flying. Only speed could save them; the monsters, with their snouts that were great suction-cups, could wrench off

a metal door—tear out the glass from a port!

He saw the luminous mass crush itself against a forward lookout and felt the jar of its body against their ship. Soft and vaporous, these cloud-like serpents seemed as they drifted through space; yet the impact, when they struck, proved that this new matter had mass.

Chet saw the figure at the controls stagger back and cower in fear; the man's bullet-shaped head was covered by his upraised arms: there was some horror outside those windows that his eyes had no wish to see. Beside him the towering figure of Schwartzmann appeared; he had sprung into Chet's view, and he screamed orders at the fear-stricken pilot.

"Fool! Swine!" Schwartzmann was shouting. "Do something! You said you could fly this ship!" In desperation he leaped forward and reached for the controls himself.

Chet's blurred faculties snapped sharply to attention. That yellow glow against the port—the jarring of their ship—it meant instant destruction once that searching snout found some place where it could secure a hold. If the air-pressure within the ship were released; if even a crack were opened!—

"Here, you!" he shouted to the frantic Schwartzmann who was jerking frenziedly at the controls that no longer gave response. "Cut these ropes!—leave those instruments alone, you fool!" He was suddenly vibrant with hate as he realized what this man had done: he had struck him, Chet, down as he would

have felled an animal for butchery; he had stolen their ship; and now he was losing it. Chet hardly thought of his own desperate plight in his rage at this threat to their ship, and at Schwartzmann's inability to help himself.

"Cut these ropes!" he repeated. "Damn it all, turn me loose; I can fly us out!" He added his frank opinion of Schwartzmann and all his men. And Schwartzmann, though his dark face flushed angrily red for one instant, leaped to Chet's side and slashed at the cords with a knife.

The room swam before Chet's dizzy eyes as he came to his feet. He half fell, half drew himself full length toward the valve that he alone knew. Then again he was on his feet, and he gripped at the ball-control with one hand while he opened a master throttle that cut in this new supply of explosive.

The room had been silent with the silence of empty space, save only for the scraping of a horrid body across the ship's outer shell. The silence was shattered now as if by the thunder of many guns. There was no time for easing themselves into gradual flight. Chet thrust forward on the ball-control, and the blast from their stern threw the ship as if it had been fired from a giant cannon.

The self-compensating floor swung back and up; Chet's weight was almost unbearable as the ship beneath him leaped out and on, and the terrific blast that screamed and thundered urged this speeding shell to greater and still greater speed. And then, with the facility that that speed gave, Chet's careful

hands moved a tiny metal ball within its magnetic cage, and the great ship bellowed from many ports as it followed the motion of that ball.

Could an eye have seen the wild, twisting flight, it must have seemed as if pilot and ship had gone suddenly mad. The craft corkscrewed and whirled; it leaped upward and aside; and, as the glowing mass was thrown clear of the lookout, Chet's hand moved again to that maximum forward position, and again the titanic blast from astern drove them on and out.

There were other shapes ahead, glowing lines of fire, luminous masses like streamers of cloud that looped themselves into contorted forms and writhed vividly until they straightened into sharp lines of speed that bore down upon the fleeing craft and the human food that was escaping these hungry snouts.

Chet saw them dead ahead; he saw the outthrust heads, each ending in a great suction-cup, the row of disks that were eyes blazing above, and the gaping maw below. He altered their course not a hair's breadth as he bore down upon them, while the monsters swelled prodigiously before his eyes. And the thunderous roar from astern came with never a break, while the ship itself ceased its trembling protest against the sudden blast and drove smoothly on and into the waiting beasts.

There was a hardly perceptible thudding jar. They were free! And the forward lookouts showed only the brilliant fires of distant suns and one more glorious than the rest that meant a planet.

Chet turned at last to face Schwartzmann and his pilot where they had clung helplessly to a metal stanchion. Four or five others crept in from the cabin aft; their blanched faces told of the fear that had gripped them—fear of the serpents; fear, too, of the terrific plunges into which the ship had been thrown. Chet Bullard drew the metal control-ball back into neutral and permitted himself the luxury of a laugh.

"You're a fine bunch of highwaymen," he told Schwartzmann; "you'll steal a ship you can't fly; then come up here above the R. A. level and get mixed up with those brutes. What's the idea? Did you think you would just hop over to the Dark Moon? Some little plan like that in your mind?"

Again the dark, heavy face of Schwartzmann flushed deeply; but it was his own men upon whom he turned.

"You," he told the pilot—"you were so clever; you would knock this man senseless! You would insist that you could fly the ship!"

The pilot's eyes still bulged with the fear he had just experienced. "But, Herr Schwartzmann, it was you who told me—"

A barrage of unintelligible words cut his protest short. Schwartzmann poured forth imprecations in an unknown tongue, then turned to the others.

"Back!" he ordered. "Bah!—such men! The danger it iss over—yess! This pilot, he will take us back safely."

He turned his attention now to the waiting Chet. "Herr Bullard, iss it not—yess?"

He launched into extended apologies—he had wanted a look at this so marvelous ship—he had spied upon it; he admitted it. But this murderous attack was none of his doing; his men had got out of hand; and then he had thought it best to take Chet, unconscious as he was and return with him where he could have care.

And Chet Bullard kept his eyes steadily upon the protesting man and said nothing, but he was thinking of a number of things. There was Walt's warning, "this Schwartzmann means mischief," and the faked message that had brought him from the hospital to get the ship from its hiding place; no, it was too much to believe. But Chet's eyes were unchanging, and he nodded shortly in agreement as the other concluded.

"You will take us back?" Schwartzmann was asking. "I will repay you well for what inconvenience we have caused. The ship, you will return it safely to the place where it was?"

And Chet, after making and discarding a score of plans, knew there was nothing else he could do. He swung the little metal ball into a sharply-banked turn. The straight ray of light from an impossibly brilliant sun struck now on a forward lookout; it shone across the shoulder of a great globe to make a white, shining crescent as of a giant moon. It was Earth; and Chet brought the bow-sights to bear on that far-off target, while again the thunderous blast was built up to drive them back along the trackless path on which they had come. But he wondered, as he pressed forward on the control, what the real plan

of this man, Schwartzmann, might be....

Less than half an hour brought them to the Repelling Area, and Chet felt the upward surge as he approached it. Here, above this magnetic field where gravitation's pull was nullified, had been the air-lanes for fast liners. Empty lanes they were now; for the R. A., as the flying fraternity knew it—the Heaviside Layer of an earlier day—marked the danger line above which the mysterious serpents lay in wait. Only the speed of Chet's ship saved them; more than one of the luminous monsters was in sight as he plunged through the invisible R. A. and threw on their bow-blast strongly to check their fall.

Then, as he set a course that would take them to that section of the Arctic waste where the ship had been, he pondered once more upon the subject of this Schwartzmann of the shifty eyes and the glib tongue and of his men who had "got out of hand" and had captured this ship.

"Why in thunder are we back here?" Chet asked himself in perplexity. "This big boy means to keep the ship; and, whatever his plans may have been before, he will never stop short of the Dark Moon now that he has seen the old boat perform. Then why didn't he keep on when he was started? Had the serpents frightened him back?"

He was still mentally proposing questions to which there seemed no answer when he felt the pressure of a metal tube against his back. The voice of Schwartzmann was in his ears.

"This is a detonite pistol"—that voice was no longer unctuous and self-deprecating—"one move and I'll plant a charge inside you that will smash you to a jelly!"

There were hands that gripped Chet before he could turn; his arms were wrenched backward; he was helpless in the grip of Schwartzmann's men. The former pilot sprang forward.

"Take control, Max!" Schwartzmann snapped; but he followed it with a question while the pilot was reaching for the ball. "You can fly it for sure, Max?"

The man called Max answered confidently.

"*Ja wohl!*" he said with eager assurance. "Up top there would have been no trouble yet for that *verdammt, verloren* valve. That one experimental trip is enough —I fly it!"

Those who held Chet were binding his wrists. He was thrown to the floor while his feet were tied, and, as a last precaution, a gag was forced into his mouth. Schwartzmann left this work to his men. He paid no attention to Chet; he was busy at the radio.

He placed the sending-levers in strange positions that would effect a blending of wave lengths which only one receiving instrument could pick up. He spoke cryptic words into the microphone, then dropped into a language that was unfamiliar to Chet. Yet, even then, it was plain that he was giving instructions, and he repeated familiar words.

"Harkness," Chet heard him say, and, "—Delacouer—

ja!—Mam'selle Delacouer!"

Then, leaving the radio, he said, "Put my ship inside the hangar;" and the pilot, Max, grounded their own ship to allow the men to leap out and float into the big building the big aircraft in which Schwartzmann had come.

"Now close the doors!" their leader ordered. "Leave everything as it was!" And to the pilot he gave added instructions: "There iss no air traffic here. You will to forty thousand ascend, und you will wait over this spot." Contemptuously he kicked aside the legs of the bound man that he might walk back into the cabin.

The take-off was not as smooth as it would have been had Chet's slim hands been on the controls; this burly one who handled them now was not accustomed to such sensitivity. But Chet felt the ship lift and lurch, then settle down to a swift, spiralling ascent. Now he lay still as he tried to ponder the situation.

"Now what dirty work are they up to?" he asked himself. He had seen a sullen fury on the dark face of Herr Schwartzmann as he spoke the names of Walt and Diane into the radio. Chet remembered the look now, and he struggled vainly with the cords about his wrists. Even a detonite pistol with its tiny grain of explosive in the end of each bullet would not check him—not when Walt and Diane were endangered. And the expression on that heavy, scowling face had told him all too clearly that some real danger threatened.

But the cords held fast on his swollen wrists. His head was still throbbing; and even his side, not entirely healed, was adding to the torment that beat upon him—beat and beat with his pulsing blood—until the beating faded out into unconsciousness....

Dimly he knew they were soaring still higher as their radio picked up the warning of an approaching patrol ship; vaguely, he realized that they descended again to a level of observation. Chet knew in some corner of his brain that Schwartzmann was watching from an under lookout with a powerful glass, and he heard his excited command:

"Down—go slowly, down!... They are landing.... They have entered the hangar. Now, down with it. Max! Down! down!"

The plunging fall of the ship roused Chet from his stupor. He felt the jolt of the clumsy landing despite the snow-cushioned ground; he heard plainly the exclamations from beyond an open port—the startled oath in Walter Harkness' voice, and the stinging scorn in the words of Diane Delacouer.

Herr Schwartzmann had been in the employ of Mademoiselle Delacouer, but he was taking orders no longer. There was a sound of scuffling feet, and once the thud of a blow.... Then Chet watched with heavy, hopeless eyes as the familiar faces of Diane and Walt appeared in the doorway. Their hands were bound; they, too, were threatened with a slim-barreled pistol in the hands of the smirking, exultant Schwartzmann.

A tall, thin-faced man whom Chet had not seen before followed them into the room. The newcomer was motioned forward now, as Schwartzmann called an order to the pilot:

"All right; now we go. Max! Herr Doktor Kreiss will give you the bearings; he knows his way among the stars."

Herr Schwartzmann doubled over in laughing appreciation of his own success before he straightened up and regarded his captives with cold eyes.

"Such a pleasure!" he mocked; "such charming passengers to take with me on my first trip into space; this ship, it iss not so goot. I will build better ships later on; I will let you see them when I shall come to visit you."

He laughed again at sight of the wondering looks in the eyes of the three; stooping, he jerked the gag from Chet's mouth.

"You do not understand," he exclaimed. "I should haff explained. You see, *meine guten Freunde*, we go—ach! —you have guessed it already! We go to the Dark Moon. I am pleased to take you with me on the trip out; but coming back, I will have so much to bring—there will be no room for passengers.

"I could have killed you here," he said; and his mockery gave place for a moment to a savage tone, "but the patrol ships, they are everywhere. But I have influence here und there—I arranged that your flask of gas should be charged with explosive, I discredited you, and yet I could not so great a risk take as to kill you all.

"So came inspiration! I called your foolish young friend here from the hospital. I ordered him to go at once to the ship hidden where I could not find, and I signed the name of Herr Harkness."

Chet caught the silent glances of his friends who could yet smile hopefully through the other emotions that possessed them. He ground his teeth as the smooth voice of Herr Schwartzmann went on:

"He led me here: the young fool! Then I sent for you —und this time I signed his name—und you came. So simple!

"Und now we go in *my* ship to *my* new world. And," he added savagely, "if one of you makes the least trouble, he will land on the Dark Moon—yess!—but he will land hard, from ten thousand feet up!"

The great generator was roaring. To Chet came the familiar lift of the R. A. effect. They were beyond the R. A.; they were heading out and away from Earth; and his friends were captives through his own unconscious treachery, carried out into space in their own ship, with the hands of an enemy gripping the controls....

Chet's groan, as he turned his face away from the others who had tried to smile cheerfully, had nothing to do with the pain of his body. It was his mind that was torturing him.

But he muttered broken words as he lay there, words that had reference to one Schwartzmann. "I'll get him, damn him! I'll get him!" he was promising himself.

And Herr Schwartzmann, who was clever, would have proved his cleverness still more by listening. For a Mister Pilot of the World does not get his rating on vain boasts. He must know first his flying, his ships and his air—but he is apt to make good in other ways as well.

CHAPTER III

Out of Control

Walter Harkness had built this ship with Chet's help. They had designed it for space-travel. It was the first ship to leave the Earth under its own power, reach another heavenly body, and come back for a safe landing. But they had not installed any luxuries for the passengers.

In the room where the three were confined, there were no self-compensating chairs such as the high-liners used. But the acceleration of the speeding ship was constant, and the rear wall became their floor where they sat or paced back and forth. Their bonds had been removed, and one of Harkness' hands was gripping Diane's where they sat side by side. Chet was briskly limbering his cramped muscles.

He glanced at the two who sat silent nearby, and he knew what was in their minds—knew that each was thinking of the other, forgetting their own danger; and it was these two who had saved his life on their first adventure out in space.

Walt—one man who was never spoiled by his millions; and Diane—straight and true as they make 'em! Some way, somehow, they must be saved—thus ran his thoughts—but it looked bad for them all. Schwartzmann?—no use kidding themselves about that lad; he was one bad hombre. The best they could hope for was to be marooned on the Dark Moon—left there to live or to die amid those savage surroundings; and the worst that might happen—! But Chet refused to think of what alternatives might occur to the ugly, distorted mind of the man who had them at his mercy.

There was no echo of these thoughts when he spoke; the smile that flashed across his lean face brought a brief response from the despondent countenances of his companions.

"Well," Chet observed, and ran his hand through a tangle of blond hair, "I have heard that the Schwartzmann lines give service, and I reckon I heard right. Here we were wanting to go back to the Dark Moon, and,"—he paused to point toward a black portlight where occasional lights flashed past —"I'll say we're going; going somewhere at least. All I hope is that that Maxie boy doesn't find the Dark Moon at about ten thousand per. He may be a great little skipper on a nice, slow, five-hundred-maximum freighter, but not on this boat. I don't like his landings."

Diane Delacouer raised her eyes to smile approvingly upon him. "You're good, Chet," she said; "you are a darn good sport. They knock you down out of control, and you nose right back up for a forty-

thousand foot zoom. And you try to carry us with you. Well, I guess it's time we got over our gloom. Now what is going to happen?"

"I'll tell you," said Walter Harkness, looking at his watch: "if that fool pilot of Schwartzmann's doesn't cut his stern thrust and build up a bow resistance, we'll overshoot our mark and go tearing on a few hundred thousand miles in space."

Diane was playing up to Chet's lead.

"*Bien!*" she exclaimed. "A few million, perhaps! Then we may see some of those Martians we've been speculating about. I hear they are handsome, my Walter—much better looking than you. Maybe this is all for the best after all!"

"Say," Harkness protested, "if you two idiots don't know enough to worry as you ought, I don't see any reason why I should do all the heavy worrying for the whole crowd. I guess you've got the right idea at that: take what comes when it gets here—or when we get there."

Small wonder, thought Chet, that Herr Schwartzmann stared at them in puzzled bewilderment when he flung open the door, and took one long stride into the room. Stocky, heavy-muscled, he stood regarding them, a frown of suspicion drawing his face into ugly lines. Plainly he was disturbed by this laughing good-humor where he had expected misery and hopelessness and tears. He moved the muzzle of a detonite pistol back and forth.

"You haff been drinking!" he stated at last. "You are

intoxicated—all of you!" His eyes darted searching glances about the little room that was too bare to hide any cause for inebriation.

It was Mam'selle Diane who answered him with an emphatic shake of her dark head; an engaging smile tugged at the corners of her lips. "*Mais non!* my dear Herr Schwartzmann," she assured him; "it is joy—just happiness at again approaching our Moon—and in such good company, too."

"Fortunes of war, Schwartzmann," declared Harkness; "we know how to accept them, and we don't hold it against you. We are down now, but your turn will come."

The man's reply was a sputtering of rage in words that neither Chet nor Harkness could understand. The latter turned to the girl with a question.

"Did you get it, Diane? What did he say?"

"I think I would not care to translate it literally," said Diane Delacouer, twisting her soft mouth into an expression of distaste; "but, speaking generally, he disagrees with you."

Herr Schwartzmann was facing Harkness belligerently. "You think you know something! What is it?" he demanded. "You are under my feet; I kick you as I would *meinen Hund* and you can do nothing." He aimed a savage kick into the air to illustrate his meaning, and Harkness' face flushed suddenly scarlet.

Whatever retort was on Harkness' tongue was left

unspoken; a sharp look from Chet, who brought his fingers swiftly to his lips in a gesture of silence, checked the reply. The action was almost unconscious on Chet's part; it was as unpremeditated as the sudden thought that flashed abruptly into his mind—

They were helpless; they were in this brute's power beyond the slightest doubt. Schwartzmann's words, "You know something. What is it?" had fired a swift train of thought.

The idea was nebulous as yet ... but if they could throw a scare into this man—make him think there was danger ahead.... Yes, that was it: make Schwartzmann think they knew of dangers that he could not avoid. They had been there before: make this man afraid to kill them. The dreadful alternative that Chet had feared to think of might be averted....

All this came in an instantaneous, flashing correlation of his conscious thoughts.

"I'll tell you what we mean," he told Schwartzmann. He even leaned forward to shake an impressive finger before the other's startled face. "I'll tell you first of all that it doesn't make a damn bit of difference who is on top—or it won't in a few hours more. We'll all be washed out together.

"I've landed once on the Dark Moon; I know what will happen. And do you know how fast we are going? Do you know the Moon's speed as it approaches? Had you thought what you will look like when that fool pilot rams into it head on?

"And that isn't all!" He grinned derisively into Schwartzmann's flushed face, disregarding the half-

raised pistol; it was as if some secret thought had filled him with overpowering amusement. His broad grin grew into a laugh. "That isn't all, big boy. What will you do if you do land? What will you do when you open the ports and the—" He cut his words short, and the smile, with all other expression, was carefully erased from his young face.

"No, I reckon I won't spoil the surprise. We got through it all right; maybe you will, too—maybe!"

And again it was Diane who played up to Chet's lead without a moment's hesitation.

"Chet," she demanded, "aren't you going to warn him? You would not allow him and his men to be—"

She stopped in apparent horror of the unsaid words; Chet gave her an approving glance.

"We'll see about that when we get there, Diane."

He turned abruptly back to Schwartzmann, "I'll forget what a rotten winner you have been; I'll help you out: I'll take the controls if you like. Of course, your man, Max, may set us down without damage; then again—"

"Take them!" Schwartzmann ungraciously made an order of his acceptance. "Take the controls, Herr Bullard! But if you make a single false move!" The menacing pistol completed the threat.

But "Herr Bullard" merely turned to his companion with a level, understanding look. "Come on," he said; "you can both help in working out our location."

He stepped before the burly man that Diane might precede them through the door. And he felt the hand of Walt Harkness on his arm in a pressure that told what could not be said aloud.

There were pallid-faced men in the cabin through which they passed; men who stared and stared from the window-ports into the black immensity of space. Chet, too, stopped to look; there had been no port-holes in that inner room where they had been confined.

He knew what to expect; he knew how awe-inspiring would be the sight of strange, luminous bodies—great islands of light—masses of animalculae—that glowed suddenly, then melted again into velvet black. A whirl of violet grew almost golden in sudden motion; Chet knew it for an invisible monster of space. Glowingly luminous as it threw itself upon a subtle mass of shimmering light, it faded like a flickering flame and went dark as its motion ceased.

Life!—life, everywhere in this ocean of space! And on every hand was death. "Not surprising," Chet realized, "that these other Earthmen are awed and trembling!"

The sun was above them; its light struck squarely down through the upper ports. This was polarized light—there was nothing outside to reflect or refract it—and, coming as a straight beam from above, it made a brilliant circle upon the floor from which it was diffused throughout the room. It was as if the floor itself was the illuminating agent.

No eye could bear to look into the glare from above; nor was there need, for the other ports drew the eyes with their black depths of unplumbed space.

Black!—so velvet as to seem almost tangible! Could one have reached out a hand, that blackness, it seemed, must be a curtain that the hand could draw aside, where unflickering points of light pricked through the dark to give promise of some radiant glory beyond.

They had seen it before, these three, yet Chet caught the eyes of Harkness and Diane and knew that his own eyes must share something of the look he saw in theirs—something of reverent wonder and a strange humility before this evidence of transcendent greatness.

Their own immediate problem seemed gone. The tyranny of this glowering human and his men—the efforts of the whole world and its struggling millions—how absurdly unimportant it all was! How it faded to insignificance! And yet....

Chet came from the reverie that held him. There was one man by whom this beauty was unseen. Herr Schwartzmann was angrily ordering them on, and, surprisingly, Chet laughed aloud.

This problem, he realized, was *his* problem—his to solve with the help of the other two. And it was not insignificant; he knew with some sudden wordless knowledge that there was nothing in all the great scheme but that it had its importance. This vastness that was beyond the power of human mind to grasp

ceased to be formidable—he was part of it. He felt buoyed up; and he led the way confidently toward the control-room door where Schwartzmann stood.

The scientist, whom Schwartzmann had called Herr Doktor Kreiss, was beside the pilot. He was leaning forward to search the stars in the blackness ahead, but the pilot turned often to stare through the rear lookouts as if drawn in fearful fascination by what was there. Chet took the controls at Schwartzmann's order; the pilot saluted with a trembling hand and vanished into the cabin at the rear.

"Ready for flying orders, Doctor," the new pilot told Herr Kreiss. "I'll put her where you say—within reason."

Behind him he heard the choked voice of Mademoiselle Diane: "*Regardez! Ah, mon Dieu*, the beauty of it! This loveliness—it hurts!"

One hand was pressed to her throat; her face was turned as the pilot's had been that she might stare and stare at a quite impossible moon—a great half-disk of light in the velvet dark.

"This loveliness—it hurts!" Chet looked, too, and knew what Diane was feeling. There was a catch of emotion in his own throat—a feeling that was almost fear.

A giant half-moon!—and he knew it was the Earth. Golden Earth-light came to them in a flooding glory; the blazing sun struck on it from above to bring out half the globe in brilliant gold that melted to softest, iridescent, rainbow tints about its edge. Below, hung

motionless in the night, was another sphere. Like a reflection of Earth in the depths of some Stygian lake, the old moon shone, too, in a half-circle of light.

Small wonder that these celestial glories brought a gasp of delight from Diane, or drew into lines of fear the face of that other pilot who saw only his own world slipping away. But Chet Bullard, Master Pilot of the World, swung back to scan a star-chart that the scientist was holding, then to search out a similar grouping in the black depths into which they were plunging, and to bring the cross-hairs of a rigidly mounted telescope upon that distant target.

"How far?" he asked himself in a half-spoken thought, "—how far have we come?"

There was an instrument that ticked off the seconds in this seemingly timeless void. He pressed a small lever beside it, and, beneath a glass that magnified the readings, there passed the time-tape. Each hour and minute was there; each movement of the controls was indicated; each trifling variation in the power of the generator's blast. Chet made some careful computations and passed the paper to Harkness, who tilted the time-tape recorder that he might see the record.

"Check this, will you, Walt?" Chet was asking. "It is based on the time of our other trip, acceleration assumed as one thousand miles per hour per hour out of air—"

The scientist interrupted; he spoke in English that

was carefully precise.

"It should lie directly ahead—the Dark Moon. I have calculated with exactness."

Walter Harkness had snatched up a pair of binoculars. He swung sharply from lookout to lookout while he searched the heavens.

"It's damned lucky for us that you made a slight error," Chet was telling the other.

"Error?" Kreiss challenged. "Impossible!"

"Then you and I are dead right this minute," Chet told him. "We are crossing the orbit of the Dark Moon—crossing at twenty thousand miles per hour relative to Earth, slightly in excess of that figure relative to the Dark Moon. If it had been here—!" He had been watching Harkness anxiously; he bit off his words as the binoculars were thrust into his hand.

"There she comes," Harkness told him quietly; "it's up to you!"

But Chet did not need the glasses. With his unaided eyes he could see a faint circle of violet light. It lay ahead and slightly above, and it grew visibly larger as he watched. A ring of nothingness, whose outline was the faintest shimmering halo; more of the distant stars winked out swiftly behind that ghostly circle; it was the Dark Moon!—and it was rushing upon them!

Chet swung an instrument upon it. He picked out a jet of violet light that could be distinguished, and he followed it with the cross-hairs while he twirled a

micrometer screw; then he swiftly copied the reading that the instrument had inscribed. The invisible disk with its ghostly edges of violet was perceptibly larger as he slammed over the control-ball to up-end them in air.

Under the control-room's nitron illuminator the cheeks of Herr Doktor Kreiss were pale and bloodless as if his heart had ceased to function. Harkness had moved quietly back to the side of Diane Delacouer and was holding her two hands firmly in his.

The very air seemed charged with the quick tenseness of emotions. Schwartzmann must have sensed it even before he saw the onrushing death. Then he leaped to a lookout, and, an instant later, sprang at Chet calmly fingering the control.

"Fool!" he screamed, "you would kill us all? Turn away from it! Away from it!"

He threw himself in a frenzy upon the pilot. The detonite pistol was still in his hand. "Quick!" he shouted. "Turn us!"

Harkness moved swiftly, but the scientist, Kreiss, was nearer; it was he who smashed the gun-hand down with a quick blow and snatched at the weapon.

Schwartzmann was beside himself with rage. "You, too?" he demanded. "Giff it me—traitor!"

But the tall man stood uncompromisingly erect. "Never," he said, "have I seen a ship large enough to hold two commanding pilots. I take your orders in all things, Herr Schwartzmann—all but this. If we die—

we die."

Schwartzmann sputtered: "We should haff turned away. Even yet we might. It will—it will—"

"Perhaps," agreed Kreiss, still in that precise, classroom voice, "perhaps it will. But this I know: with an acceleration of one thousand m.p.h. per hour as this young man with the badge of a Master Pilot says, we cannot hope, in the time remaining, to overcome our present velocity; we can never check our speed and build up a relatively opposite motion before that globe would overwhelm us. If he has figured correctly, this young man—if he has found the true resultant of our two motions of approach—and if he has swung us that we may drive out on a line perpendicular to the resultant—"

"I think I have," said Chet quietly. "If I haven't, in just a few minutes it won't matter to any of us; it won't matter at all." He met the gaze of Herr Doktor Kreiss who regarded him curiously.

"If we escape," the scientist told him, "you will understand that I am under Herr Schwartzmann's command; I will be compelled to shoot you if he so orders. But, Herr Bullard, at this moment I would be very proud to shake your hand."

And Chet, as he extended his hand, managed a grin that was meant also for the tense, white-faced Harkness and Diane. "I like to see 'em dealt that way," he said, "—right off the top of the deck."

But the smile was erased as he turned back to the lookout. He had to lean close to see all of the disk, so swiftly was the approaching globe bearing down.

It came now from the side; it swelled larger and larger before his eyes. Their own ship seemed unmoving; only the unending thunder of the generator told of the frantic efforts to escape. They seemed hung in space; their own terrific speed seemed gone—added to and fused with the orbital motion of the Dark Moon to bring swiftly closer that messenger of death. The circle expanded silently; became menacingly huge.

Chet was whispering softly to himself: "If I'd got hold of her an hour sooner—thirty minutes—or even ten.... We're doing over twenty thousand an hour combined speed, and we'll never really hit it.... We'll never reach the ground."

He turned this over in his mind, and he nodded gravely in confirmation of his own conclusions. It seemed somehow of tremendous importance that he get this clearly thought out—this experience that was close ahead.

"Skin friction!" he added. "It will burn us up!"

He has a sudden vision of a flaming star blazing a hot trail through the atmosphere of this globe; there would be only savage eyes to follow it—to see the line of fire curving swiftly across the heavens.... He, himself, was seeing that blazing meteor so plainly....

His eyes found the lookout; the globe was gone. They were close—close! Only for the enveloping gas that made of this a dark moon, they would be seeing the surface, the outlines of continents.

Chet strained his eyes—to see nothing! It was horrible. It had been fearful enough to watch that expanding globe.... He was abruptly aware that the

outer rim of the lookout was red!

For Chet Bullard, time ceased to have meaning; what were seconds—or centuries—as he stared at that glowing rim? He could not have told. The outer shell of their ship—it was radiant—shining red-hot in the night. And above the roar of the generator came a nerve-ripping shriek. A wind like a blast from hell was battering and tearing at their ship.

"Good-by!" He has tried to call; the demoniac shrieking from without smothered his voice. One arm was across his eyes in an unconscious motion. The air of the little room was stifling. He forced his arm down; he would meet death face to face.

The lookout was ringed with fire; it was white with the terrible white of burning steel!—it was golden!—then cherry red! It was dying, as the fire dies from glowing metal plunged in its tempering bath—or thrown into the cold reaches of space!

In Chet's ears was the roar of a detonite motor. He tried to realize that the lookouts were rimmed with black—cold, fireless black! An incredible black! There were stars there like pinpoints of flame! But conviction came only when he saw from a lookout in another wall a circle of violet that shrank and dwindled as he watched....

A hand was gripping his shoulder; he heard the voice of Walter Harkness speaking, while Walt's hand crept to raise the triple star that was pinned to his blouse.

"Master Pilot of the World!" Harkness was saying. "That doesn't cover enough territory, old man. It's

another rating that you're entitled to, but I'm damned if I know what it is."

And, for once, Chet's ready smile refused to form. He stared dumbly at his friend; his eyes passed to the white face of Mademoiselle Diane; then back to the controls, where his hand, without conscious volition, was reaching to move a metal ball.

"Missed it!" he assured himself. "Hit the fringe of the air—just the very outside. If we'd been twenty thousand feet nearer!... He was moving the ball: their bow was swinging. He steadied it and set the ship on an approximate course.

"A stern chase!" he said aloud. "All our momentum to be overcome—but it's easy sailing now!"

He pushed the ball forward to the limit, and the explosion-motor gave thunderous response.

CHAPTER IV

The Return to the Dark Moon

No man faces death in so shocking a form without feeling the effects. Death had flicked them with a finger of flame and had passed them by. Chet Bullard found his hands trembling uncontrollably as he fumbled for a book and opened it. The tables of figures printed there were blurred at first to his eyes, but he forced himself to forget the threat that was past, for there was another menace to consider now.

And uppermost in his mind, when his thoughts came back into some approximate order, was condemnation of himself for an opportunity that was gone.

"I could have jumped him," he told himself with bitter self-reproach; "I could have grabbed the pistol from Kreiss—the man was petrified." And then Chet had to admit a fact there was no use of denying: "I was as paralyzed as he was," he said, and only knew he had spoken aloud when he saw the puzzled look that crossed Harkness' face.

Harkness and Diane had drawn near. In a far corner of the little room Schwartzmann had motioned to Kreiss to join him; they were as far away from the others as could be managed. Schwartzmann, Chet judged, needed some scientific explanation of these disturbing events; also he needed to take the detonite pistol from Kreiss' hand and jam it into his own hand. His eyes, at Chet's unconscious exclamation, had come with instant suspicion toward the two men.

"Forty-seven hours, Walt," the pilot said, and repeated it loudly for Schwartzmann's benefit; "—forty-seven hours before we return to this spot. We are driving out into space; we've crossed the orbit of the Dark Moon, and we're doing twenty thousand miles an hour.

"Now we must decelerate. It will take twenty hours to check us to zero speed; then twenty-seven more to shoot us back to this same point in space, allowing, of course, for a second deceleration. The same figuring with only slight variation will cover a return to the Dark Moon. As we sweep out I can allow for the moon-motion, and we'll hit it at a safe landing

speed on the return trip this time."

Chet was paying little attention to his companion as he spoke. His eyes, instead, were covertly watching the bulky figure of Schwartzmann. As he finished, their captor shot a volley of questions at the scientist beside him; he was checking up on the pilot's remarks.

Chet was leaning forward to stare intently from a lookout, his head was close to that of Harkness.

"Listen, Walt," he whispered; "the Moon's out of sight; it's easy to lose. Maybe I can't find it again, anyway—it's going to take some nice navigating—but I'll miss it by ten thousand miles if you say so, and even the Herr Doktor can't check me on it."

Chet saw the eyes of Schwartzmann grow intent. He reached ostentatiously for another book of tables, and he seated himself that he might figure in comfort.

"Just check me on this," he told Harkness.

He put down meaningless figures, while the man beside him remained silent. Over and over he wrote them—would Harkness never reach a decision?—over and over, until—

"I don't agree with that," Harkness told him and reached for the stylus in Chet's hand. And, while he appeared to make his own swift computations, there were words instead of figures that flowed from his pen.

"Only alternative: return to Earth," he wrote. "Then S will hold off; wait in upper levels. Kreiss will give him new bearings. We'll shoot out again and do it better next time. Kreiss is nobody's fool. S means to maroon us on Moon—kill us perhaps. He'll get us there, sure. We might as well go now."

Chet had seen a movement across the room. "Let's start all over again," he broke in abruptly. He covered the writing with a clean sheet of paper where he set down more figures. He was well under way when Schwartzmann's quick strides brought him towering above them. Again the detonite pistol was in evidence; its small black muzzle moved steadily from Harkness to Chet.

"For your life—such as is left of it—you may thank Herr Doktor Kreiss," he told Chet. "I thought at first you would have attempted to kill us." His smile, as he regarded them, seemed to Chet to be entirely evil. "You were near death twice, my dear Herr Bullard; and the danger is not entirely removed.

"'Forty-seven hours' you have said; in forty-seven hours you will land us on the Dark Moon. If you do not,"—he raised the pistol suggestively—"remember that the pilot, Max, can always take us back to Earth. You are not indispensable."

Chet looked at the dark face and its determined and ominous scowl. "You're a cheerful sort of soul, aren't you?" he demanded. "Do you have any faint idea of what a job this is? Do you know we will shoot another two hundred thousand miles straight out before I can check this ship? Then we come back;

and meanwhile the Dark Moon has gone on its way. Had you thought that there's a lot of room to get lost in out here?"

"Forty-seven hours!" said Schwartzmann. "I would advise that you do not lose your way."

Chet shot one quizzical glance at Harkness.

"That," he said, "makes it practically unanimous."

Schwartzmann, with an elaborate show of courtesy, escorted Diane Delacouer to a cabin where she might rest. At a questioning look between Diane and Harkness, their captor reassured them.

"Mam'selle shall be entirely safe," he said. "She may join you here whenever she wishes. As for you,"—he was speaking to Harkness—"I will permit you to stay here. I could tie you up but this iss not necessary."

And Harkness must have agreed that it was indeed unnecessary, for either Kreiss or Max, or some other of Schwartzmann's men, was at his side continuously from that moment on.

Chet would have liked a chance for a quiet talk and an exchange of ideas. It seemed that somewhere, somehow, he should be able to find an answer to their problem. He stared moodily out into the blackness ahead, where a distant star was seemingly their goal. Harkness stood at his side or paced back and forth in the little room, until he threw himself, at last, upon a cot.

And always the great stern-blast roared; muffled by

the insulated walls, its unceasing thunder came at last to be unheard. To the pilot there was neither sound nor motion. His directional sights were unswervingly upon that distant star ahead. Seemingly they were suspended, helpless and inert, in a black void. But for the occasional glowing masses of strange living substance that flashed past in this ocean of space, he must almost have believed they were motionless—a dead ship in a dead, black night.

But the luminous things flashed and were gone—and their coming, strangely, was from astern; they flicked past and vanished up ahead. And, by this, Chet knew that their tremendous momentum was unchecked. Though he was using the great stern blast to slow the ship, it was driving stern-first into outer space. Nor, for twenty hours, was there a change, more than a slackening of the breathless speed with which the lights went past.

Twenty hours—and then Chet knew that they were in all truth hung motionless, and he prayed that his figures that told him this were correct.... More timeless minutes, an agony of waiting—and a dimly-glowing mass that was ahead approached their bow, swung off and vanished far astern. And, with its going, Chet knew that the return trip was begun.

He gave Harkness the celestial bearing marks and relinquished the helm. "Full speed ahead as you are," he ordered; "then at nineteen-forty on W.S. time, we'll cut it and ease on bow repulsion to the limit."

And, despite the strangeness of their surroundings, the ceaseless, murmuring roar of the exhaust, the weird world outside, where endless space was waiting for man's exploration—despite the deadly

menace that threatened, Chet dropped his head upon his outflung arms and slept.

To his sleep-drugged brain it was scarcely a moment until a hand was dragging at his shoulder.

"Forty-seven hours!" the voice of Schwartzmann was saying.

And: "Some navigating!" Harkness was exclaiming in flattering amazement. "Wake up, Chet! Wake up! The Dark Moon's in sight. You've hit it on the nose, old man: she isn't three points off the sights!"

The bow-blast was roaring full on. Ahead of them Chet's sleepy eyes found a circle of violet; and he rubbed his eyes savagely that he might take his bearings on Sun and Earth.

As it had been before, the Earth was a giant half-moon; like a mirror-sphere it shot to them across the vast distance the reflected glory of the sun. But the globe ahead was a ghostly world. Its black disk was lost in the utter blackness of space. It was a circle, marked only by the absence of star-points and by the halo of violet glow that edged it about.

Chet cut down the repelling blast. He let the circle enlarge, then swung the ship end for end in mid-space that the more powerful stern exhaust might be ready to counteract the gravitational pull of the new world.

Again those impalpable clouds surrounded them. Here was the enveloping gas that made this a dark moon—the gas, if Harkness' theory was correct, that

let the sun's rays pass unaltered; that took the light through freely to illumine this globe, but that barred its return passage as reflected light.

Black—dead black was the void into which they were plunging, until the darkness gave way before a gentle glow that enfolded their ship. The golden light enveloped them in growing splendor. Through every lookout it was flooding the cabin with brilliant rays, until, from below them, directly astern of the ship, where the thundering blast checked their speed of descent, emerged a world.

And, to Chet Bullard, softly fingering the controls of the first ship of space—to Chet Bullard, whose uncanny skill had brought the tiny speck that was their ship safely back from the dark recesses of the unknown—there came a thrill that transcended any joy of the first exploration.

Here was water in great seas of unreal hue—and those seas were his! Vast continents, ripe for adventure and heavy with treasure—and they, too, were his! His own world—his and Diane's and Walt's! Who was this man, Schwartzmann, that dared dream of violating their possessions?

A slender tube pressed firmly, uncompromisingly, into his back to give the answer to his question. "Almost I wish you had missed it!" Herr Schwartzmann was saying. "But now you will land; you will set us down in some place that you know. No tricks, Herr Bullard! You are clever, but not clever enough for that. We will land, yess, where you know it is safe."

From the lookout, the man stared for a moment with greedy eyes; then brought his gaze back to the three. His men, beside Harkness and Diane, were alert; the scientist, Kreiss, stood close to Chet.

"A nice little world," Schwartzmann told them. "Herr Harkness, you have filed claims on it; who am I to dispute with the great Herr Harkness? Without question it iss yours!"

He laughed loudly, while his eyes narrowed between creasing wrinkles of flesh. "You shall enjoy it," he told them; "—all your life."

And Chet, as he caught the gaze of Harkness and Diane, wondered how long this enjoyment would last. "All your life!" But this was rather indefinite as a measure of time.

CHAPTER V

A Desperate Act

The ship that Chet Bullard and Harkness had designed had none of the instruments for space navigation that the ensuing years were to bring. Chet's accuracy was more the result of that flyer's sixth sense—that same uncanny power that had served aviators so well in an earlier day. But Chet was glad to see his instruments registering once more as he approached a new world.

Even the sonoflector was recording; its invisible rays

were darting downward to be reflected back again from the surface below. That absolute altitude recording was a joy to read; it meant a definite relationship with the world.

"I'll hold her at fifty thousand," he told Harkness. "Watch for some outline that you can remember from last time."

There was an irregular area of continental size; only when they had crossed it did Harkness point toward an outflung projection of land. "That peninsula," he exclaimed; "we saw that before! Swing south and inland.... Now down forty, and east of south.... This ought to be the spot."

Perhaps Harkness, too, had the flyer's indefinable power of orientation. He guided Chet in the downward flight, and his pointing finger aimed at last at a cluster of shadows where a setting sun brought mountain ranges into strong relief. Chet held the ship steady, hung high in the air, while the quick-spreading mantle of night swept across the world below. And, at last, when the little world was deep-buried in shadow, they saw the red glow of fires from a hidden valley in the south.

"Fire Valley!" said Chet, "Don't say anything about me being a navigator. Wait, you've brought us home, sure enough."

"Home!" He could not overcome this strange excitement of a homecoming to their own world. Even the man who stood, pistol in hand, behind him was, for the moment, forgotten.

Valley of a thousand fires!—scene of his former adventures! Each fumerole was adding its smoky red

to the fiery glow that illumined the place. There were ragged mountains hemming it in; Chet's gaze passed on to the valley's end.

Down there, where the fires ceased, there would be water; he would land there! And the ship from Earth slipped down in a long slanting line to cushion against its under exhausts, whose soft thunder echoed back from a bare expanse of frozen lava. Then its roaring faded. The silvery shape sank softly to its rocky bed as Chet cut the motor that had sung its song of power since the moment when Schwartzmann had carried him off—taken him from that frozen, forgotten corner of an incredibly distant Earth.

"Iss there air?" Schwartzmann demanded. Chet came to himself again with a start: he saw the man peering from the lookout to right and to left as if he would see all that there was in the last light of day.

"Strange!" he was grumbling to himself. "A strange place! But those hills—I saw their markings—there will be metals there. I will explore; later I return: I will mine them. Many ships I must build to establish a line. The first transportation line of space. Me, Jacob Schwartzmann—I will do it. I will haff more than anyone else on Earth; I will make them all come to me crawling on their bellies!"

Chet saw the hard shine of the narrowed eyes. For an instant only, he dared to consider the chance of leaping upon the big, gloating figure. One blow and a quick snatch for the pistol!... Then he knew the folly of such a plan: Schwartzmann's men were

armed; he would be downed in another second, his body a shattered, jellied mass.

Schwartzmann's thoughts had come back to the matter of air; he motioned Chet and Harkness toward the port.

Diane Delacouer had joined them and she thrust herself quickly between the two men. And, though Schwartzmann made a movement as if he would snatch her back, he thought better of it and motioned for the portal to be swung. Chet felt him close behind as he followed the others out into the gathering dark.

The air was heavy with the fragrance of night-blooming trees. They were close to the edge of the lava flow. The rock was black in the light of a starry sky; it dropped away abruptly to a lower glade. A stream made silvery sparklings in the night, while beyond it were waving shadows of strange trees whose trunks were ghostly white.

It was all so familiar.... Chet smiled understandingly as he saw Walt Harkness' arm go about the trim figure of Diane Delacouer. No mannish attire could disguise Diane's charms; nor could nerve and cold courage that any man might envy detract from her femininity. Her dark, curling hair was blowing back from her upraised face as the scented breezes played about her; and the soft beauty of that face was enhanced by the very starlight that revealed it.

It was here that Walt and Diane had learned to love; what wonder that the fragrant night brought only remembrance, and forgetfulness of their present

plight. But Chet Bullard, while he saw them and smiled in sympathy, knew suddenly that other eyes were watching, too; he felt the bulky figure of Herr Schwartzmann beside him grow tense and rigid.

But Schwartzmann's voice, when he spoke, was controlled. "All right," he called toward the ship; "all iss safe."

Yet Chet wondered at that sudden tensing, and an uneasy presentiment found entrance to his thoughts. He must keep an eye on Schwartzmann, even more than he had supposed.

Their captor had threatened to maroon them on the Dark Moon. Chet did not question his intent. Schwartzmann would have nothing to gain by killing them now. It would be better to leave them here, for he might find them useful later on. But did he plan to leave them all or only two? Behind the steady, expressionless eyes of the Master Pilot, strange thoughts were passing....

There were orders, at length, to return to the ship. "It is dark already," Schwartzmann concluded; "nothing can be accomplished at night.

"How long are the days and nights?" he asked Harkness.

"Six hours." Harkness told him; "our little world spins fast."

"Then for six hours we sleep," was the order. And again Herr Schwartzmann conducted Mademoiselle Delacouer to her cabin, while Chet Bullard watched

until he saw the man depart and heard the click of the lock on the door of Diane's room.

Then for six hours he listened to the sounds of sleeping men who were sprawled about him on the floor; for six hours he saw the one man who sat on guard beside a light that made any thought of attack absurd. And he cursed himself for a fool, as he lay wakeful and vainly planning—a poor, futile fool who was unable to cope with this man who had bested him.

Nineteen seventy-three!—and here were Harkness and Diane and himself, captured by a man who was mentally and morally a misfit in a modern world. A throw-back—that was Schwartzmann: Harkness had said it. He belonged back in nineteen fourteen.

Harkness was beyond the watching guard; from where he lay came sounds of restless movement. Chet knew that he was not alone in this mood of hopeless dejection. There was no opportunity for talk; only with the coming of day did the two find a chance to exchange a few quick words.

The guard roused the others at the first sight of sunlight beyond the ports. Harkness sauntered slowly to where Chet was staring from a lookout. He, too, leaned to see the world outside, and he spoke cautiously in a half-whisper:

"Not a chance, Chet. No use trying to bluff this big crook any more. He's here, and he's safe; and he knows it as well as we do. We'll let him ditch us—you and Diane and me. Then, when we're on our

own, we'll watch our chance. He will go crazy with what he finds—may get careless—then we'll seize the ship—" His words ended abruptly. As Schwartzmann came behind them, he was casually calling Chet's attention to a fumerole from which a jet of vapor had appeared. Yellowish, it was; and the wind was blowing it.

Chet turned away; he hardly saw Schwartzmann or heard Harkness' words. He was thinking of what Walt had said. Yes, it was all they could do; there was no chance of a fight with them now. But later!

Diane Delacouer came into the control-room at the instant; her dark eyes were still lovely with sleep, but they brightened to flash an encouraging smile toward the two men. There were five of Schwartzmann's men in the ship besides the pilot and the scientist, Kreiss. They all crowded in after Diane.

They must have had their orders in advance; Schwartzmann merely nodded, and they sprang upon Harkness and Chet. The two were caught off their guard; their arms were twisted behind them before resistance could be thought of. Diane gave a cry, started forward, and was brushed back by a sweep of Schwartzmann's arm. The man himself stood staring at them, unmoving, wordless. Only the flesh about his eyes gathered into creases to squeeze the eyes to malignant slits. There was no mistaking the menace in that look.

"I think we do not need you any more," he said at last. "I think, Herr Harkness, this is the end of our little argument—and, Herr Harkness, you lose. Now,

I will tell you how it iss that you pay.

"You haff thought, perhaps, I would kill you. But you were wrong, as you many times have been. You haff not appreciated my kindness; you haff not understood that mine iss a heart of gold.

"Even I was not sure before we came what it iss best to do. But now I know. I saw oceans and many lands on this world. I saw islands in those oceans.

"You so clever are—such a great thinker iss Herr Harkness—and on one of those islands you will haff plenty of time to think—yess! You can think of your goot friend, Schwartzmann, and of his kindness to you."

"You are going to maroon us on an island?" asked Walt Harkness hoarsely. Plainly his plans for seizing the ship were going awry. "You are going to put the three of us off in some lost corner of this world?"

Chet Bullard was silent until he saw the figure of Harkness struggling to throw off his two guards. "Walt," he called loudly, "take it easy! For God's sake, Walt, keep your head!"

This, Chet sensed, was no time for resistance. Let Schwartzmann go ahead with his plans; let him think them complacent and unresisting; let Max pilot the ship; then watch for an opening when they could land a blow that would count! He heard Schwartzmann laughing now, laughing as if he were enjoying something more pleasing than the struggles of Walt.

Chet was standing by the controls. The metal instrument-table was beside him; above it was the control itself, a metal ball that hung suspended in air within a cage of curved bars.

It was pure magic, this ball-control, where magnetic fields crossed and recrossed; it was as if the one who held it were a genie who could throw the ship itself where he willed. Glass almost enclosed the cage of bars, and the whole instrument swung with the self-compensating platform that adjusted itself to the "gravitation" of accelerated speed. The pilot, Max, had moved across to the instrument-table, ready for the take-off.

Schwartzmann's laughter died to a gurgling chuckle. He wiped his eyes before he replied to Harkness' question.

"Leave you," he said, "in one place? *Nein!* One here, the other there. A thousand miles apart, it might be. And not all three of you. That would be so unkind—"

He interrupted himself to call to Kreiss who was opening the port.

"No," he ordered: "keep it closed. We are not going outside; we are going up."

But Kreiss had the port open. "I want a man to get some fresh water," he said; "he will only be a minute."

He shoved at a waiting man to hurry him through the doorway. It was only a gentle push: Chet wondered as he saw the man stagger and grasp at his throat. He was coughing—choking horribly for an instant outside the open port—then fell to the ground, while his legs jerked awkwardly,

spasmodically.

Chet saw Kreiss follow. The scientist would have leaped to the side of the stricken man, whose body was so still now on the sunlit rock; but he, too, crumpled, then staggered back into the room. He pushed feebly at the port and swung it shut. His face, as he turned, was drawn into fearful lines.

"Acid!" He choked out the words between strangled breaths. "Acid—sulfuric—fumes!"

Chet turned quickly to the spectro-analyzer: the lines of oxygen and nitrogen were merged with others, and that meant an atmosphere unfit for human lungs! There had been a fumerole where yellowish vapor was spouting: he remembered it now.

"So!" boomed Schwartzmann, and now his squinting eyes were full on Chet. "You—you *schwein*! You said when we opened the ports there would be a surprise! Und this iss it! You thought to see us kill ourselves!

"Open that port!" he shouted. The men who held Chet released him and sprang forward to obey. The pilot, Max, took their place. He put one hand on Chet's shoulder, while his other hand brought up a threatening metal bar.

Schwartzmann's heavy face had lost its stolid look; it was alive with rage. He thrust his head forward to glare at the men, while he stood firmly, his feet far apart, two heavy fists on his hips. He whirled abruptly and caught Diane by one arm. He pulled her roughly to him and encircled the girl's trim figure with one huge arm.

"Put you *all* on one island?" he shouted. "Did you think I would put you *all* out of the ship? You"—he pointed at Harkness—"and you"—this time it was Chet—"go out now. You can die in your damned gas that you expected would kill me! But, you fools, you imbeciles—Mam'selle, she stays with me!" The struggling girl was helpless in the great arm that drew her close.

Harkness' mad rage gave place to a dead stillness. From bloodless lips in a chalk-white face he spat out one sentence:

"Take your filthy hands off her—now—or I'll—"

Schwartzmann's one free hand still held the pistol. He raised it with deadly deliberation; it came level with Harkness' unflinching eyes.

"Yes?" said Schwartzmann, "You will do—what?"

Chet saw the deadly tableau. He knew with a conviction that gripped his heart that here was the end. Walt would die and he would be next. Diane would be left defenseless.... The flashing thought that followed came to him as sharply as the crack of any pistol. It seemed to burst inside his brain, to lift him with some dynamic power of its own and project him into action.

He threw himself sideways from under the pilot's hand, out from beneath the heavy metal bar—and he whirled, as he leaped, to face the man. One lean, brown hand clenched to a fist that started a long swing from somewhere near his knees; it shot upward to crash beneath the pilot's outthrust jaw and

lift him from the floor. Max had aimed the bar in a downward sweep where Chet's head had been the moment before; and now man and bar went down together. In the same instant Chet threw himself upon the weapon and leaped backward to his feet.

One frozen second, while, to Chet, the figures seemed as motionless as if carved from stone—two men beside the half-opened port—Harkness in convulsive writhing between two others—the figure of Diane, strained, tense and helpless in Schwartzmann's grasp—and Schwartzmann, whose aim had been disturbed, steadying the pistol deliberately upon Harkness—

"Wait!" Chet's voice tore through the confusion. He knew he must grip Schwartzmann's attention—hold that trigger finger that was tensed to send a detonite bullet on its way. "Wait, damn you! I'll answer your question. I'll tell you what we'll do!"

In that second he had swung the metal bar high; now he brought it crashing down in front of him. Schwartzmann flinched, half turned as if to fire at Chet, and saw the blow was not for him.

With a splintering crash, the bar went through an obstruction. There was sound of glass that slivered to a million mangled bits—the sharp tang of metal broken off—a crash and clatter—then silence, save for one bit of glass that fell belatedly to the floor, its tiny jingling crash ringing loud in the deathly stillness of the room....

It had been the control-room, this place of metal

walls and of shining, polished instruments, and it could be called that no longer. For, battered to useless wreckage, there lay on a metal table a cage that had once been formed of curving bars. Among the fragments a metal ball that had guided the great ship still rocked idly from its fall, until it, too, was still.

It was a room where nothing moved—where no person so much as breathed....

Then came the Master Pilot's voice, and it was speaking with quiet finality.

"And that," he said, "is your answer. Our ship has made its last flight."

His eyes held steadily upon the blanched face of Herr Schwartzmann, whose limp arms released the body of Diane; the pistol hung weakly at the man's side. And the pilot's voice went on, so quiet, so hushed—so curiously toneless in that silent room.

"What was it that you said?—that Harkness and I would be staying here? Well, you were right when you said that, Schwartzmann: but it's a hard sentence, that—imprisonment for life."

Chet paused now, to smile deliberately, grimly at the dark face so bleached and bloodless, before he repeated:

"Imprisonment for life!—and you didn't know that you were sentencing yourself. For you're staying too, Schwartzmann, you contemptible, thieving dog! You're staying with us—here—on the Dark Moon!"

CHAPTER VI

"*Six to Four*"

Perhaps to every person in that control room there came, as Chet's quiet, emotionless tones died away, the same mental picture; for there was the same dazed look on the countenances of all.

They were seeing an ocean of space, an endless void of empty black. And across that etheric sea was a whirling globe. They had seen it from afar; they had seen its diminutive continents and its snow-clad poles.... They would never see it again....

Earth!—their own world!—home! And now for them it was only a moon, a tremendous, glorious moon, whose apparent nearness would be taunting and calling them each day and night of their lives....

It was Diane Delacouer who dared to break the hard silence that bound them all. From wide eyes she stared at Walt Harkness; then her lips formed a trembling smile in which Chet, too, was included.

"You saved us," she whispered; "you saved us, Chet ... but now it looks as if we all were exiles."

She crossed slowly, walking like one in a dream, to stand close to Walt Harkness. And Chet Bullard also roused himself; but it was toward the stupefied, hulking figure of Schwartzmann that he moved.

He reached for the detonite pistol, and this man who had been their captor was too stunned to make any resistance. Chet jammed the weapon under his belt.

"Close that port!" he ordered the two men who had half-opened it at Schwartzmann's command. "Keep that poison gas out."

There was a flash of color that swept by the open port—some flying creature of vivid crimson: Chet had no time to see what manner of bird or beast it was. But it was alive! He crossed to examine the spectro-analyzer, and the two men disregarded his order and slipped into the rear cabin.

"Seems all clear to me, Walt," he said; and Harkness confirmed his findings with a quick glance.

"O.K.!" he assured Chet; "that air is all right to breathe."

He glanced from a lookout port. "The air's moving now," he said. "That gas—whatever it was—is gone; it must have settled down here in the night. Some new vent that has opened since we were here before.

"But suppose we forget that and settle matters in here," he suggested; and Chet nodded assent.

"Call your men!" Harkness ordered Schwartzmann.

The man had recovered his composure; again his heavy face was flushed beneath a stubble of beard. He made no move to comply with Harkness' demand.

But there was no need: from the cabin at the rear came the scientist, Kreiss. His face was pale and drawn, and he stared long and searchingly at Chet Bullard. His breath still whistled in his throat; the poison gas had nearly done for him.

At his heels were the two who had been working at the port. Two others, who had held Harkness, were drawn off at one side, where they mumbled one to another and shot ugly glances toward Chet.

This, Chet knew, accounted for all. Even the pilot, Max, had roused from the sleep that a blow on the chin had induced and was again on his feet. For him no explanation was needed; the shattered cage of the ball-control told its own story.

Harkness seated Mademoiselle Delacouer on a bench at the pilot's post. "You will want to be in on this," he told her, "but I'll put you here in case they get rough. But don't worry," he added; "we'll be ready for them now."

Then he turned to Schwartzmann: "Now, you! Oh, there are plenty of things I could call you! And you would understand them perfectly, though they are all words that no gentleman would use."

At Schwartzmann's outburst of profane rejoinder, Harkness broke in with no uncertain tones.

"Shut up, Schwartzmann, and stay that way; I'm giving the orders now. And we'll just cut out all the pleasantries; they won't get us anywhere. We must face the situation, all of us; see what we're up against and make some plans."

But Herr Schwartzmann was not to be put down so easily. He crossed over to where Chet stood. Chet's hand dropped to the pistol that was hooked in his own belt, but Schwartzmann made no move toward it. Instead he planted himself before the pilot and

jammed his fists into his hips while he tried to draw his stocky form to equal Chet's slim height.

"Fool!" he said. "Dolt! For a minute I believed you; I thought you had cut us off from the Earth. Now I know better. Max, he understands ships; and the Herr Doktor Kreiss iss a man of science: together they the repairs will make."

The Master Pilot smiled grimly. "Try to do it," he said, and turned toward the two whom Schwartzmann had named. "You, Max, and you, too, Doctor Kreiss—do you want to take on the job? If you do, I will help you."

But the two looked at the shattered controls and shook their heads at their employer.

"Impossible!" the pilot exclaimed. "Without new parts it can never be done."

Schwartzmann seemed about to vent his fury upon the man who dared give such a report, but Doctor Kreiss raised a restraining hand.

"Check!" he said. "I check that report. Repairs are out of the question."

Chet caught Harkness' eye upon him. "I'll be back," Harkness told him and went quickly toward the rear of the ship. Their stores were back there; would Walt think to get a detonite pistol? He came back into the room while the thought was still in Chet's mind. A gun was in each hand; he passed one of the weapons to Diane.

Unconsciously, Schwartzmann felt for his own gun that was in Chet's belt. He laughed mirthlessly. "Two men," he said scornfully; "two men and a girl!"

Harkness paid no attention. "Now we will get right down to cases," he remarked. "Two men and a girl is right—plus what is left of one ship. And please don't forget that the ship is ours and all the supplies that are in it. Now, you listen to me; I've a few things to tell you."

He faced squarely toward Schwartzmann, and Chet had to repress a grin at the steely glint in his companion's eyes. Nice chap, Harkness—nice, easy-going sort—up to a certain point. Chet had seen him in action before.

"First of all," Harkness was saying, "don't think that we have any illusions about you. You're a killer, and, like all such, you're a coward. If you had the upper hand, you would never give us a chance for our lives. In fact you were ready to throw us out to be gassed when Chet raised your little bet.

"But it looks as if Chet and Mademoiselle Delacouer and I will have to be living on this world for some time. We don't want to start that life by killing off even such as you—not in cold blood. We will give you a chance; we will split our provisions with you—give you half of what we have; you will have to shift for yourselves when that is gone. We will all have to learn to do that."

Again the heavy, glowering face of Schwartzmann broke into a laugh that was half sneer.

"You're damned kind," he told Harkness, "and, as usual, a fool. Two men and a girl!" He half turned to count his own forces.

"There are seven of us," he challenged; "seven! And all of them armed—all but me!"

He spoke a curt order in his own tongue, and each man whipped a pistol from his clothes.

"Seven to two," he said, and laughed again; "maybe it iss that Herr Harkness would like to count them.

"*Your* ship and *your* supplies!" he exclaimed scornfully. "And you would be so kind as to giff us food.

"*Gott im Himmel!*" he shouted; "I show you! I am talking now! We stay here—*ja*—because this *Dummkopf* has the controls *gebrochen*! But it iss we who stay; und you? You go, because I say so. It iss I who rule, und I prove it—seven to two!"

"Three!" a firm voice spoke from between Chet and Harkness; "seven to three! Our odds are improving, Herr Schwartzmann."

And Chet saw from the corner of his eye that the gun in the small hand of Mademoiselle Diane was entirely unwavering. But he spoke to her sharply, and his voice merged with that of Harkness who was saying somewhat the same words:

"Back—go back, Diane! We can handle this. For God's sake, keep out; we don't want any shooting."

Neither of the men had drawn his gun. Their hands were ready, but each had hoped to end this weird conference without firing a shot. Here was no place for gun-play and for wounded men.

Their attention was on Diane for the moment. A growled word from their enemy brought their minds back to him; they turned to find black pistol muzzles staring each of them in the eyes. Herr Schwartzmann, in the language of an earlier day, had got the drop.

"Seven to three," Schwartzmann said; "let it go that way; no difference does it make. If I say one word, you die."

Chet's arm ached to snap his hand toward his gun. It would be his last move, he well knew. He was sick with chagrin to see how easily they had been trapped; Walt had tried to play fair with a man who had not an atom of fairness in his character. And now—

"Seven to three!" Schwartzmann was gloating—till another voice broke in.

"I don't check your figures." The whistling tones were coming from a tortured throat, but the words were clear and distinct. "I don't check you; I make it six to four—and if one of your men makes a move, Herr Schwartzmann, I shall blow you to a pulp!"

And Herr Doktor Kreiss held a gun in a steady hand as he moved a pace nearer to Chet—a gun whose slender barrel made a glinting line of light toward Schwartzmann's eyes.

"If the gentlemen and Mademoiselle will permit," he offered almost diffidently, "I would prefer to be aligned with them. We are citizens of another world now; my former allegiance to Herr Schwartzmann is ended. This is—what is it you say?—a new deal. I

would like to see it; and I use another of your American aphorisms: I would like to see it a square deal."

The voice of a scholar, thought Chet; one more used to the precision of laboratory phrases than to wild talk like this; but no man to be trifled with, nevertheless. Chet did not hesitate to turn despite the pistols that were still aimed at him.

But Herr Kreiss was not looking in his direction; his eyes were trained steadily in the same line as his gun. This little experiment he was conducting seemed to require his undivided attention until the end. To Schwartzmann he said sharply:

"Your men—order them to drop their weapons. Quick!"

As they clattered upon the floor the scientist turned and extended his hand to Chet.

"And still speaking not too technically," he continued, "this is one hell of a fix that you have got us into. Even in desperate straits it took nerve to do that." He pointed to the shattered remains of the multiple bars that had been the control mechanism, and added:

"I admire that kind of nerve. And, if you don't mind, since we are exiles together—" His throat seemed choking him again.

There were weapons in the hands of Chet and Harkness; they were not making the same mistake twice. Chet shifted his gun to his left hand that he

might reach toward the scientist with his right.

"I knew you were white all the time," Chet told him; "I'll say you belong!"

CHAPTER VII

The Red Swarm

It was a matter of a half hour later when Harkness ordered them all outside. He had accepted Kreiss as an addition to their ranks and had made himself plain to Schwartzmann.

To the scientist he said. "You remarked that no ship could hold two commanding pilots: that goes for an expedition like this, too. I am in command. If you will take orders we will be mighty glad to have you with us."

And to Schwartzmann, in a different tone: "I am sparing you and your men. I ought to shoot you down, but I won't. And I don't expect you to understand why; any decency such as that would beyond you.

"But I am letting you live. This world is big enough to hold us both, and pretty soon I will tell you what part of it you can live in. And then remember this one thing, Schwartzmann—get this straight!—you keep out of my way. I will show you a valley where you and your men can stay. And if ever you leave that valley I will hunt you down as I would one of

the beasts that you will see in this world."

Chet had to repress a little smile that was twitching at his lips; it always amused him hugely to see Harkness when roused.

"Turn us out to starve?" Schwartzmann was demanding. "You would do that?"

"There will be food there," said Harkness curtly: "suit yourself about starving. Only stay where I put you!"

Back of the others of Schwartzmann's men, the pilot, Max, was stooping. Half-hidden he moved toward the doorway to the rear cabin and to the storage-room and gun-rooms beyond. Chet glimpsed him in his silent retreat.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you, Max," he advised quietly. "Personally, I think you're all getting off too well; as for myself, I'm sort of itching for an excuse to let off this gun."

It was here that Harkness turned to the open port.

"Put them out!" he snapped. "You, Chet, go out first and line them up as they come—but, no, wait: there may be gas out there."

Chet was beside the port; a breath from outside came to him sweetly fragrant. A shadow was moving across the smooth lava rock. "A bird!" he thought. Then a flash of red in startling vividness swept past the open door: it was like a quick flicker of living flame. He could not see what it was, but it was alive —and this answered his question.

"Send 'em along," he said; "it seems all right now." He stepped through the opening in the heavily insulated walls.

It was early morning, yet the sun was already hot upon the smooth expanse of the lava flow. Some ancient eruption from the distant peaks that hemmed in the valley had sent out this flood of molten rock; it was hard and black now. But, to the right, where the valley went on and up, and rose gently and widened as it rose, a myriad of red flames and jets of steam told of the inner fires that still raged.

These were the fumeroles where only a month before he and Harkness and Diane had found clustering savages who were more apes than men; they had been roasting meat at these flames. And below, where the lava stopped, was the open glade where the little stream splashed and sparkled: in the high rock walls that hemmed the glade the caves showed black. And, beyond the open ground, was the weird forest, where tree-trunks of ghostly white were laced with a network of red veining. They grew close, those spectral columns, in a shadow-world beneath the high roof of greenery they supported.

Here was the scene of an earlier adventure. Chet was swept up in the flood of recollections born of familiar sights and scents. Herr Schwartzmann, cursing steadily in a guttural tongue, came from the ship to bring Chet's thoughts back to the more immediate problem.

There were five others who followed—the pilot and Schwartzmann's four men. There had been another,

but his body lay huddled upon the bare lava. He had followed his master far—and here, for him, was the end.

Kreiss' pistol was still in his hand as he came after. Harkness and Diane were last.

Harkness pointed with his gun. "Over there!" he ordered. "Get them away from the ship, Chet. Line them up down below there; all the ape-men have cleared out since we had our last fight. Get them down by the stream. Diane and I will bring them some supplies, and then we can send them off for good."

Chet sent Kreiss down first, where an easy slope made the descent a simple matter; it had been the bow-wave of the molten lava—here was the end of that inundation of another age—and the slope was wrinkled and creased. Schwartzmann followed; then the others. The last man was ready to descend when Diane and Walt came back.

They had packages of compressed foods. This was all right with Chet, but he raised his eyebrows inquiringly at sight of several boxes of ammunition and an extra gun. Harkness smiled good-naturedly.

"I will give them one pistol," Walt told him, "and a good supply of shells. We don't need to be afraid of them with only one gun, and we can't leave the poor devils at the mercy of every wild beast."

"You're the boss," said Chet briefly; "but, for me, I'd sooner give this Schwartzmann just one bullet—right where it would do the most good.

"Let's make him work for it," he suggested, and called to the men below:

"Come back up here, Schwartzmann! A little present for you—and I'm saying you don't deserve it."

He watched the return trip as Schwartzmann dragged his heavy bulk up the slope; he was enjoying the man's explosive, panted curses. Beside him were Diane and Walt. With them, it was as it had been with him at first. They had eyes only for the familiar ground below: the stream, the open ground, the trees....

Each of them was looking down at that lower ground.

It was Kreiss standing down there who first caught Chet's attention. Kreiss was trying to shout. Chet saw his waving arms; he stared, puzzled, at the facial contortions—the working lips from which no sound came. He knew that something was wrong. It was a moment or two before he realized that Kreiss could not speak, that the throat, injured by the choking fumes, had failed him. Then he heard the strangled croak that Kreiss forced from his lips: "*Behind you!—look behind you!*"

Schwartzmann was scrambling to the top where they stood; every man was accounted for. What had they to fear? And suddenly it was borne in upon Chet's consciousness that he had been hearing a sound—a sound that was louder now—a rustling!—a clashing of dry, rasping things! The very air seemed to hold something ominous.

He knew this in the instant while he whirled about; while he heard the dry rustling change to a humming

roar; while he saw, like a cloud of flame, a great swarm of red, flying things like the one that had flown past the port—and one, swifter than the rest, that darted from the swarm and flashed upon him.



One, swifter than the rest, dashed upon him.

It was red—vividly, dazzlingly red! The body of a reptile—a wild phantasm of distorted dreams—was supported by short, quivering wings. The body was some five feet in length, and it was translucent.

A shell, like the dried husk of some creature long dead!—yet here was something alive, as its quick attack proved. It had a head of dry scales which ended in a projecting black-tipped beak that came like a sword, straight and true for Chet's heart. It seemed an age before he could bring his pistol up and fire.

Detonite, as everyone knows, does not explode on

impact; the cap of fulminate in the end of each bullet sets it off. But even this requires some resistance—something more than a dry, red husk to check the bullet's flight. There was no explosion from the tiny shell that Chet's pistol fired, but the bullet did its work. The creature fell plunging to the rocky ground, and its transparent wings sent flurries of dust where they beat upon the ground. There were others that went down, for the bullet had gone on and through the great swarm.

And then they attacked.

The very fury of the assault saved the huddle of humans. So close were the red things pressed together that their vibrating wings beat and locked the swarm into a mass. They were almost above their prey. Chet knew that he was firing upward into the swarm, but the sound of his pistol was lost. The red cloud hung poised in a whirling maelstrom; and the pandemonium of clashing wings whipped down to them not only the sound of their dry scraping but a stench from those reptile bodies that was overpowering.

Sickly sweet, the taste of it was in Chet's mouth; the sound of the furious swarm was battering at his ears as he knew that his pistol was empty.

There were red bodies on the bare rock before him. A scaly, scabrous thing was pressing against his upflung hands that he raised above his head—a loathsome touch! A beak that was a needle-pointed tube stabbed his shoulder before he could flinch aside: the quick pain of it was piercingly sharp....

Other red horrors dropped from the main mass overhead; he saw Harkness beating at them wildly while he made a shelter of his body above the crouched figure of Diane. Two of them—two incredible, beastly, flying things! He saw them so plainly where they hovered, and Harkness striking at them with a useless, empty gun, while they waited to drive home their lance-like beaks.

The picture was so plain! His brain was a photographic plate, super-sensitized by the utter horror of the moment. While the red monster stabbed its beak into his shoulder, while he drove home one blow against its parchment body with his empty pistol, while the wild, beating wings lifted the creature again into the air—he saw it all.

Here were Diane and Harkness! Nearby Schwartzmann was on the ground! His man—the one who had not yet descended with the others—was running stumblingly forward. He was wounded, and the blood was streaming from his back. Chet saw the two monsters hovering above Harkness' head; he saw their thick-lidded eyes—and he saw those eyes as they detected an easier prey.

The fleeing man was half-stooped in a shambling run. The winged reptile Chet had beaten off joined the other two and they were upon the wounded man in a flurry of red.

Chet saw him go down and took one involuntary step forward to give him aid—then stopped, transfixed by what he beheld.

The man was down crouching in terror. Above him the three monstrous things beat each other with their wings; then their long beaks stabbed downward. The

man's body was hidden, but through those transparent beaks there mounted swiftly a red stream. Plainly visible, Chet saw that vital current—the living life-blood of a living man—drawn into those beastly bodies; he saw it spread through a network of canals! And he was held rigid with horror until a harsh scream from Harkness reached his brain.

"The trees!" Harkness was shouting. "The trees! Down, Chet, for God's sake! You can't save him!"

Walt was half carrying Diane. Even then Chet was vaguely thankful that their bodies were between the girl and this gruesome sight. And Walt was leaping madly down the lava slope.

Beyond him, already on the lower level, was the racing figure of Schwartzmann. A whirring flash of red pursued him. Another made a crimson streak through the air toward Walt's back. Chet came with startling abruptness from the frozen rigidity that held him, and he crashed his empty pistol in well-directed aim through the body of the beast. Then he, too, threw himself in great leaps down the slope.

Kreiss was firing from below; Chet knew dimly that this was checking the attack of the swarm. He saw Walt stagger; saw blood flowing from a slash on the back of his head, and knew that Kreiss had got the monster just in time. He sprang toward the stumbling man and got his arms under the unconscious figure of the girl to help carry the load.

And now it was Kreiss who was shouting. "The trees!

We'll be safe in the trees!" He saw Kreiss drop his pistol and dash headlong for the white trunks of ghostly trees.

His arm was pierced by a stinging pain; cold eyes, with thick, leathery lids, were staring into Chet's as he cast one horrified glance over his shoulder. Then he crashed against the white trunk of a tree and helped Harkness drag the body of the girl between two twin trunks. He pulled himself to safety in the shelter of the protecting trees, and held weakly to one of them.... And the crimson lace-work of the sap-wood that showed through the white bark was no brighter red than the mark of his blood-stained hands where they clung for support.

CHAPTER VIII

Doomed

The sun was high when they ventured forth. Diane would have come, but the two men would have none of it. They remembered the sight they had seen; they knew what was left of a man's body lying on the rocks above; and they ordered the girl to stay hidden while Kreiss remained with her as a guard.

There were only the four who lay hidden in the woods; Schwartzmann and Max, with the remaining three men, were gone. Harkness' calls were unanswered, and he ceased the halloo.

"Better keep quiet," he advised himself and the

others. "We are out of ammunition, though they don't know it. And they have got away. They will keep on going, too, and I am not any too well pleased with that. I wanted to put Schwartzmann where I could keep an eye on him.... Oh, well, he isn't very dangerous."

But Chet Bullard made a few mental and unspoken reservations to that remark. "That boy is always dangerous," he told himself, "and he won't be happy unless he is making trouble. Thank the Lord he hasn't got that gun!"

He came out cautiously from among the trees, but the red horde was gone. The reptiles' wings had rasped and clashed furiously for a time; they had darted in fiery flashes before the protecting trees: and the fitful breeze had brought gusts of nauseous odors—until a thin haze formed in the higher air and the red things were gone.

"There will not be any more for a while," said Harkness.

He pointed toward the fumerole they had seen from the lookout earlier in the day: again it was emitting jets of thin, steamy vapor that did not disappear like steam but floated up above their heads. "The gas has driven them off," he added.

The two men climbed slowly up the slope that had been the wave front of molten rock. Chet found his pistol by the path and picked it up.

"We'll get more ammunition up top," he told Harkness, "and we will toss some down to Kreiss. He

can have the extra gun you brought for Schwartzmann, too."

He stopped suddenly. He had reached the level top of the lava flow. Here was where they had stood when the beasts attacked; where Harkness had dropped the boxes of ammunition and the pistol—and except for a few scattered bodies of unbelievable reptiles and for a stain of blood where his own wound had bled, there was nothing to show where they had been.

"He got 'em!" Chet exclaimed. "That son-of-a-gun Schwartzmann got the gun and shells. I saw him scrambling around on the rock. I thought he was just scared to death; but no, he wasn't too frightened to grab the gun and the ammunition while one of his own men was being killed. And that's not so good, either!"

A dozen paces beyond was a huddle of clothing that stirred idly in the breeze. "The poor devil!" exclaimed Chet, and moved over beside the body of the man who had gone down under the red swarm's attack.

It lay face down. Chet stooped to turn the body over, though he knew there was no hope of life. He stopped with a gasp of dismay.

Two eyes still stared in horror from a face that was colorless—a drained, ghastly white face! No tint remained to show that this ever had been a living man. More dreadful than the waxen pallor of death, here was a bleached, bloodless flesh that told of the nameless horror that had overwhelmed this man, beaten him down and drained him of every drop of blood.

"Vampires!" Chet heard Harkness saying in a

horrified whisper. "Those beaks that were like tubes! And they—they—" He stopped as if in fear of the words that would tell what they themselves had escaped.

Chet turned the body to its former position; that dreadful face beneath a pitiless sun was a sight no other eyes should see. "Let's go on to the ship," he said. "We'll get some ammunition, go back and get Diane—"

He did not finish the thought. Before him he saw the lifeless body moving; it rolled and shuddered as if life had returned to this thing where no life should be. Chet raised one hand in an unconscious gesture as if to ward off some new horror that the body might disclose. It was a moment before he realized that the rock was shaking beneath his feet, that he was dizzy and that from no great distance a rumbling growl was sounding in his ears.

The moving body had shaken Chet's mental poise as had the earthquake his physical equilibrium. Harkness had not seen it; he was looking off across the level plateau.

"Look!" he exclaimed; "another vent has opened! See it spout?"

Some hundred yards distant were clouds of green vapor that rolled into the air. At their base a fountain of mud sputtered and spouted and fell back to build up a cone. The green cloud whirled sluggishly, then was caught by the breeze and began its slow, rolling progress across the flat rock. It was coming their

way, rolling down toward the ship, and Chet gripped suddenly at his companion's arm.

"Come on!" he said! "I'm going away from here, and I'm going now. We'll get Diane and Kreiss: remember what a whiff of gas did to him this morning."

He was drawing Harkness toward the face of the rock; he wondered at his slowness. Walt seemed fascinated by the oncoming cloud.

"Wait!" Harkness paused at the top of the descending slope. Chet turned, to look where Harkness was watching.

The green cloud moved slowly. As he turned to stare it touched the bow of their ship; it flowed slowly, sluggishly, along the sides, and then swept up and over the top. The lookouts of the control room were obscured, and the port from which they had come!

"Cut off!" breathed Harkness, his voice heavy with hopeless conviction. "We can't get back! And now we're on our own past any doubt!"

"It may not last," Chet was urging an hour later, when, with Kreiss and Diane, they stood on high ground to look down on the ship.

The sparkling sheen of the metal cylinder had changed from silver to pale green. The cloud that enveloped it was not heavy, but it was always the same. Yet still Chet insisted: "It may not last."

"Sorry to disappoint you," replied Kreiss, "but there is little ground for such a belief." Again he was the

professor instructing a class. "These fumeroles, in my opinion, are venting a region far below the surface. It is possible that further seismic disturbances may alter conditions; a rearrangement of the lower rock strata may close existing crevices and open others like this you have seen; but, barring that, I see no reason for thinking that this emission of what appears to be chlorine with other gases may not continue indefinitely."

Chet looked at Diane. Was it a twinkle that appeared and vanished in her eyes as Herr Professor Kreiss concluded his remarks. She would laugh in the very face of death, Chet realized, but her tone was entirely serious as she offered another suggestion.

"If this wind should change," she said, "and if it blew the gas in another direction, the ship could be cleared. One of us could go in long enough to switch on the air generators full."

But now it was Chet who shook his head in a negative. "Remember," he told her, "when we were here before? All of the time while Walt was gone for the ship—how did the wind blow then?"

"The same as now," she admitted.

"And it never changed."

"No,"—slowly—"it never changed."

Chet turned to Walt and Kreiss. "That's that," he said shortly. "Any other good ideas in the crowd? Can anyone go through that gas and get to the ship? I'll make a try."

"Suicide!" was Kreiss' verdict, and Harkness confirmed his words.

"I saw things that moved up in the trees," he said. "Lord knows what they were; Birds—beasts of some sort! But they were alive till the gas touched them. I saw it drift among the trees when we left, and those things up there came plopping down like ripe apples."

Diane Delacouer looked up at Harkness with wide, serious eyes. "Then," she shrugged, "we are really—"

"Castaways," Harkness told her. "We're on our own—off on a desert island—shipwrecked—all that sort of thing! And you might as well know the worst of it; you, too, Kreiss.

"Our good friend, Schwartzmann, is at large, and he has the pistol and ammunition we brought out from the ship. He is armed, and we are not; he has food, and we have none. And I'll have to admit that I didn't have any breakfast and could use a little right now."

"There are seven shells left in my pistol," said Diane. She held the weapon out to Harkness; he took it carefully.

"Seven," he said; "it is all we have. We must kill some animals for food, my dear, but not with these; we must save these for bigger game."

"But we cannot!" expostulated Kreiss. "To kill game with our bare hands—impossible! We are doomed!"

And now Chet caught Diane's glance brimming with mirth that was undisguised. Truly, Diane Delacouer would have her laugh in the face of death.

"Doomed?" she exclaimed. "Not while Chet and I

know how to make bows and arrows!... Do you suppose we can find any of their old spears, Chet? They made gorgeous bows, you remember."

And Chet bowed low in an exaggeration of admiration that was not entirely assumed. "Lead on!" he said. "You are in command. The army is ready to follow."

CHAPTER IX

A Premonition

Fire Valley had been the home of the ape-men. On that earlier journey Walt and Chet had seen them, had fought with the tribe, and had lived for a time in their caves that made dark shadows high on the rock wall. And they knew that the wood the ape-men used for their spears was well suited for bows.

Back in the caves they found discarded spears and some wood that had been gathered for shafts. Tough, springy, flexible, it was a simple matter for the men to convert these into serviceable weapons. Sinews that the ape-men had torn from great beasts made the bowstrings, and there were other slim shafts that they notched, then sharpened in the fire.

Yet, to Chet as he worked, came an overwhelming feeling of despondency. To be fashioning crude weapons like these—preparing to defend themselves as best they could from the dangers of this new, raw world! No, it could not be true.... And he knew while

he protested that it was all in vain.

He asked himself a score of times if his impulsive, desperate act had not been a horrible mistake. And he found the same answer always: it was all he could have done. Had he attacked Schwartzmann he would have been killed—and Walt, too! Schwartzmann would have had Diane. Only some such stupefying shock as the effect of the shattered control could have checked Schwartzmann. No, there had been no alternative. And the thing was done. Finally, irrevocably done!

Chet walked to the cave-mouth to stare down at the ship below him in the valley. From the fumerole's throat came a steady, rolling cloud of shimmering green; the ship was immersed in it. The voice of Herr Kreiss spoke to him; the scientist, too, had come forward for another look.

"If it were at the bottom of the sea," he said, "it would be no more inaccessible. It is, in very fact, at the bottom of a sea—a sea of gas. We could penetrate an aqueous medium more easily."

"And," Chet pondered slowly, "if only I could have returned.... With time—and metal bars—and tools that I could improvise—I might...."

His voice trailed off. What use now to speculate on what he might have done. The scientist concluded his thought:

"You might have reconstructed the control—yes, I, too, had thought of that. But now, the gas! No—we must put that out of our minds, unless we would

become insane."

Chet turned back into the black and odorous cave. He saw Harkness who was flexing a bow he was making for Diane; he was showing her how to grip it and let the arrow run free.

"Towahg was the last one I instructed," Walt was saying; and Chet knew from the deep lines in his face that his attempt at casual talk was for Diane's benefit; "I wonder how long Towahg remembered. He was a grateful little animal."

"Towahg?" queried Kreiss. "Who is Towahg?"

"Ape-man," Harkness told him. "Friendly little rascal; he helped us out when we were here before. He saved Diane's life, no question about that. I showed him the use of the bow; jumped him ahead a hundred generations in the art of self-defense."

"And offense!" was Kreiss' comment. "There are certain drawbacks to arming a potential enemy."

"Oh, Towahg is all right," Harkness reassured the scientist, "although he may have taught the trick to others of the tribe who are not so friendly."

"Where are they? In what direction do they live?" Kreiss continued.

"Want to make a social call?" Chet inquired. "You needn't mind those little formalities up here, Doctor."

But in the mental makeup of Herr Doktor Kreiss had been included no trace of humor; he took Chet's remark at face value. And he answered in words that

echoed Chet's real thoughts and that took the smile from his lips.

"But, no," said Herr Kreiss; "it is the contrary that I desire. Here we are; here we stay for the rest of our lives. I would wish those years to be undisturbed. I have no wish to quarrel with what primitive inhabitants this globe may hold. There is much to study, to learn. I shall pass the years so.

"And now," he questioned, "where is it that we go? Where shall be our home?"

Chet, too, looked inquiringly at Harkness. "You saw more of this country than I did," he reminded him; "what would you suggest?"

And, at sight of the serious, troubled eyes of Diane Delacouer, he added:

"We want a site for a high-grade subdivision, you understand. Something good, something exclusive, where we can keep out the less desirable element. Dianeville must appeal to the people who rate socially."

At the puzzled look on the scientist's face, Chet caught Diane's glance of unspoken amusement, and knew that his ruse had succeeded: he must not let Diane get too serious. Harkness answered slowly:

"I saw a valley; I think I can find it again. When Towahg guided me back to the ship, when we were here before, I saw the valley beyond the third range of hills. We go up Fire Valley; follow the stream that comes in from the side—"

"Water?" Chet questioned.

"Yes; I saw a lake."

"Cover? Trees? Not the man-eating ones?"

"Everything: open ground, hills, woods. It looked good to me then; it will look a lot better now," said Walt enthusiastically.

"Walk faster," said Chet; "I'm stepping on your heels."

They reached the valley floor some distance above the fumerole and the clouds of poison gas; and the march began. The attack of the flying reptiles had taught them the danger of exposure in the open, and they kept close to the trees that fringed the valley.

Once Chet left them and vanished among the trees, to return with the body of an animal slung over one shoulder.

"Moon-pig!" he told the others. "Ask Doctor Kreiss if you want to know its species and ancestry and such things. All I know is that it has got hams, and I am going to roast a slice or so before we start."

"Bow and arrow?" asked Harkness.

Chet nodded. "I'm a dead shot," he admitted, "up to a range of ten feet. This thing with the funny face stood still for me, so it looks as if we won't starve."

The sun had swung rapidly into the sky; it was now overhead. One half of their first short day was gone. And Chet's suggestions of food met with approval.

"I can't quite get used to it," Diane admitted to the rest; "to think that for us time has turned back. We have been dropped into a new and savage world, and we must do as the savages of our world did

thousands of years ago. Now!—in nineteen seventy-three!"

Chet removed a slab of meat from the hot throat of a tiny fumerole. "Nineteen seventy-three on Earth," he agreed, "but not here. This is about nineteen thousand B.C."

He called to Kreiss who was digging into a thin stratum of rock. The scientist had a splinter of flint in his hand, and he was gouging at a red outcropping layer.

"Old John Q. Neanderthal, himself!" said Chet. "What have you found, silver or gold? Whatever it is, you're forgetting to eat; better come along." But Doctor Kreiss had turned geologist, it was plain.

"Cinnabar," he said; "an ore of hydrargyrum!" His tone was excited, but Chet refused to have his mind turned from practical things.

"Is it good to eat?" he demanded.

"*Nein, nein!*" Kreiss protested. "It is what you call mercury—quicksilver!"

"Ladies and gentlemen," said Chet dryly, "I see where this man Kreiss is to be a big help. He has discovered the site for the thermometer factory. He will be organizing a Chamber of Commerce next."

He left out a portion of the cooked meat for Kreiss' later attention, and he and Harkness rolled a supply into leaf-wrapped packages and stowed them in the pockets of their coats before they started on. Again

the little procession took up the march with Harkness leading.

"Leave as little trail as possible," Harkness ordered. "We don't want to shout to Schwartzmann where we have gone."

They left the Valley of the Fires to follow the stream-bed in another hollow between great hills. Chet found himself looking back at the familiar flares with regret. Here was the only place on this new world which was not utterly strange to his eyes. He continued to glance behind him, long after the smoky fires were lost to sight; but he would not admit even to himself that it was for another reason.

Nineteen seventy-three!—and he was a man of the modern civilization. Yet deep within him there stirred ancient instincts—racial memories, perhaps. And, as he splashed through the little stream and bent to make his way through strange-leafed vines and leprous-spotted trees, a warning voice spoke inaudibly within his own mind—spoke as it might have whispered to some ancestor scores of centuries dead.

"You are followed!" it told him. "Listen!—there is one who follows on the trail!"

CHAPTER X

A Mysterious Rescuer

Their way led through tangled growths of trees and vines that were like unreal things of a dream. Unreal they were, too, in their strange degree of livingness, for there were snaky tendrils that drew back as if in fear at their approach and stalks that folded great, thorny leaves protectingly about pulpy centers at the first touch of a hand. The world of vegetation seemed strangely sentient and aware of their approach. Only the leprous-white trees remained motionless; their red-veined trunks towered high in air, and the sun of late afternoon shot slantingly through a leafy roof overhead.

Twice Chet let the others go on ahead while he slipped silently into some rocky concealment and watched with staring, anxious eyes back along their trail. But the little stream's gurgling whisper was the only voice, and in all the weird jungle there was no movement but for the unfolding of the vegetation where they had passed.

"Nerves!" he reproached himself. "You're getting jumpy, and that won't do." But once more he let the others climb on while he stepped quickly behind a projecting rock over which he could look.

Again there was silence; again the leaves unfolded their thorny wrappings while vermiform tendrils crept across the ground or reached tentatively into the air. And then, while the silence was unbroken, while no evidence came through his feeble, human senses, something approached.

Neither sight nor sound betrayed it—this something, that came noiselessly after—but a tell-tale plant whipped its leaves into their former wrapping; a vine drew its hanging clusters of flowers sharply into the air. The unseeing watchers of the forest had sensed

what was unheard and unseen, and Chet knew that his own inner warning had been true.

He waited to see this mysterious pursuer come into view; and after waiting in vain he realized the folly of thinking himself concealed. He glanced about him; every plant was drawn tightly upon itself. With silent voices they were proclaiming his hiding place, warning this other to wait, telling him that someone was hidden here.

Chet's face, despite his apprehension, drew into a whimsical, silent grin. "No chance to ambush him, whoever he is or whatever it is," he told himself. "But that works two ways: he can't jump us when we're prepared; not in daylight, anyway."

And he asked himself a question he could not answer: "I wonder," he whispered softly, "—I wonder what these plants will do at night!"

Almost they could see the swift descent of the sun. Each flashing glint of light through the dense growth came from lower down toward the invisible horizon. It shone at last where Chet cast anxious glances about upon a mound of rocks.

Rough blocks of tremendous size had been left here from some seismic disturbance. Like the ruins of a castle they were heaped high in air. Even the tree growths stopped at their base, and above them was an opening in the roof of tangled branches and leaves—a rough circle of clear, blue sky.

"How about making camp?" Chet asked. "This place looks good to me. I would just as soon be up off the

ground a bit."

Harkness looked at the pile of rocks; glanced once toward the sun. "Right!" he agreed. "This will do for our first camp."

"You've named it," Chet told him as he scrambled to the top of a great block. He extended a hand to Diane, standing tired and breathless at its side.

"Welcome to First Camp!" he told her. "Take this elevator for the first ten floors."

He drew her up to the top of the block. Harkness joined them, and Diane, though she tried to smile in response to Chet, did not refuse their help in making the ascent; the day's experiences had told on all of them.

Thirty or forty feet above the ground was Chet's estimate. From the top of their little fort they watched the shadows of night sweep swiftly down. Scrub tree growths whose roots had anchored among the rocks gave them shelter, while vines and mosses softened the hard outlines of the labyrinth of stones.

Chet undid the package of meat and passed it out freely. There had been scurryings and rustlings in the jungle growth that had reassured him in the matter of food. Darkness fell as they ate; then it gave way to a new flood of light.

Golden light from a monstrous moon! It sent searching fingers through rifts in the leafy roof, then poured itself over the edge of the opening above in a cascade of glory. And, though each one of the four

raised his eyes toward that distant globe and knew it for the Earth, no word was said; they ate their food in silence while the silent night wrapped them about.

Still in silence they prepared for the night. Chet and Harkness improvised a bed for Diane in the shelter of a sheer-rising rock. They tore off pieces of moss and stripped leaves from the climbing vines to make a mattress for her; then withdrew with Kreiss to a short distance while Chet told them of his suspicions.

"Six hours of night," he said at last; "that means two hours for each of us. We'll take turns standing guard."

Harkness insisted upon being first. Chet flipped a coin with Kreiss and drew the last turn of guard duty. He stretched himself out on a bit of ground where vegetation had gained a foothold among the rocks.

"It's going to take me a while to get used to these short days," he said. "Six hours of daylight; six hours of night. This is a funny, little world—but it's the only one we've got."

The night air was softly warm; the day had been hard on muscles and nerves. Chet stared toward the glorious ball of light that was their moon. There were men and women there who were going about their normal affairs. Ships were roaring through the air at their appointed levels; their pilots were checking their courses, laughing, joking.

Chet resolutely withdrew his eyes. Think? Hell, no! That was one thing that he must not do. He threw

one arm across his eyes to shut out the light that brought visions of a world he would never see again —that emphasized the utter hopelessness of their position.... His next conscious sensation was of his shoulder being shaken, while the hushed voice of Doctor Kreiss said:

"Your turn now, Herr Bullard; four hours have you slept."

From Kreiss, Chet took the pistol with its seven precious shells. "All quiet," Kreiss told him as he prepared to take Chet's place on the soft leaves; "strange, flying things have I seen, but they do not come near. And of your mysterious pursuer we have seen nothing. You imagined it, perhaps."

"I might have imagined it," Chet answered, "but don't try to tell me that the plants did. I'll give this vegetation credit for some damned uncanny powers but not for imagination—I draw the line there."

He looked toward the highest point of rock and shook his head. "Too plain a target if I'm up there," he argued, and took up his position in the shadows instead.

Once he moved cautiously toward the place they had prepared for Diane. She was breathing softly and regularly. And on the rock at her side, with only his jacket for a bed, lay Harkness. Their hands were clasped, and Chet knew that the girl slept peacefully in the assurance of that touch.

"They don't make 'em any finer!" he was telling himself, and at the same moment he stiffened abruptly to attention.

Something was moving! Through and above the

hushed noises of the night had come a gliding sound. It was an indescribable sound, too elusive for identification; and Chet, in the next instant, could not be sure of its reality. He did not call, but swung alertly back on guard and slipped from shadow to shadow as he made his way across the welter of rocks.

He stopped at last in strained listening to the silent night. One hand upon a great stone block at his side steadied his body in tense, poised concentration.

From afar came a whistling note whose thin keenness was mingled with a squeal of fright: some marauder of the night had found its prey. From the leafy canopy above him voices whispered as the night wind set a myriad leaves in motion. The thousand tiny sounds that blend to make the silence of the dark! These he heard, and nothing more, while he forced himself to listen beyond them. He followed with his eyes the creeping flood of Earth-light that came slantingly now through the opening above to half-illumine this rocky world; and then, in the far margin of that light he found something on which his eyes focused sharply—something that moved!

Walt!—Kreiss—he must arouse them! A shout of alarm was in his throat—a shout that was never uttered. For, from the darkness at his back—not where this moving thing had been disclosed by the friendly Earth-light, but from the place he had just left—came a scream of pure terror. It was the shocking scream of a person roused from sleep in utter fright, and the voice was that of Diane.

"Walter!" she cried! "Walt!" There were other words that ended in a strangling, choking sound, while a hoarse shout from Harkness merged into a discord that rang horribly through the still night.

Chet was racing across the rocks; the pistol was in his hand. What fearful thing would he face? What was it that had attacked? He forced his leaden feet to carry him on in a succession of wild leaps. Forgotten was the menace behind him, although he half saw, half sensed, a shadow that moved faster than he along the upper rocks. He thought only of the unknown horror that was ahead, that had drawn that despairing shriek from the brave lips of Diane. The few seconds of his crossing were an age in length.

One last spring, one vivid instant while the Earth-light marked in sharp distinctness the figure of a leaping man! It was Harkness, throwing himself into the air, trying vainly to reach the struggling form of Diane Delacouer. She was held high above his head, and she was wrapped in the coils of a monster serpent—coils that finished in a smoothly-rounded end. And Chet knew in that instant of horror that the thing was headless!

He was raising his pistol to fire; the long moments that seemed never to end were in actuality an instant. Where should he aim? He must not injure Diane.

From the high rocks beside him came a glint of light, a straight line of reflected brilliance as from a poised and slender shaft. It moved, it flashed downward, it hissed angrily as it passed close to Chet's head. It

went on, a spear like a flash of light—on and down, to drive sharply into the body of that serpent shape! And the coils, at that blow, relaxed, while the figure of Diane Delacouer fell limply to the outstretched, cushioning arms of the man below....

Had the weapon been thrown with uncanny accuracy, or had it been meant for him? Chet could not be sure. But he knew that before him Walt Harkness was bending protectingly above the unconscious figure of a girl, while above and about the two there flailed a terrible, headless thing that beat the rocks with sledge-hammer blows. It struck Harkness once and sent him staggering, and once it came close to Chet so that his hands closed upon it for an instant. And with the touch he knew that this serpent was no animal shape, but worse—a creeping tendril from some flesh-eating horror of the vegetable world.

He dashed in beside Walt; he saw Kreiss hurrying across the rocks. They had Diane safely out of reach of the threshing, striking thing before the scientist arrived.

The spear that had passed close to Chet had pinned this deadly thing to earth; it tore loose as they watched, and the wounded tendril, with the spear still hanging from its side, slid swiftly down the slope and into the darkness at the foot of the rocks.

Even the calm preciseness of Herr Kreiss was shattered by the attack. In a confusion of words he stammered questions that went unanswered. Chet thrust his pistol into Harkness' hands and was off

down the rocky slope toward the springs where they had got water for their evening meal. A rolled leaf made a cup that he held carefully while he climbed back. A few minutes later the pallid face of Diane showed a faint flush, while she drew a choking breath.

Harkness held the girl's head in his arms; he was uttering words of endearment that were mingled with vicious curses for the thing that had escaped.

"Never mind that," argued Chet; "that one won't bother us again, and after this we will be on guard. But here is something to wonder about. What about this spear? Where did it come from?"

Harkness had eyes only for Diane's tremulous smile. "I am all right, truly," she assured him. Only then did he turn in bewilderment to Chet.

"I thought you threw it! But of course not; you couldn't; we didn't have any spears."

"No," said Chet; "I didn't throw it. I saw something moving over across there"—he pointed toward the farther rocks where he had been—"I was going to call when Diane's scream beat me to it. But what I saw wasn't the thing that attacked her. And if it was the same one who threw that spear he must have come across here in a hurry. And that spear, by the way, came uncomfortably close to my head. I'm not at all sure but it was meant for me."

Harkness released his arms from Diane, for she was now able to sit erect. He picked up the crude bow that had been beside him and fitted an arrow to the

string.

"I'll go and have a look," he promised grimly. But Chet held him back.

"You're not thinking straight; this shock has knocked you out of control. If that little stranger with the spear meant to help us there's no need of hunting him out; he doesn't seem anxious to show himself. And if he meant it for me, he's still too good a shot to fool with in the dark. You stick here until daylight."

"That is good advice," Herr Kreiss agreed. "The night, it will soon be gone." He was looking at the leafy opening overhead where the golden light of a distant Earth was fading before the glow of approaching day.

CHAPTER XI

The Sacrificial Altar

"I am off the trail," Harkness admitted. "Towahg guided me before; I wish he were here to do it now."

They had pushed on for another short day, Harkness leading, and Chet bringing up the rear and casting frequent backward glances in a vain effort to catch a glimpse of some other moving figure.

Smothered at times in a dense tangle of vegetation, where they sweated and worked with aching muscles to tear a path; watching always for the flaming, crimson buds on grotesque trees, whose limbs were

waving, undulating arms and from which came tendrils like the one that had nearly ended Diane's life, they fought their way on.

They had seen the buds on that earlier trip; had seen the revolting beauty of them—the fleshy lips that opened above a pool of death into which those reaching arms would drop any living thing they touched. They kept well out of reach when a splash of crimson against the white trees flashed in warning.

Again they would traverse an open space, where outcropping rocks would send Kreiss into transports of delight over their rich mineral contents. But always their leader's eyes were turned toward a range of hills.

"It is beyond there," he assured them, "if only we can reach it." Harkness pointed to a scar on a mountainside where a crystal outcrop in a sheer face of rock sparkled brilliantly in the sunlight. "I remember that—it isn't so very far—and we can look back down the valley from there and see our ship."

"But we'll never make it to-night," said Chet; "it's a case of making camp again."

They had gained an altitude of perhaps a thousand feet. No longer did the jungle press so hard upon them. Even the single file that had been their manner of marching could be abandoned, and Harkness drew Diane to his side that he might lend her some of his own strength.

Again the soft contours of the rolling ground had been disturbed: a landslide in some other century had sent a torrent of boulders from the high slopes

above. Harkness threaded his way among great masses of granite to come at last to an opening where massive monoliths formed a gateway.

It was an entrance to another valley. They did not need to enter, for they could skirt it and continue toward the high pass in the hills. But the gateway seemed inviting. Harkness took Diane's hand to help her toward it; the others followed.

The fast sinking sun had buried itself behind a distant range, and long shadows swept swiftly across the world, as if the oncoming night were alive—as if it were rousing from the somnolence of its daytime sleep and reaching out with black and clutching hands toward a fearful, waiting world.

"No twilight here," Chet observed; "let's find a hide-out—a cave, by choice—where we can guard the entrance and—"

A gasp from Diane checked him. "Oh!" she exclaimed. "It is not real! *C'est impossible!*"

Chet had been busied with the matter of a secure footing; he looked up now and took a step forward where Harkness and Diane stood motionless in a gateway of stone. And he, too, stopped as if stunned by the weird beauty of the scene.

A valley. Its length reached out before them to end some half mile away. Sides that might once have sloped evenly seemed weathered to a series of great steps, and an alternation of striations in black and white made a banding that encircled the entire oval. Each step was dead-black stone, each riser was snow-

white marble; and the steps mounted up and up until they resembled the sides of a great bowl. In the center, like an altar for the worship of some wild, gargantuan god, was a stepped pyramid of the same startling black and white. Banded like the walls, it rose to half their height to finish in a capstone cut square and true.

An altar, perhaps; an arena, beyond a doubt, or so it seemed to Chet. He was first to put the impression in words.

"A stadium!" he marvelled; "an arena for the games of the gods!"

"The gods," Diane breathed softly, "of a wild, lost world—" But Chet held to another thought.

"Who—who built it?" he asked. "It's tremendous! There is nothing like it on Earth!"

Only Kreiss seemed oblivious to the weird beauty of the spectacle. To Professor Kreiss dolomite and black flint rock were dolomite and black flint; interesting specimens—a peculiar arrangement—but nature must be permitted her little vagaries.

"Who built it?" He repeated Chet's question and gave a short laugh before answering in words. "The rains, Herr Bullard, and the winds of ages past. Yes, yes! A most remarkable example of erosion—most remarkable! I must return this way some time and give it my serious attention."

Harkness had not spoken; he was shaking his head doubtfully at Kreiss' words. "I am inclined to agree

with Chet," he said slowly. "But who could have built a gigantic work like this? Have there been former civilisations here?"

He straightened up and shook himself free from the effects of the wild, barbaric scene.

"And you needn't come back," he told Kreiss; "you can have a look now, to-night, by moonlight. We can't go on. I think we'll be safest on that big altar rock; nothing will get near us without our knowing."

Chet felt Diane Delacouer's hand on his arm; her other hand was gripping at Harkness. The shiver that passed through her was plainly perceptible. "I'm afraid," she confessed in a half-whisper; "there's something about it: I do not like it. There is evil there—danger. We should not enter."

Walt Harkness gently patted the hand that trembled on his arm. "I don't wonder that you are all shot to pieces," he assured her. "After last night, you've a right to be. But I really believe this is the safest spot we can find."

He stepped forward beyond the great stones that were like a gateway from one wildly impossible world to another. A rock slide, it seemed, had smoothed off the great steps from where they stood, for there was a descending slope that gave easy footing. He took one step, and then another, to show the girl how foolish were her fears; then he started back. In the fading light something had flashed from the jungle they had left. Across the rocky expanse it came, to bury itself in the loose soil and rubble, not

two paces in advance of the startled man. An arrow! —and it stood quivering in silent warning on the path ahead.

Chet quietly unslung his bow where he had looped it over one shoulder, but Harkness motioned him back. The pistol was in his hand, but after a moment's hesitation he returned that to his belt. His voice was low and tense.

"Listen," he said: "we're no match for them with our bows. They are hidden; they could pick us off as we came. And I can't waste a single detonite shell on them while they keep out of sight. We can't go back; we must go ahead. We will all make a break for it and run as fast as we can toward the big altar—the pyramid. From there we can stand them off for a while. And we will go now and take them by surprise."

He seized Diane firmly by one arm and steadied her as they dashed down the slope. Chet and the professor were close behind. Each spine must have tingled in anticipation of a shower of arrows. Chet threw one hasty look toward the rear; the air was clear; no slender shafts pursued them. But from the cover of the jungle growth came a peculiar sound, almost like a human in distress—a call like a moaning cry.

They slackened their breath-taking pace and approached the great pyramid more slowly. As they drew near, the great steps took on their real size; each block was taller even than Chet, and he had to reach above his head to touch the edge of the stone.

They walked quickly about; found a place where the great blocks were broken down, where the slope was littered with debris from the disintegrating stone that had sifted down from above. They could climb here; it was almost like a crudely formed set of more normally sized steps. They made their way upward while Chet counted the courses of stone. Six, then eight—ten—and here Harkness called a halt.

"This—will do," he gasped between labored breaths. "Safe enough here. Chet, you and Kreiss—spread out —watch from all—sides."

The pilot was not as badly winded as Harkness who bad been helping Diane. "Stay here," he told Harkness; "you too, Kreiss; make yourselves comfortable. I will go on up to the top. The moon—or the Earth, rather—will be up pretty soon; I can keep watch in all directions from up there. We've got to get some sleep; can't let whoever it is that is trailing us rob us of our rest or we'll soon be no good. I'll call you after a while."

The great capstone projected beyond the blocks that supported it; that much had been apparent from the ground. But Chet was amazed at the size of the monolith when he stood at last on the broad step over which this capstone projected like a roof.

The shadows were deep beneath, and Chet, knowing that he could never draw himself to the top of the great slab whose under side he could barely touch, knew also that he must watch from all sides. The shadowed floor beneath the big stone made a shelter from any watchful eyes out there in the night; here

would be his beat as sentry. He walked slowly to the side of the pyramid, then around toward the front.

It was the front to Chet because it faced the entrance, the rocky gateway, where they had come in. He did not expect to find that side in any way differing from the first. Each side was twenty paces in length; Chet measured them carefully, astounded still at the size of the structure.

"Carved by the winds and rains," he said, repeating the opinion of Professor Kreiss. "Now, I wonder.... It seems too regular, too much as if—" He paused in his thoughts as he reached the corner; waited to stare watchfully out into the night; turned the corner, and, still in shadow, moved on. "Too much as if nature had had some help!"

His meditation ended as abruptly as did his steady pacing: he was checked in midstride, one foot outstretched, while he struggled for balance and fought to keep from taking that forward step.

In the shelter of the capstone was a darker shadow; there was a blackness there that could mean only the opening of a cave—a cavern, whose regular outlines and square-cut portal dismissed for all time the thought of a natural opening in the rock. But it was not this alone that had brought the man up short in his stealthy stride: it had jolted him as if he had walked head on into the great monolith itself. It was not this but a flat platform before the cave, a raised stone surface some two feet above the floor. And on it, pale and unreal in the first light of the rising Earth was a naked, human form—a face that grimaced with distorted features.

Chet had known the ape-men on that earlier visit: he knew that while most of them were heavily covered with hair there were some who were almost human in their hairlessness. The body before him was one of these.

It lay limply across the stone platform, the listless head hanging downward over one edge. It had high cheekbones, a retreating forehead, glassy, staring eyes, and grinning teeth that projected from between loose lips. And the evening wind stirred the black, stringy hair while it touched lightly upon the ends of a short length of vine about the ape-man's neck, where only the ends could be seen, for the rest of the pliant vine was sunk deeply into the flesh of the neck. It had been the instrument of death; the ape-man had been strangled.

Chet tore his fascinated eyes from the revolting features of that purple face; he forced himself to look beyond at what else might be on this sacrificial stone. And, as he saw the assortment of fruit that was there on a green mat of leaves, the surprise was even greater than would have followed a repetition of the first discovery.

A naked, murdered man!—and ripe fruit! What was the meaning of this? Chet asked himself a score of questions and found the answer to none. But one thing he knew now beyond a doubt: Herr Professor Kreiss had been wrong. This was truly an altar for the performance of unknown and savage rites, and the altar itself and the whole encircling arena had been created by some intelligence. People—things—embodied intelligences of some sort had carved these stones. Chet was oppressed by a feeling of impending danger.

His thoughts came back sharply to the things on the stone: the absurdly contrasting exhibits: a naked body and fruit! But were they so different? he asked himself, and knew in the same instant that they were not. They were one and the same; they differed only in kind. They were both food!

From the darkness beyond came a shuffling of feet. From the black passage someone was coming—drawing near to the portal—and coming slowly, steadily through the dark. The pad of animal feet would have been unnerving—or the stealthy footfalls of an approaching savage—but this was neither; it was a scuffing, shuffling sound. The sweat stood out in beads on Chet's forehead and a trickle of it reached his eyes. He dashed it away with the back of his hand while he drew silently into the shadow of the overhanging stone. He held his breath as he watched in the darkness.

His pistol came noiselessly from his belt. Yet, how could he fire it? he asked himself in a moment of frantic planning. Only seven cartridges left!—they would need them all; and to fire now would bring more enemies upon them. He returned the gun to his belt and stooped to weigh a fragment of stone in his hand: this must serve him as a weapon.

The dragging footsteps were near, where the passage mouth loomed black. The light of a distant Earth, struck slantingly across to leave this face of the pyramid in half-darkness. From that far and peaceful world the light poured floodingly down; it shone in under the projecting capstone; it struck upon the raised altar and revealed in ghastliest detail the

gruesome offering there. And surely the strangest sight of all that that Earth-light disclosed was when it shone golden upon a black and hairy body of a beast that was half man, half ape. The creature moved slowly forward, walking erect, with its furry arms stretched gropingly ahead. In the full light it went shuffling on like one who is blind or who walks in the dark, until it stopped before the altar stone and stood rigidly waiting.

Waiting for what? Chet was making demands upon his reason that was already taxed beyond its capacity. He heard nothing, and he knew with entire certainty that there was no audible call, yet he sensed the message at the instant the ape-man moved.

"Flesh!" said the message. "Bring flesh! Bring it now!"

And, with glazed, wide-open eyes which plainly saw, but could not comprehend, the ape-thing stared at the altar-stone. It bent forward, took the fresh-killed body by the throat, and slung it across one shoulder as easily as a child might handle a doll; then it turned and vanished once more into the waiting dark.

"God!" breathed Chet when the vision had passed. "God help us! What does it mean?"

He took one backward step, then another, and made his way in silence along the path he had come. He must get back to the others to tell them of what he had seen; to help them to flee from this place of horror that was more terrible for its qualities of the

unknown.

He gave his companions the story in staccato sentences. "And the ape-man was unconscious," he concluded; "he was an automaton only, directed by another brain. I know it. I got that message, I tell you; it was radioed by someone or by something—sent direct to that big ape's brain.

"Now let's get out of here. Diane had it right when she said that the place was evil. But she didn't make it strong enough. It's foul with evil! It's damned! Come on, I'm leaving now!"

Chet's whispered words were uttered with all the emphasis that horror could instill. He knew that he spoke truth. But he could not know how mistaken was his last positive assertion.

"I'm leaving now!" Chet had said, and how desperately he wanted to put this place behind him only he himself could know. He took one step toward the place where they could descend; then Harkness' hand pulled him roughly to his knees.

"Down!" Harkness was commanding; "get down, Chet! They're coming—a swarm of them—through the gate!"

The pilot heard them before he saw them. They began a chant as they poured through the entrance, a weird, wailing note like the cry of a stricken animal that cries on and on. Then he saw the swarm.

They came in a cataract of black bodies that spilled through that stone portal and down the long slope.

They formed a ragged column on the ground and came on toward the pyramid, where, unseen, three men and a girl from another world were crouching.

"Back!" Chet ordered in a whisper. "Keep low—in the shadow! Get around in back of the pyramid. We can make a run for it!"

They crept swiftly along the rocky step where the deep angle was in shadow. They reached the rear slope where Chet had climbed. And each one knew without the speaking of a word that retreat was not to be considered. The open arena!—the high bank of great steps in their bold markings of black and white! They could never hope to scale them; they would never even reach them alive, for the savage horde would overwhelm them before they had crossed the Earth-lit ground.

"All right," said Chet in acceptance of their unspoken thoughts, "up it is! Here's a hand, Diane—up you go! Now watch your step, and climb as if a thousand devils were after you, for there's all of that!"

The wave of bodies was washing against the pyramid's base when Chet drew Kreiss, the last of the four, into the shadow of the huge capstone. The noise of their climbing had been covered by the wailing cry that came piercing shrilly from the throng far below. And they had been unseen, Chet was sure; unless the one furtive shadow that he had seen draw away from the crowd and slip around toward the rear of the pyramid meant that some one of the tribe had found their trail.

From the front of the shadowed top came the shuffling of heavy, dragging feet on the stone. It was the same as before. Chet had held some vague idea of fighting off the horde from the top of the steps, for here was the only place where they could ascend. He had forgotten this other one for the moment, and he realized in a single flashing instant that here was a worse menace than the pack.

Only one, it was true, one ape-man who would be no match for them! But Chet remembered those blind, staring eyes and the message that had come to him. Those eyes had seen the horrible food upon the altar; some other brain had seen it too. The ape-man was an instrument only; there was some hidden horror in back of him, something that saw with his eyes, something that must never see them, cowering and huddled in the shadow of that great stone.

The shuffling was coming from the right; Chet clutched silently at the others to draw them away and toward the left. They retreated to the corner, turned it, and went on toward the front; then stopped in silent waiting where the shadow ended. The front, where the altar stood, was in the full glare of Earth.

For the moment they were safe, but what of the time when the ape-man returned? He had descended to the ground; when he climbed back again would he retrace his steps? Or would he come this side and trap them here where the light of their own Earth made any forward step impossible?

Below them the wailing ceased. Chet leaned forward

to see the black horde, silent and motionless. Approaching them was the "big ape" he had seen at the altar. His hands were reaching blindly before him and he moved as would a human when entranced.

He reached the huddled blacks; his groping hands hovered hesitantly above a cowering, hairy form. Presently the ape-man passed on to the next, and his hands rested on the creature's face. From the massed figures there rose a moan, and Chet felt poignantly the animal misery of it. Suddenly all emotion was transformed to startled attention. From the slope at the rear had come the rattle of loose stones!

Far below, in plain view, was the one who had descended—Chet knew that his eyes could never mistake that blind, groping figure—but from the slope they could not see, from around the far edge of the pyramid, a clicking stone sent a repeated warning.

Chet laid a hand on Harkness' arm. "Get set, Walt!" he warned. "Get ready for trouble. There's something coming: it may come this way!"

CHAPTER XII

In the Shadow of the Pyramid

They waited, unbreathing, listening to the occasional stealthy sounds. The pistol was still in Chet's belt; the three men were crouched before Diane, in their hands the crude weapons that they had made.

And then the sounds ceased. The menace seemed to have passed, or to be withheld; the men had been tensely prepared for some minutes when Diane spoke softly.

"Look below," she whispered; "the savages! That big one seems to be choosing them—selecting some from among them."

Chet forced himself to look away from that corner of the rocky step where he had been expecting an unknown enemy to appear, and he stared below them where the Earth-light from the fully risen globe swept across the arena.

He was amazed at the numbers of the savages that the full light disclosed. There were hundreds—yes, thousands—of them, he estimated. And they were standing in black, clotted masses, standing awed and silent in a world that was all black and white in a dazzling contrast, while there passed among them one with outstretched arms.

The black, hairy hands would hover over a cowering head; the eyes, Chet knew, were staring widely, blindly, at the shivering creature before him. And if Chet's surmise was correct, there was another—a hidden, mysterious something—who was taking the message of those eyes as the ape-man's brain transmitted it; taking it and sending back instructions as to which victims should be selected.

Often the hands passed on; but soon they would descend to touch the savage face of another in the assemblage. At the touch the selected one jerked sharply erect, then walked stiffly from the ranks to join a group that was waiting.

At last there were nearly a hundred savage figures in that group, all grown men, young and in the full flood of their savage strength. No women were chosen, nor children, though there were countless little black bodies huddled with the others.

A prolific race, indeed, Chet thought, and this human automaton down there was leaving the women to produce more victims; leaving the children till they were fully grown, taking only the best and strongest of the pack—for what?

His question was answered in part in the next instant. While the wailing cry quivered again upon the air, the chosen hundred took up their somnambulistic walk. The messenger from the pyramid came after like a herdsman driving cattle to the slaughter. They passed from Chet's view as they rounded the rear of the pyramid, and then he heard the scuff and clatter of their ascent.

No need to explain to the others; each of the four saw all too clearly their predicament. From the rear, coming steadily on, was the savage throng; before them, plainly visible from below, was the lighted edge where the altar rock stood. To step out there in full view would bring the whole pack upon them; to drop down to another level would expose them as plainly. Only in the dark shelter of the projecting capstone were they hidden from the upturned faces now massed solidly about.

Their problem was solved for them by the sight of a savage body, black, ragged with unkempt tufts of hair—another!—a score of them! They were

rounding the corner of the pyramid and walking stiffly toward them, pressing upon them.

And the arrow on the drawn bow in Chet's hand was never loosed, for each savage face was wide-eyed and devoid of expression; the ape-men neither saw nor felt them. They were hypnotized, as Chet was suddenly aware; they knew only that they must follow the mental instructions that were guiding them on.

The black, animal bodies were upon them. Chet came from the stupefying wonder that had claimed them all and sprang to shield the group from the steady advance. Harkness was beside him, and an instant later, Kreiss; Diane was at their backs. And the weight of the advancing bodies swept them irresistibly backward, out into the light, along the wide step toward the passage that yawned darkly under the projecting cap.

There was no checking the avalanche of bodies—no resisting them: the men were carried along; it was all they could do to keep their footing. Harkness sprang backward to take Diane in his arms and retreat with her before the advancing horde. Chet was waiting for an outcry from below, for some indication that despite the mass of bodies that smothered them, their presence had been observed. But only the wailing cry persisted.

There was another advancing column that had circled the other side, and now both groups were meeting at the passageway. Chet gripped at the figure of Kreiss who was being swept helpless toward

the dark vault and he dragged him back. The two fought their way out toward the front and saw Harkness doing the same.

"The altar," gasped Chet; "up on the altar!" And he saw Harkness swing Diane up on the stone, then turn and extend a helping hand toward the two men.

Safe in the sanctuary of this altar dedicated to some deity that they could never imagine, they crouched close to its blood-clotted surface, and still there was no change in the cry from below.

"Let them all go in," Harkness whispered. "Then follow them into the shadow. There will no more come up here, I imagine. We will make our escape after a bit."

The black mouth of the passage had swallowed the ape-men by solid scores, and now only some stragglers were left. Harkness was speaking in quick, whispered orders:

"Follow the last ones. Keep stooped over so they won't spot us from below. Wait in the darkness of the entrance."

Chet saw him crouch low as he crept from the stone. Diane followed, then Kreiss; and Chet next, close behind a shambling ape-figure that slunk into the darkness of the passageway.

That it was a passage Chet had not the least doubt. It had taken in these scores of savage figures, taken them somewhere; but where it led or why these poor stunned creatures had been chosen he could not

know. Yet he remembered the one message he had caught: "Flesh! Bring flesh!" It had meant only one thing: it was food that was wanted—human food! And the fetid stench that was wafted from the darkness of this place of mystery and horror, that made him reel back and put a hand to his revolted lips, would not have encouraged him, even had he had any desire to learn the answer to the puzzle.

Diane was half-crouching; she was choking with the foul air. Harkness spoke gaspingly as he took her by the arm:

"Outside, for God's sake!... Horrible!... Get Diane outside—try lying down—we may be out of sight!"

But this time he did not follow his own instructions. He rose erect, instead, and stood swaying as if dazed; and Chet saw that before him, outlined against the lighted opening in the rock, was the messenger he had seen.

Black against the bright Earth-light, his features were lost; no expression could be seen. But his eyes, that were dead and white like the upturned belly of a fish, came suddenly to life. They glared from the dark face with a light that came almost visibly from them to the staring eyes of Walt Harkness. Chet saw Harkness stiffen, one upraised hand falling woodenly to his side; a cry of warning was strangled in his throat, and then the glaring eyes passed on to the face of Diane.

Chet had forgotten this messenger from the pyramid's hidden horror. If he had thought of him at all he had assumed that he had passed in with the other crowding ape-men; he was one like them, undistinguishable from the rest. And now the savage

figure was before them in terrifying reality.

The eyes passed on to Kreiss. Then the ugly face swung toward Chet, and, as their eyes met, it seemed to Chet that a blow had crashed stunningly upon his brain. He tried to move—he knew that he must move. He must reach for his bow, must leap upon this hulking brute and beat at the glaring eyes with his bare fists. And his muscles that he tried to rouse to action might have changed to stone, so unresponsive were they, and unmoving.

The hairy hands reached out and touched Harkness. They passed on and lingered upon the blanched features of the girl, and Chet raged inwardly at his inability to resist and her utter helplessness to draw away. Then Kreiss; and again Chet's turn. And, with the touching of those rough animal hands, he felt that a contact had been established with some distant force—a something that communicated with him, that sent thoughts which his brain phrased in words.

"Curious!" said those thoughts. "How exceedingly curious! We shall be interested in learning more. We shall learn all we can in one way and another of this new race. We shall dismember them slowly, all but the woman: we find her strangely attractive.... You will bring them to us at once."

And Chet knew that the instructions were for the messenger whose hands came stiffly upward to point the way; while, with a portion of his mind that was functioning freely, Chet raged as he saw Diane take the first stiff, involuntary step forward. Then

Harkness and Kreiss! and he knew that he too must follow, knew himself to be as helpless as the driven brutes he had seen herded down below. And then, with the same mind that was still able to comprehend the messages of his own eyes and ears, he knew that from behind the savage figure there had come a sound.

His senses were alert, sharpened to an abnormal degree; the almost silent footfall otherwise could never have been heard.

The raised hand swung toward him; he knew that he must turn and follow the others to whatever awaited.... But the hand paused! Then swiftly the savage figure swung to face toward the entrance, and those blazing eyes, as Chet knew, were a match for any opponent.

But the eyes never found what they looked for and the quick swing of the big ape-body was never completed. In the portal of light there was framed a naked figure which sprang as if from nowhere, squat, savage and ape-like, but hairless. Its arms were upraised; the hands held a bow; and the twang of the bowstring came as one with the ripping thud of a shaft that was tearing through flesh.

The savage fell in mid-turn; and it seemed as if the blazing light of the terrible eyes must have flicked out before the breath of Death. And, protruding from the thick neck, was the shaft of a crude arrow.... There were others that flashed, thudding and quivering, into the body that jerked with each impact, then lay still, a darker blot on the floor of a

dark cave.

Chet was breathless; it was an instant before he realized that he was free, that the hypnotic bonds that had bound him were loosed. It was another instant before he sensed that his companions were still marching—trudging stiffly, woodenly off through the dark. He bounded after, heedless of bruising walls; he followed where the sound of their scuffling feet marked their progress to a sure doom.

There were stairs; how he sensed them Chet could not have told. But he paused, hesitated a moment, then found the first step and half ran, half fell, through the utter darkness of the pit into which they had gone.

The odors that had seemed the utmost of vileness now came to him a hundred times worse. They tore at his throat with a strangling grip, and he was weak with nausea when he crashed upon a figure that he knew, was Kreiss. Then on, to grasp at Diane and Harkness; to drag them to a standstill in the darkness that pressed upon them smotheringly, while he shook them, beat at them, shouted their names.

"Diane! Walt! Wake up! Wake up, I tell you! We're going back!"

He swung them around; forced them to face about.

"Walt, for God's sake, wake up! Diane! Kreiss!" The deep, sobbing breath of Diane was the first encouraging response.

Then: "Free!" she gasped. "I'm free!" And Harkness

and Kreiss both mumbled incoherently as they came from their hypnotic stupor.

"How—" began Harkness, "how did you—" But Chet waited for no explanation of the seeming miracle that had just taken place.

"Go back," he told them, "—back up the steps!" And a babble of cries that were terrifying in their inhuman savagery welled up from the depths of the pyramid to urge them on.

The body of their captor was prone on the floor above: they stepped over it to reach the entrance. No figure showed there now; Chet stooped low and stepped forth cautiously that the surging horde on the ground might not see him. The others followed. He felt Harkness' hand in a sudden warning grip upon him.

"Chet!" said Harkness, "there is something there in the shadow—there!" And Chet saw, even before Walt pointed, a wriggling figure that crept toward them.

He struck down the bow that Kreiss had raised, and a ray of light came through a jagged niche in the rock above to fall upon the face of the one who drew near.

Abjectly, in utmost humility, the naked figure crept toward their feet, and the savage face that was raised to theirs was wreathed in a distorted smile.

Beside him, Chet felt Harkness struggling to speak. In wondering tones that were almost unbelieving, Harkness choked out one word.

"Towahg!" he said. "Towahg!"

And the thick lips in that upraised face echoed

proudly:

"Towahg! Me come!"

CHAPTER XIII

Happy Valley

"Towahg!" Chet marveled; "you little devil! It's you who has been following us all this time!"

"I wish he hadn't been so bashful," Harkness added. "If he had come out and showed himself he would have saved us a lot of trouble." But Harkness stepped forward and patted the black shoulder that quivered with joy beneath his touch. "Good boy, Towahg!" he told the grinning ape-man.

Monkey-like, Towahg had to imitate, and this time he gave a reproduction of his own acts. He wriggled toward the entrance of the passage, peered around the edge, and seemed to see something that made him draw back. Then he fitted an arrow to his bow and springing upright, let it fly.

So realistic was the performance that Chet actually expected to see another enemy transfixed, but the squat figure of Towahg was doing a dance of victory beside the prostrate figure of the first and only victim. Chet reached out with one long arm and swung the exulting savage about. He heard Herr Kreiss expressing his opinion in accents of disgust.

"Ugly little beast!" Kreiss was saying. "And

murderous!"

There was no time to lose: the sound of scrambling bodies was coming nearer from the dark pit beyond. Yet, even then, Chet found an instant to defend the black.

"Damned lucky for us that he is a murderer!" he told Kreiss. Then to Towahg:

"Listen, you little imp of hell! You don't know more than ten words, but get this!"

Chet was standing where the Earth-light struck upon him; he pointed into the dark where the sounds of pursuit grew loud, and he shook his head and screwed his features into an expression that was supposed to depict fear. "No! No!" he said.

He dragged the savage forward and pointed cautiously to the milling horde below, and repeated, "No! No!" Then he included them all in a wave of his hand and pointed back and out into the night. And Towahg's unlovely features were again twisted into what was for him a smile, as he grunted some unintelligible syllables and motioned them to follow.

It had taken but an instant. Towahg was scurrying in advance; he sped like a shadow of a passing cloud, and behind him the others followed, crouching low in the shelter of the deep-cut step. No figures were below them at the rear of the pyramid, and Chet reached for one of Diane's arms, while Harkness took the other. Between them they held her from falling while they followed the dark blur that was Towahg leaping noiselessly down the long slope.

No time for caution now. The savage ahead of them leaped silently; his flying feet hardly disturbed a stone. But beneath them, Chet felt a small landslide of rubble that came with them in their flight. And above the noise of their going came a sound that sped them on—the rising shout of wonder from the unseen multitude in front, and a chorus of animal cries from the pyramid's top.

Chet saw a blot of black figures at the top of the slope just as they felt firm ground beneath their feet. They followed where Towahg led in a swift race across the open arena toward the great steps at the rear. Black and white in strongly contrasting bands, the rock reared itself in a barrier that, to Chet, seemed hopelessly unsurmountable. He felt that they had come to the end of their tether.

"Trapped!" he told himself, and wondered at Towahg's leading them into such a cul-de-sac, even while he knew that retreat in other directions was cut off. The pursuit was gaining on them; savages from beyond the pyramid had sighted them now in the full light of Earth, and their yelping cry came mingled with hoarse growls as the full pack took the trail. Ahead of them, Towahg, reaching the base of the first white step, was dancing with excitement beside a narrow cleft in the rocks. He led the way through the small passage. And Harkness, bringing up the rear, took the detonite pistol in his hand.

"One shell! We'll have to waste it!" he said, and raised the weapon.

Its own explosion was slight, but the sound of the bursting cartridge when its grain of detonite struck the rocks made a thunderous noise as it echoed between the narrow walls.

"That will check the pursuit," Harkness exulted; "that will make them stop and think it over."

It was another hour before Towahg slackened his pace. He had led them through jungle that to them seemed impassable; had shown them the hidden trails and warned them against spiked plants whose darts were needle sharp. At last he led them to a splashing stream where they followed him through the trackless water for a mile or more.

The mountain with the white scar was their beacon. Harkness pointed it out to their guide and made him understand that that was where they would go.

And, when night was gone, and the first rays of the rising sun made a quickly changing kaleidoscope of the colorful east, they came at last to a barren height. Behind them was a maze of valleys and rolling hills; beyond these was a place of smoke, where red fires shone pale in the early light, and set off at one side was a shape whose cylindrical outline could be plainly seen. It caught the first light of the sun to reflect it in sparkling lines and glittering points, and every reflection came back to them tinged with pale green, by which they knew that the gas was still there.

Chet turned from a prospect that could only be depressing. His muscles were heavy with the poisons of utter fatigue; the others must be the same, but for the present they were safe, and they could find some position that they could defend. Towahg would be a valuable ally. And now their lives were ahead of them—lives of loneliness, of exile.

Harkness, too, had been staring back toward that ship that was their only link with their lost world; his eyes met Chet's in an exchange of glances that showed how similar were their thoughts. And then, at sound of a glad laugh from Diane, their looks of despair gave place to something more like shame, and Chet shifted his own eyes quickly away.

"It is beautiful, Walter," Diane was saying: "the lovely valley, the lake, the three mountain peaks like sentinels. It is marvelous. And we will be happy there, all of us, I know it.... Happy Valley. There—I've named it! Do you like the name, Walter?"

And Chet saw Harkness' reply in a quick pressure of his hand on one of Diane's. And he knew why Walt looked suddenly away without giving her an answer in words.

"Happy Valley!" Diane of all the four had shown the ability to rise above desperate physical weariness, above a despondent mood, to dare look ahead instead of backward and to find hope for happiness in the prospect.

Off at one side, Chet saw Kreiss; the scientist's weariness was forgotten while he ran like a puppy after a bird, in pursuit of a floating butterfly that drifted like a wind-blown flower. And Harkness, unspeaking, was still clinging to Diane's firm hand.... Yes, thought Chet, there was happiness to be found here. For himself, it would be more than a little lonesome. But, he reflected, what happiness was there in any place or thing more than the happiness we put there for ourselves?... Happy Valley—and why not? He dared to meet the girl's eyes now, and

the smile on his lips spread to his own eyes, as he echoed his thoughts:

"Why not?" he asked. "Happy Valley it is; we just didn't recognize it at first."

They came to the lake at last; its sparkling blue had drawn them from afar off: it was still lovelier as they came near. Here was the same steady west wind that had driven the gas upon their ship. But here it ruffled the velvet of waving grasses that swept down to the margin of the lake. There was a higher knoll that rose sharply from the shore, and back of all were forests of white-trunked trees.

Chet had seen none of the crimson buds, nor threatening tendrils since entering the valley. And Towahg confirmed his estimate of the valley's safety. He waved one naked arm in an all-inclusive gesture, and he drew upon his limited vocabulary to tell them of this place.

"Good!" he said, and waved his arm again. "Good! Good!"

"Towahg, you're a silver-tongued orator," Chet told him: "no one could have described it better. You're darned right; it's good."

He raised his head to take a deep breath of the fragrant air; it was intoxicating with its blending of spicy odors. At his feet the water made emerald waves, where the clear, deep blue of the reflected sky merged with yellow sand. Fish darted through the deeper pools where the beach shelved off, and above them the air held flashing colorful things that

circled and skimmed above the waves.

The rippling grass was so green, the sky and lake so intense a blue, and one mountainous mass of cloud shone in a white too blinding to be borne. And over it all flowed the warm, soft air that seemed vibrant with a life-force pulsing strongly through this virgin world.

Diane called from where she and Harkness had wandered through the lush grass. Kreiss had thrown himself upon a strip of warm sand and was oblivious to the beauties that surrounded him. Towahg was squatted like a half-human frog, binding new heads on his arrows.

"Chet," she called, "come over here and help me to exclaim over this beautiful place. Walter talks only of building a house and arranging a place that we can defend. He is so very practical."

"Practical!" exclaimed Chet. "Why, Walt's a dreamer and a poet compared to me. I'm thinking of food. Hey, Towahg," he called to the black, "let's eat!" He amplified this with unmistakable pointings at his mouth and suggestive rubbing of his stomach, and Towahg started off at a run toward trees that were heavy with strange fruit.

By night there were unmistakable signs that the hand of man had been at work. A band of savages would have accepted the place as they found it; for them the shelter of a rock would have sufficed. They would have passed on to other hunting grounds and only a handful of ashes and a broken branch,

perhaps, would have marked where they had been. But your civilized man is never satisfied.

Along the mile of shore was open ground. Here the trees approached the water: again their solid rampart of ghostly trunks was held back some hundreds of yards. And the open ground was vividly green where the soft grass waved; and it was matted, too, with crimson and gold of countless flowers. A beautiful carpet, flung down by the edge of a crystal lake, and the flowered covering swept up and over the one high knoll that touched the shore.... And on the knoll, near an outcrop of limestone rocks, was a house.

"Not exactly pretentious," Chet had admitted, "but we'll do better later on."

"It will keep Diane under cover," argued Harkness; "these leaves are like leather."

He helped Diane put another strip of leaf in place on the roof; a twist of green vine tied around the stem held it loosely.

The leaves were huge, as much as ten feet in diameter: great circles of leathery green that they cut with a pocket knife and "tailored" as Diane called it to fit the rough framework of the hut. Towahg had found them and had given them a name that they did not trouble to learn. "Towahg's grunts sound so much alike," Diane complained smilingly. "He seems to know his natural history, but he is difficult to understand."

But Towahg proved a valuable man. He cracked two

round stones together, and cleaved off one to a rounded edge. He bound this with withes to a short stick and in a few minutes had a serviceable stone ax that bit into slender saplings that were needed for a framework.

Chet nodded his head to call Kreiss' attention to that. "Herr Doktor," he said, "it isn't every scientist who has the chance to see a close-up of the stone age."

But Herr Kreiss, as Chet told Harkness later, did not seem to "snuggle up nice and friendly" to the grinning savage. "He is armed better than we," Kreiss complained. "I do not trust him. It is an impossible situation, this, that civilized men should be dependent upon one so savage. For what is our *kultur*, our great advancement in all lines of mental endeavor, if at the last, when tested by nature, we must rely upon such assistance?"

Chet saw Herr Doktor Kreiss draw himself aloof with meticulous care as Towahg dashed by, and it occurred to him that perhaps it was as well for Kreiss that the black one knew so little of what was said.

But aloud he merely said: "You'll have lots of chances to use that mental endeavor stuff later on, Doctor. But right now what we need to know is how to get by without any of your laboratories, without text books or tools, with just our bare hands and with brains that are geared up to the civilization you mention and don't do us a whole lot of good here. Better let Towahg show us what he knows."

But Herr Kreiss only shrugged his thin shoulders and wandered off through this research-man's paradise, where every flower and insect and stone were calling to him. Chet envied the equanimity with which the

man had accepted his lot, had come to this place and was prepared to spend his remaining years collecting scientific data that were to him all-important.

Again the sun sank swiftly. But this time, Chet stretched himself luxuriously upon the matted grass and turned to stare at the little fire that burned before the entrance of Diane's shelter. His pocket fireflash had kindled some dry sticks that burned without smoke.

"We will be a little careful about smoke," Harkness had warned them all. "No use of broadcasting the news of our being here. We have come a long way and I think there is small chance of Schwartzmann's party or the savages finding us in this spot."

Beyond the fire, Harkness raised himself now to sit erect and glance about the circle of fire-lit faces. "There's plenty of planning to be done," he said. "There is the matter of defense; we must build a barricade of some sort. As for shelter, we must remember that we will be here a long time and that we might as well face it. We will need to build some serviceable shelters. Then, what about clothes? These we are wearing are none the better for the trip through the jungle: they won't last forever. We've got to learn—Lord! we've got to learn so many things!"

And the first of many councils was begun.

CHAPTER XIV

A Bag of Green Gas

Under a tree on the edge of the open ground a notched stick hung. Six sharply cut V's showed red through the white bark, then one that was deeper; another six and another deeper cut; more of them until the stick was full: so passed the little days.

"Some time," Herr Kreiss had promised, "I shall determine with accuracy the length of our Dark Moon days; then we will convert these crude records into Earth time. It is good that we should not lose our knowledge of the days on Earth." He made a ceremony each morning of the cutting of another notch.

Chet, too, had a bit of daily routine that was never neglected. Each sunrise found him on the high divide; each morning he watched for the glint and sparkle of sunlight as it flashed from a metal ship; and each morning the reflected light came to him tinged with green, until he knew at last that it might never be different. The poisonous fumes filled the pocket at the end of the valley where the great ship rested. She was indeed at the bottom of a sea.

Back at camp were other signs of the passing days. Around the top of the knoll a palisade had sprung up. Stakes buried in the ground, with sharpened ends pointing up and outward, were interwoven with tough vines to make a barricade that would check any direct assault. And, within the enclosure, near the little hut that had been built for Diane, were other shelters. One black night of tropic rainstorm had taught the necessity for roofs that would protect

them from torrential downpours.

These did well enough for the present, these temporary shelters and defenses, and they had kept Diane and the two men working like mad when it was essential that they have something to do, something to think of, that they might not brood too long and deeply on their situation and the life of exile they were facing.

For Kreiss this was not necessary. In Herr Kreiss, it seemed, were the qualities of the stoic. They were exiled—that was a fact; Herr Kreiss accepted it and put it aside. For, about him, were countless things animate and inanimate of this new world, things which must be taken into his thin hands, examined, classified and catalogued in his mind.

In the rocky outcrop at the top of their knoll he had found a cave with which this rock seemed honeycombed. Here, within the shelter of the barricade, he had established what he called very seriously his "laboratory." And here he brought strange animals from the jungle—flying things that were more like bats than birds, yet colored gorgeously. Chet found him one day quietly exultant over a wrinkled piece of parchment. He was sharpening a quill into a pen, and a cup-shaped stone held some dark liquid that was evidently ink.

"So much data to record," he said. "There will be others who will follow us some day. Perhaps not during our lifetime, but they will come. These discoveries are mine; I must have the records for them.... And later I will make paper," he added as an

afterthought; "there is papyrus growing in the lake."

But on the whole, Kreiss kept strictly to himself. "He's a lone wolf," Chet told the others, "and now that he is bringing in those heavy loads of metals he is more exclusive than ever: won't let me into the back end of his cave."

"Does he think we will steal his gold?" Harkness asked moodily. "What good is gold to us here?"

"He may have gold," Chet informed him, "but he has something more valuable too. I saw some chunks that glowed in the dark. Rotten with radium, he told me. But even so, he is welcome to it: we can't use it. No, I don't think he suspects us of wanting his trophies; he's merely the kind that flocks by himself. He was having a wonderful time today pounding out some of his metals with a stone hammer; I heard him at it all day. He seems to have settled down in that cave for keeps."

Harkness threw another stick across the fire; its warmth was unneeded, but its dancing flames were cheering.

"And that is something we must make up our minds about," he said slowly: "are we to stay here, or should we move on?"

He dropped to the ground near where Diane was sitting, and took one of her hands in his.

"Diane and I plan to 'set up housekeeping,'" he told Chet, and Chet saw him smile whimsically at the words. Housekeeping on the Dark Moon would be

primitive indeed. "We are lacking in some of the customary features of a wedding; we seem to be just out of ministers or civil officials to tie the knot."

"Elect me Mayor of Dianeville," Chet suggested with a grin, "and I'll marry you—if you think those formalities are necessary here."

Diane broke in. "It's foolish of me, Chet, I know it; but don't laugh at me." He saw her lips tremble for an instant. "You see, we're so far away from—from everything, and it seems that that if Walter and I could just start our lives with a really and truly marriage—oh, I know it is foolish—"

This time Chet interrupted. "After all you have been through, and after the bravery you've shown, I think you are entitled to a little 'foolishness.' And you *shall* be married with as good a knot as any minister could tie: you see, that is one of the advantages of being a Master Pilot. My warrant permits me to perform a marriage service in any level above the surface of the Earth. A left-over from the time when ship's captains had the same right. And although we are grounded for keeps, if we are not above the surface of the Earth right now I don't know anything about altitudes. But," he added as if it were an afterthought, "my fee, although I hate to mention it, is five dollars."

Harkness gravely reached into the pocket of his ragged coat and brought out a wallet. He tendered a five dollar bill to Chet. "I think you're robbing me," he complained, "but that's what happens when there is no competition. And we'll start building a house

to-morrow."

"Will we?" Chet inquired. "Is this the best place? For my part I would feel safer if there were more miles between us and that pyramid. What was down in there, God knows. But there was something back of that hypnotized ape—something that knocked us for a crash landing with one look from those eyes."

The night air was warm, where he lay before their huts, but a shiver of apprehension gripped him at the thought of a mysterious Something that was beyond the power of his imagination, and that was an enemy they would never want to face. Something inhuman in its cold brutality, yet superhuman too, if this mental force were an indication. A something different from anything the people of Earth had ever known, bestial and damnable!

"I am with you on that," Harkness agreed, "but what about the ship? You have had your eye on it every day; do we want to go where we could not see it? If the gas cleared, if there was ever a season when the wind changed, think of what that would mean. Ammunition, food, supplies of all kinds, and the ship as a place of refuge, too, would be lost. No, we can't turn that over to Schwartzmann, Chet; we've got to stick around."

"I still wish we were farther away," Chet acknowledged, "but you are right, Walt; we could never be satisfied a single day if we thought the ship could be reached. Then, too, Towahg seems to think this is O. K.

"As near as I can learn from his sign language and a dozen words, this is about as good a spot as we can find. He says the ape-men never cross the big divide;

something spooky about it I judged. However, we must remember this: the fact that Towahg came across shows that the rest of them would if they found it could be done."

"That was why he led us so far while we waded up that stream," offered Diane. "Trailing Towahg would be like trying to follow the wake of an airship."

"And I asked him about the red vampires that jumped us down by the ship," Chet continued. "He gave me the clear sign on that, too."

Diane was not anxious for more wanderings, as Chet could see. "There is game here," she suggested, "and the edge of the jungle is simply an orchard of fruit, as you know. And having a lake to bathe in is important—oh, I must not try to influence you. We must do what is best."

"No," said Chet, "our own wishes don't count; the ship's the deciding factor. You had better build your house here, Walt. Happy Valley will be headquarters for the expedition; we've got a whale of a lot of country to explore. And, of course, we will slip back and check up on Schwartzmann; find out where he went to—"

"Count me out;" Harkness interrupted; "count me out. You go and hunt trouble if you want to; Diane and I will have our hands full right here. Great heavens, man! We've got to learn to make clothes; and, by the way, that uniform you're wearing is no credit to your tailor. If we are to call this home, we must do better than the savages. I intend to find some bamboo, split

it, make some troughs, and bring water down here from the spring. I've got to learn where Kreiss is getting his metal and find some soft enough to hammer into dishes. We can't call the department store by radiophone, you know, and have them shoot a bunch of stuff out by pneumatic tube."

"That's all right," Chet mocked; "by the time you have built a house with only a stone ax in your tool kit, you'll think the rest of it is simple."

The barricade, or *chevaux de frise* as Chet insisted upon calling it, to show his deep study of the wars of earlier days, was built in the form of a U. The knoll itself sloped on one side directly to the water's edge: they had left that side open and carried their line of sharp stakes down to the water, that in the event of a siege they would not be conquered by thirst.

On the highest point of the knoll, some few weeks later, a house was being built—a more pretentious structure, this, than the other little huts. The aerial roots that the white trees dropped from their high-flung branches were not impossible to cut with their crude implements; they made good building material for a house whose framework must be tied together with vines and tough roots. This would be the home of Harkness and Diane.

The two had been insistent that this structure would be incomplete without a room for Chet, but the pilot only laughed at that suggestion.

"It's an old saying," he told them, "that one house isn't big enough for two families. I think the remark

is as old as the institution of marriage, just about. And it's as true on the Dark Moon as it is on Earth. And, besides, I intend to build some bachelor apartments that will make this place of yours look pretty cheap, that is, if I ever find time. I am going to be pretty busy just roaming around this little world seeing what I can see. Even Herr Kreiss has got the wanderlust, you will notice."

"He has been gone four days," said Diane. Her tone was frankly worried. Chet finished tying a sapling to a row of uprights and slid to the ground.

"Don't be alarmed about Kreiss," he reassured her. "He has been all-fired mysterious for the past several weeks. He's been working on something in that cave of his, and visitors have not been admitted. When he left he told me he would be gone for some time, and he looked at me like an owl when he said it: his mysterious secret was making his eyes pop out. He has a surprise up his sleeve."

"Wedding present for Diane," Harkness suggested.

"Well, he showed me some darn nice sapphires," Chet agreed. "Probably found some way to cut them and he's setting them in a bracelet of soft gold: that's my guess."

"I wish he were here," Diane insisted.

And Chet nodded across the clearing as he said fervently: "I wish I could get all my wishes as quickly as that. There he comes now with his bow in one hand and a bag of something in the other."

The tall figure moved wearily across the open ground, but straightened and came briskly toward them as he drew near. He seemed more gaunt than usual, as if he had finished a long journey and had slept but little. But his eyes behind their heavy spectacles were big with pride.

"You have—what do you Americans say?—'poked fun' at my helplessness in the forest," he told Chet. "And now see. Alone and without help I have made a great journey, a most important journey." He held up a bladder, translucent, filled with something palely green.

"The gas!" he said proudly.

"Why, Herr Kreiss," Diane exclaimed, amazed, "you can't mean that you've been to Fire Valley; that that is the gas from about the ship!... And why did you want it? What earthly use...."

She had looked from the proud face of the scientist to that of Harkness; then turned toward Chet. Her voice died away, her question unfinished, at sight of the expression in those other eyes.

"From—the ship? You mean that you've been there—Fire Valley? That you've come back here?" Chet was asking on behalf of Harkness as well: his companion added nothing to the words of the pilot—words spoken in a curiously quiet, strained tone.

"But yes!" Herr Kreiss assured him. His gaze was still proudly fixed upon the bladder of green gas. "I needed some for an experiment—a most important experiment." And not till then did he glance up and

let his thin face wrinkle in amazed wonder at the look on the pilot's face.

Chet had raised one end of another stick as Kreiss approached. He had intended to place it against the frame they were building: it fell heavily to the ground instead. He regarded Harkness with eyes that were somber with hopeless despair, yet that somehow crinkled with a whimsical smile.

"Well, I said he had a surprise up his sleeve," he reminded them. "It is nearly night; I can't do anything now. I'll go to-morrow; take Towahg. I don't know that there's anything we can do, but we'll try.

"You will stay here with Diane," he told Harkness. And Harkness accepted the order as he would from one who was in command.

"It's up to you now," he told Chet. "I'll stay here and hold the fort. You're running the job from now on."

But the pilot only nodded. Herr Kreiss was sputtering a barrage of how's and why's; he demanded to know why his success in so hazardous a trip should have this result.

But Chet Bullard did not answer. He walked slowly away, his eyes on the ground, as one who is trying to plan; driving his thoughts in an effort to find some escape from a danger that seemed to hover threateningly.

CHAPTER XV

Terrors of the Jungle

Towahg had learned the names of these white-skinned ones who came down from whatever heaven was pictured in his rudimentary mind. His pronunciation of them was peculiar: it had not been helped any by reason of Diane's having been his teacher. Her French accent was delightful to hear, but not helpful to a Dark Moon ape-man who was grappling with English.

But he knew them by name, using always the French "Monsieur," and when Chet repeated: "Monsieur Kreiss—he go," pointing through the jungle, and followed this with the command: "Towahg go! Me go!" the ape-man's unlovely face drew into its hideous grin and he nodded his head violently to show that he understood.

Chet gripped a hand each if Harkness and Diane and clung to them for a moment. Below their knoll the white morning mist drifted eerily toward the lake; the knoll was an island and they three the only living creatures in a living world. It was the first division of their little force, the first parting where any such farewell might be the last. The silence hung heavily about them.

"Au 'voir," Diane said softly; "and take no chances. Come back here and we'll win or lose together."

"Blue skies," was Walt Harkness' good-by in the language of the flyer; "blue skies and happy landings!"

And Chet, before the shrouding mist swallowed him up, replied in kind.

"Lifting off!" he announced as if his ship were rising beneath him, "and the air is cleared. I'll drop back in four days if I'm lucky."

Towahg was waiting, curled up for warmth in the hollow of a great tree's roots. Like all the ape-men he was sullen and taciturn in the chill of the morning. Not until the sun warmed him would he become his customary self. But he grunted when Chet repeated his instructions, "Monsieur Kreiss, he go! Now Towahg go too—go where Monsieur Kreiss go!" and he led the way into the jungle where the scientist had emerged.

Chet followed close through wraith-like, drifting mist. They were ascending a gentle slope; among the trees and tangled giant vines the mist grew thin. Then they were above it, and occasional shafts of golden light shot flatly in to mark the ascending sun.

They were climbing toward the big divide, that much Chet knew. White, ghostly trees gave place to the darker, gloomier growth of the uplands. Strange monstrosities, they had been to Chet when first he had seen them, but he was accustomed to them now and passed unnoticing among their rubbery trunks, so black and shining with morning dew.

Far above a wind moved among the pliant branches that whipped and whirled their elastic lengths into strange, curled forms. Then the miracle of the daily growth of leaves took place, and the rubbery limbs

were clothed in green, where golden flowers budded prodigiously before they flashed open and filled the wet air with their fragrance.

They were following the path that Chet had traveled on his morning trips to the divide for a view of the ship. Kreiss would have gone this way, of course, although to Chet, there was no sign of his having passed. Then came the divide, and still Chet followed where Towahg led sullenly across the expanse of barren rocks. Towahg's head was sunk between his black shoulders; his long arms hung limply; and he moved on with a steady motion of his short, heavily muscled legs, with apparently no thought of where he went or why.

Chet stopped for a moment's look at the distant sparkle that meant the shining ship, which shone green as on every other day, and he wondered as he had a score of times if it might be possible for them to make a suit—a bag to enclose his head, or a gas-mask—anything that could be made gas-tight: and could be supplied with air. Then he thought of the bow that was slung on his shoulder and the stone ax at his belt. These were their implements: these were all they had.... Suddenly he began to walk rapidly down the slope after Towahg who was almost to the trees.

Again they were among the black rubbery growth. It rose from a tangle of mammoth leafed vines and creepers that wove themselves into an impassable wall—impassable until Towahg lifted a huge leaf here, swung a hanging vine there, and laid open a passage through the living labyrinth.

"How did Kreiss ever find his way?" Chet asked himself. And then he questioned: "Did he come this way? Is Towahg on the trail?"

Again he repeated his instructions to the ape-man, and he showed his own wonder as to which way they should go.

The sun must have done its work effectively, for now Towahg's wide grin was in evidence. He nodded vigorously, then dropped to one knee and motioned for Chet to see for himself, as he pointed to his proof.

Chet stared at the unbroken ground. Was a tiny leaf crushed? It might have been, but so were a thousand others that had fallen from above. He shook his head, and Towahg could only show his elation by hopping ludicrously from one foot to the other in a dance of joy.

Then he went on at a pace Chet found difficulty in following, until they came to a place where Towahg tore a vine aside to show easier going, but climbed instead over a fallen tree, grown thickly with vines, and here even Chet could see that other feet had tripped and stumbled. The Master Pilot glanced at the triple star still pinned to his blouse; he thought of the study and training that had preceded the conferring of that rating, the charting of the stars, navigational problems in a three-dimensional sea. And he smiled at his failure to read this trail that to Towahg was entirely plain.

"Every man to his job," he told the black, and patted him on the shoulder, "and you know yours, Towahg,

you're good! Now, where do we sleep?"

He ventured to suggest a bed of leaves that had gathered amongst a maze of great rocks, but Towahg registered violent disapproval. He pointed to a pendant vine; his hands that were clumsy at so many things gave an unmistakable imitation of a bud that developed on that vine and opened. Then Towahg sniffed once at that imaginary flower, and his body went suddenly limp and apparently lifeless as it fell to the ground.

"You're right, old top!" Chet assured him, as Towahg came again to his feet. "This is no place to take a nap." A crashing of some enormous body that tore the tough jungle in its rush came from beyond the rocks.

"And there are other reasons," he added as he followed Towahg's example and leaped for a hanging tangle of laced vines. Here was a ladder ready to take them to the high roof above, but they did not need it; the crashing died away in the distance.

It was Chet's first intimation that this section of the Dark Moon held beasts more huge than the "Moon-pigs" he had killed: it was a disturbing bit of knowledge. He caught Towahg's cautious, wary eyes and motioned toward the branches high overhead.

"How about hanging ourselves up there for the night?" he asked, and the gestures, though not the words, were plain, as the ape-man's quick dissent made clear.

He motioned Chet to follow. Down they plunged, and

always down. Towahg gave Chet to understand that Kreiss had slept some distance beyond: they would try to reach the same place. But the quick-falling dusk caught them while yet among the black rubbery trees. And the dark showed Chet why their branches might not be inviting as a sleeping place.

By ones and twos they came at first, occasional lines of light that flowed swiftly and vanished through the black tangle of limbs. Chet could hardly believe them real; they appeared and were lost from sight as if they had melted.

But more came, and it seemed at last as if the roof above were alive with light. The moving, luminous things glowed in hues that were never still: were pure gold, were green, then red, melting and changing through all the colors of the spectrum.

Living fireworks that were a blaze of gorgeous beauty! They wove an ever-moving canopy of softest lights that raced dazzlingly to and fro, that crossed and intertwined; that were dazing to his eyes while they held his senses enthralled by their color and sheer loveliness ... until one light detached itself and fell toward him where he stood spellbound beside a giant fern.

It struck softly behind him, and its crimson glory flashed yellow as it struck, then went black and in the dim light, on a great leathery leaf with a spread of ten feet, Chet saw an enormous worm, whose head was a thing of writhing antennae, whose eyes were pure deadliness, and whose round corrugated body drew up the hanging part that the leaf could not hold. It hunched itself into a huge inverted U and, before Chet could recover from his horrified surprise, was poised to spring.

It was Towahg's strength, not his own, that threw him bodily down the path. It was Towahg who poured a volley of grunted words and shrieks into his ear, while he dragged him back. Chet saw the vicious head flash to loveliest gold while it shot forward to the body's full twelve feet of length—twelve feet of pulsing lavender and rose and flashing crimson that was more horrible by reason of its beauty.

Chet stumbled to his feet and raced after Towahg. The ape-man moved in swift silence, Chet close at his back. And other luminous horrors dropped on ropes of translucent silver behind them, until the ghostly white of friendly trees became visible, and they stood at last, breathless and shaken, as far as Chet was concerned, in the familiar jungle of the lower valleys.

And Towahg, to whom poison vines and writhing, horrible worms of death that had failed to make him their prey were things of a forgotten past, curled up in the shelter of an outflung snarl of great roots, grunted once, and went calmly to sleep.

But Chet Bullard, accustomed only to man-made dangers that would have held Towahg petrified with fear, lay long, staring into the dark.

CHAPTER XVI

Through Air and Water

It was midday when they approached the heights they had reached on their flight from Fire Valley. Off

to one side must lie the arena with the pyramid within. And within the pyramid—! Chet took his thoughts quickly away from that. Or perhaps it was the shrieking chatter from ahead that gave him other things to think of.

Towahg had heard them before, but Chet had not understood his signs. And now the chorus of an approaching pack of ape-men was louder with each passing minute. That they were coming along the same trail seemed certain.

Towahg sprang into the air; his gnarled hands closed on a heavy vine: he went up this hand over hand, ready to move off to one side through the leafy roof with never a sign of his going. He waited impatiently for Chet to join him, and the pilot, regarding the incredible leap of that squat ape-man body, shook his head in despair.

"Grab a loose end," he told Towahg. "Lower a rope—a vine. Get it down where I can reach it!" And he raved inwardly at the blank look on the savage face while he held himself in check and made signs over and over in an effort to get the idea across.

Towahg got it at last. He lowered a vine and hauled Chet up with jerks that almost tore the pilot's hands from their hold on the rough bark. Then off to one side! And they waited in the shelter of concealing leaves while the yelling pack drew near and a hundred or more of them raced by along the trail below.

Invisible to Chet was the marked trail where Kreiss had gone, but these savage things ran at top speed and read it as they ran.

Were they puzzled by the sudden increase in markings? Did they sense that some were more recent than those they had followed? Chet could not say. But he saw the pack return, staring curiously about until they swung off and vanished through the trees toward the west. And in that direction lay the arena and the haunt of a horror unknown.

Yet Chet lowered himself to the ground with steady hands and motioned Towahg where the yelling mob had gone.

"We'll go that way," he said; "we'll follow them up. And perhaps, if I can only get the idea into your thick head, we can learn what their plans are: find out if Kreiss has really thrown us in their hands—led them as straight as a pack of wolves could run to the quiet peace of Happy Valley."

Chet might have followed them into the arena itself: he felt so keenly that he must know with certainty whether or not the pack would continue their pursuit. And why had they turned back? he asked himself. Had they returned to acquaint their horrible god and his hypnotised slaves with what they had learned?

But the trail turned off from the rocky waste where the arena lay; it took them west and south for another mile, until again to Chet's ears came the chattering bedlam of monkey-talk that was almost human. And now they moved more cautiously from rock to tree and through the concealing shadows until they could look into a shallow valley ahead. But before Chet looked he was prepared for a surprising

scene. For over and above the raucous calling of the ape-folk had come another deeper tone.

"*Gott im Himmel!*" the deep voice said. "One at a time, you *verdammt* beasts. Beat them on the head, Max; make them shut up!"

And the big bulk of Schwartzmann, when Chet first saw him, was seated on a high rock that was like a barbaric throne in a valley of green. About him the ape-men leaped and grimaced and made futile animal efforts to tell him of their discovery.

"They've found something, Max," Schwartzmann said to his pilot. "Get the other two men. We'll go with the dirty brutes. And if they've got wind of those others—" His remarks concluded with a sputtering of profanity whose nature was not obscured by its being given in another language. And Chet knew that the obscenities were intended for his companions and himself.

Schwartzmann's booming voice came plainly even above the chorus of coughing growls and shriller chatter. Chet saw him showing his detonite pistol in a half-threatening motion, and the ape-men cringed away in fear.

"Not so well trained an army, Max, that I am general of, but if we find that man, Harkness, and his pilot and that traitor Kreiss, we will let these soldiers of mine tear them to little bits. Now, we go!"

Max's call had brought the other two men of Schwartzmann's party, and the black horde of ape-men broke into a wild run across the grass toward the place where Chet and Towahg lay. The two slipped hurriedly into the concealment of denser

growth, then ran at top speed down a jungle trail that led off to one side.

They were bedded down for the night on the edge of the white forest; no persuasion of Schwartzmann's would have driven the ape-men into the darkness of the black trees and their flashing, luminous worm-beasts. Chet and Towahg came within hearing of their encampment just at dusk, and a late-rising moon broke through the gaps in the leafy roof to make splotched islands of gold in the velvet dark where Chet and Towahg fought the jungle so they might swing around and past the camp. Occasional grunts and scufflings showed that the ape-men were restless, and the two knew that every step must be taken in silence and every obstructing leaf moved with no rasping friction on other leaves or branches. But they came again to the trail, and now they were ahead of the pack, as the first gray light of dawn was stealing through the ghostly white of the trees.

Towahg would have curled himself into a sleepy ball a score of times had Chet not driven him on, and now the pilot only allowed a few minutes for food, where ripe purple fruit hung in clusters on the end of stems that were like ropes.

No use to explain to Towahg. Perhaps the ape-man thought they were hurrying to get through the black forest; he might even have thought the matter through to see the necessity for reaching their own valley and warning the others. Certainly he had no idea of any plans other than these, and he must have been puzzled some several hours later when Chet halted where the trail had crossed a barren expanse

of rock.

Towahg had stopped there on the way down. Then he had sniffed the air, dropped his head low and circled about, motioning Chet to follow, from across the clearing where he had picked up the trail. Chet knew the ape-men would do the same unless they were diverted, and he had a plan. To communicate it to his assistant was his greatest problem.

He stopped at the clearing, while Towahg urged him on across the smooth rock. Chet shook his head and pointed away from the direction of the big divide, and at last he made him understand. Then Towahg did what Chet never could have done.

He followed their former trail across the stone, his head close to the ground. Now he picked a bruised leaf: again he replaced a turned stone whose markings showed it had been displaced, and he came back over an area that even an ape-man would not follow as being a place where men had gone.

From where they emerged he turned as Chet had pointed, crossed the clearing as clumsily as the German scientist might have done, scuffed his bare feet in a pocket of gravel, and pointed to soft earth where Chet might walk and leave a mark of shoes. Chet grinned happily while Towahg did his grotesque dance that indicated satisfaction, though from afar the first cries of the pack rang in the air.

They could never have outdistanced the apes alone, Chet knew that. But he also knew that Schwartzmann and the others would slow them up,

and he counted on the pack staying together on the trail as they traversed this new country. He entered the jungle with Towahg where their new trail led, and drove his tired muscles to greater speed while Towahg, always in the lead, motioned him on.

There were stops for food at times until another night came, and Chet threw himself down on a mat of grass and fell instantly asleep. If there was danger abroad he neither knew nor cared. He knew only that every muscle of his body was aching from the forced march, and that Towahg's twitching ears were on guard.

The following day they went more slowly, stopping at times to wait for the sounds of pursuit. They were leading the pack on a long journey; Chet wanted to be sure they were following and had not turned back. He left a plain mark of his boot from time to time, and knew that this mark would be shown to Schwartzmann. With that to lead him there would be no stopping the man: he would drive his army of blacks despite their superstitious fears.

The short days and nights formed an endless succession to Chet. Only once did he see a familiar place, as they passed a valley and he saw where their ship had rested on that earlier voyage.

"This is far enough," he told Towahg, and made himself plain with signs. "Now we'll lose them; hang them right up in the air and leave them there."

Another steep climb and a valley beyond, and in the hollow a tumbling stream. There was no need to tell Towahg what to do, for he led straight for the water, and his thick legs churned through it as he headed down stream; nor did he stop until they had covered

many miles.

Chet had wondered how they would leave the water without trace, but again Towahg was ready. A stone where the water splashed would show no mark of bare feet. From it he leaped into the air toward a swaying vine. He missed, tried again, and finally grasped it. And the rest was a repetition of what had been done before.

He lowered a vine as Chet had taught him, pulled the slim figure of Chet up to the dizzy heights of the jungle trees, then took Chet's one arm in a grip of chilled steel and threw him across his back, while he swung sickeningly from limb to limb, up through the branches of another grotesque tree where its queerly distorted limbs sagged and swung them to its fellow some fifty feet away.

It was a wild ride for the pilot. "I've driven everything that's made with an engine in it," he told himself, "but this one-ape-power craft has them all stopped for thrills."

And at last when even Towahg's chest that seemed ribbed with steel, was rising and falling with his great breaths, Chet found himself set down on the ground, and he patted the black on the shoulder in the gesture that meant approval.

"Water and air," he said; "it'll bother them to trail us over that route. Towahg, you're there when it comes to trapeze work. Now, if you can find the way back again—!"

And Towahg could, as Chet admitted when, after a

series of eventless days, they came again to the big divide above the reaches of Happy Valley.

And the grip of Harkness' hand, and the tears in Diane's eyes brought a choke to his throat until the voluble apologies of a penitent Herr Kreiss and the antics of a Towahg, recipient of many approving pats, turned the emotion into the safer channel of laughter.

"But I think we switched them off for good," Chet said, in conclusion of his recital; "I believe we are as safe as we ever were. And I've only one big regret:

"If I could just have been around somewhere when friend Schwartzmann found his scouts had led him up a blind alley, it would have been worth the trip. He did pretty well when he started cussing us out before; I'll bet he pumped his vocabulary dry on them this time."

CHAPTER XVII

Hunted Down

Work on the house was resumed. "And when it is done," said Diane with a gay laugh, "Walter and I shall have our wedding day. Now you see why you were wanted so badly, Chet; it was not that we worried for you, but only that we feared the loss of the one person on the Dark Moon who could perform a marriage ceremony."

"And I thought all along it was my clever carpenter work that had captivated you," responded Chet, and tried to fit the splintered end of a timber into a forked branch that made an upright post.

And each day the house took form, while the sun shone down with tropical warmth where the work was going on.

Only Harkness and Chet were the builders. Diane's strength was not equal to the task of cutting tough wood with a crude stone ax, and Herr Kreiss, though willing enough to help when asked, was usually in his own cave, busied with mysterious experiments of which he would tell nothing.

Towahg, their only remaining Helper, could not be held. Too wild for restraint of any kind, he would vanish into the jungle at break of day to reappear now and then as silently as a black shadow. But he kept them all supplied with game and fruit and succulent roots which his wilder brethren of the forest must have shown him were fit for food.

And then came an interruption that checked the work on the house, that drained the brilliant sunshine of its warmth and light, and turned all thoughts to the question of defense.

The two had been working on the roof, while Diane had returned to the jungle for another of the big leaves. She carried her bow on such trips, although the weeks had brought them a sense of security. But for Chet this feeling of safety vanished in the instant that he heard Harkness' half-uttered exclamation and saw him drop quickly to the ground.

Beyond him, coming through the green smother of grass that was now as high as her waist, was Diane. Even at a distance Chet could see the unnatural paleness of her face; she was running fast, coming along the trail they had all helped to make.

Chet hit the ground on all fours and reached for the long bow with which he had become so expert; then followed Harkness who was racing to meet the girl.

"An ape!" she was saying between choking breaths when Chet reached them. "An ape-man!" She was clinging to Harkness in utter fright that was unlike the Diane he had known.

"Towahg," Harkness suggested; "you saw Towahg!" But the girl shook her head. She was recovering something of her normal poise; her breath came more evenly.

"No! It was not Towahg. I saw it. I was hidden under the big leaves. It was an ape-man. He came swinging along through the branches of the trees: he was up high and he looked in all directions. I ran. I think he did not see me.

"And now," she confessed, "I am ashamed. I thought I had forgotten the horror of that experience, but this brought it all back.... There! I am all right now."

Harkness held her tenderly close. "Frightened," he reassured her, "and no wonder! That night on the pyramid left its mark on us all. Now, come; come quietly."

He was leading the girl toward the knoll that they all called home. Chet followed, casting frequent glances toward the trees. They had covered half the distance to the barricade when Chet spoke in a voice that was

half a whisper in its hushed tenseness.

"Drop—quick!" he ordered. "Get into the grass. It's coming. Now let's see what it is."

He knew that the others had taken cover. For himself, he had flung his lanky figure into the tall grass. The bow was beside him, an arrow ready; and the tip of polished bone and the feathered shaft made it a weapon that was not one to be disregarded. Long hours of practice had developed his natural aptitude into real skill. Before him, he parted the tall grass cautiously to see the forest whence the sound had come.

The swish of leaves had warned Chet; some far-flung branch must have failed to bear the big beast's weight and had bent to swing him to the ground—or perhaps the descent was intentional.

And now there was silence, the silence of noonday that is so filled with unheard summer sounds. A foot above Chet's head a tiny bat-winged bird rocked and tilted on vermilion leather wings, while its iridescent head made flickering rainbow colors with the vibrations of a throat that hummed a steady call. Across the meadow were countless other flashing, humming things, like dust specks dancing in the sun, but magnified and intensely colored.

Above their droning note was the shrill cry of the insects that spent their days in idle and ceaseless unmusical scrapings. They inhabited the shadowed zone along the forest edge. And now, where the foliage of the towering trees was torn back in a great

arch, the insect shrilling ceased.

As the strings of a harp are damped and silenced in unison, their myriad voices ended that shrill note in the same instant. The silence spread; there was a hush as if all living things were mute in dread expectancy of something as yet unseen.

Chet was watching that arched opening. In one instant, except for the flickering shadows, it was empty; the place was so still it might have been lifeless since the dawn of time. And then—

Chet neither saw nor heard him come. He was there —a hulking hairy figure that came in absolute silence despite his huge weight.

An ape-man larger than any Chet had seen: he stood as motionless as an exhibit in a museum in some city of a far-off Earth. Only the white of his eyeballs moved as the little eyes, under their beetling black brows, darted swiftly about.

"Bad!" thought Chet. "Damn bad!" If this was an advance scout for a pick of great monsters like himself it meant an assault their own little force could never meet. And this newcomer was hostile. There was not the least doubt of that.

Chet reached one hand behind him to motion for silence; one of his companions had stirred, had moved the grass in a ripple that was not that of the wind. Chet held his hand rigid in air, his whole body seeming to freeze with a premonition that was pure horror; and within him was a voice that said with dreadful certainty: "They have found you. They have

hunted you down."

For the thing in the forest, the creature half-human, half-beast, had raised its two shaggy arms before it; and, with eyes fixed and staring, it was walking straight toward them, walking as no other living thing had walked, but one. Chet was seeing again that one—a helplessly hypnotized ape that appeared from a pit in a great pyramid. And the voice within him repeated hopelessly: "They have found you. They have run you down."

Chet lay motionless. He still hoped that the dread messenger might pass them by, but the rigidly outstretched arms were extended straight toward him; the creature's short, heavily muscled legs were moving stiffly, tearing a path through the thick grass and bringing him nearer with every step.

Diane and Harkness had been a few paces in advance of Chet when they dropped into the concealing grass. Chet could see where they lay, and the ape-man, as he approached, turned off as if he had lost the direction. He passed Chet by, passed where Walt and Diane were hiding and stopped! And Chet saw the glazed eyes turn here and there about their peaceful valley.

Unseeing they seemed, but again Chet knew better. Was he more sensitively attuned than the others? Who could say? But again he caught a message as plainly as if the words had been shouted inside his brain.

"Yes, the valley of the three sentinel peaks and the

lake of blue; we can find it again. Houses, shelters—how crudely they build, these white-faced intruders!" Chet even sensed the contempt that accompanied the thoughts. "That is enough; you have done well. You shall have their raw hearts for your reward. Now bring them in—bring them in quickly!"

The instant action that followed this command was something Chet would never have believed possible had his own eyes not seen the incredible leap of the huge body. The ape-man's knotted muscles hurled him through the air directly toward the spot where Walt and Diane were hidden. But, had Chet been able to stand off and observe himself, he might have been equally amazed at the sight of a man who leaped erect, who raised a long bow, fitted an arrow, drew it to his shoulder, and did all in the instant while the huge brute's body was in the air.

The great ape landed on all fours. When he straightened and stood erect—his arms were extended, and in each of his gnarled hands he held a figure that was helpless in that terrible grasp.

No chance to loose the arrow then, though the brute's back was half turned. He had Harkness and Diane by their throats, and Chet knew by the unresisting limpness of Harkness' body that the fearful fire in those blazing eyes had them in a grip even more deadly than the hands of the beast.

Thoughts were flashing wildly through Chet's brain. "Knocked 'em cold! He'll do the same to me if I meet his eyes. But I can't shoot now; Diane's in line. I must take him face about; get him before he gets me—get

him first time!"

And, confusedly, there were other thoughts mingled with his own—thoughts he was picking up by means of a nervous system that was like an aerial antenna:

"Good—good! No—do not kill them. Not now; bring them to us alive. The pleasure will come later. And where are the other two? Find them!" It was here that Chet let out a wordless, blood-curdling shriek from lungs and throat that were tight with breathless waiting.

He must face the big brute about, and his wild yell did the work. Startled by that cry that must have reached even those calloused, savage nerves, the ape-man leaped straight up in the air. He whirled as he sprang, to face whatever was behind him, and he threw the bodies of Harkness and Diane to the ground.

Chet saw the black ugliness of the face; he saw the eyes swing toward him.... But he was following with his own narrowed eyes a spot on a hairy throat; he even seemed to see within it where a great carotid artery carried pumping blood to an undeveloped brain.

The glare of those eyes struck him like a blow: his own were drawn irresistibly into that meeting of glances that would freeze him to a rigid statue—but the twang and snap of his own bowstring was in his ears, and a hairy body, its throat pierced in mid-air, was falling heavily to the ground.

But Chet Bullard, even as he leaped to the side of his companions, was thinking not of his victory, nor even of the two whose lives he had saved. He was

thinking of some horror that his mind could not clearly picture: it had found them; it had seen them through this ape-man's eyes before the arrow had closed them in death ... and from now on there could not be two consecutive minutes of peace and happiness in this Happy Valley of Diane's.

CHAPTER XVIII

Besieged!

"I've felt it for some time," Chet confessed. "I've wakened and known I had been dreaming about that damnable thing. And, although it sounds like the wildest sort of insanity, I have felt that there was something—some mental force—that was reaching out for our minds; searching for us. Well, if there is anything like that—"

He was about to say that the trail made by Kreiss and the apes who tracked him would have given this other enemy a direction to follow, but Kreiss himself dropped down beside Chet where he and Walt sat before the front of Diane's shelter. The pilot did not finish the sentence. Kreiss had meant it for the best; there was no use of rubbing it in. But that thing in the pyramid would never be fooled as Schwartzmann and the apes had been.

Chet had told Kreiss of the attack and had shown him the body of the ape-man. "Council of war," he explained as Kreiss rejoined them, but he corrected himself at once. "No—not war! We don't want to go

up against that bunch. Our job is to plan a retreat."

Harkness turned to look inside the hut. "Diane, old girl," he asked, "how about it? Are you going to be able to make a long trip?"

Within the shelter Chet could see Diane's hands drawn into two hard little fists. She would force those tight hands to relax while she lay quietly in the dark; then again they would tremble, and, unconsciously, the nervous tension would be manifested in those white-knuckled little fists. For all of them the shock had been severe; it was hardest on Diane.

She answered now in a voice whose very quietness belied her brave words.

"Any time—any place!" she told Walt. "And—and the farther we go the better!"

"Quite right," Harkness agreed. "I am satisfied that there is something there we can never combat. We don't know what it is, and God help anyone who ever finds out. How about it, Chet? And you, too, Kreiss? Do you agree that there is no use in staying here and trying to fight it out?"

"I do not agree," the scientist objected. "My work, my experiments I have collected! Would you have me abandon them? Must we run in fear because an anthropoid ape has come into this clearing? And, if there are more, we have our barricade; our weapons are crude, but effective, and I might add to them with some ideas of my own should occasion demand."

"Listen!" Chet commanded. "That anthropoid ape is nothing to be afraid of: you're right on that. But he came from the pyramid, Kreiss, and there's something there that knows every foot of ground that messenger went over. There's something in that pyramid that can send more ape-men, that can come itself, for all that I know, and that can knock us cold in half a second.

"It's found us. One arrow went straight, thank God! It has given us a stay of execution. But is that damnable thing in the pyramid going to let it go at that? You know the answer as well as I do. It has probably sent twenty more of those messengers who are on their way this minute, I am telling you; and we've got two days at the most before they get here."

Kreiss still protested. "But my work—"

"Is ended!" snapped Chet. "Stay if you want to; you'll never finish your work. The rest of us will leave in the morning. Towahg will be back here to-night.

"Nothing much to get together," he told Harkness. "I'll see to it; you stay with Diane."

Their bows, a store of extra bone-tipped arrows, and food: as Chet had said there was not much to prepare for their flight. They had spent many hours in arrow making: there were bundles of them stored away in readiness for an attack, and Chet looked at them with regret, but knew they must travel fast and light.

Out of his rocky "laboratory" Kreiss came at dusk to tramp slowly and moodily down to the shelters.

"I shall leave when you do," he told Chet. "Perhaps we can find some place, some corner of this world, where we can live in peace. But I had hoped, I had thought—"

"Yes?" Chet queried. "What did you have on your mind?"

"The gas," the scientist replied. "I was working with a rubber latex. I had thought to make a mask, improvise an air-pump and send one of us through the green gas to reach the ship. And there was more that I hoped to do; but, as you say, my work is ended."

"Bully for you," said Chet admiringly; "the old bean keeps right on working all the time. Well, you may do it yet; we may come back to the ship. Who can tell? But just now I am more anxious about Towahg. Right now, when we need him the most, he fails to show up."

The ape-man was seldom seen by day, but always he came back before nightfall; his chunky figure was a familiar sight as he slipped soundlessly from the jungle where the shadows of approaching night lay first. But now Chet watched in vain at the arched entrance to the leafy tangle. He even ventured, after dark, within the jungle's edge and called and hallooed without response. And this night the hours dragged by where Chet lay awake, watching and listening for some sign of their guide.

Then dawn, and golden arrows of light that drove the morning mist in lazy whirls above the surface of

the lake. But no silent shadow-form came from among the distant trees. And without Towahg—!

"Might as well stay here and take it standing," was Chet's verdict, and Harkness nodded assent.

"Not a chance," he agreed. "We might make our way through the forest after a fashion, but we would be slow doing it, and the brutes would be after us, of course."

They made all possible preparations to withstand a siege. Chet, after a careful, listening reconnaissance, went into the jungle with bow and arrows, and he came back with three of the beasts he had called Moon-pigs. Other trips, with Kreiss as an assistant, resulted in a great heap of fruit that they placed carefully in the shade of a hut. Water they had in unlimited supply.

How they would stand off an enemy who fought only with the terrible gleam of their eyes no one of them could have said. But they all worked, and Diane helped, too, to place extra bows at points where they might be needed and to put handfuls of arrows at the firing platforms spaced at regular intervals along the barricade.

Chet smiled sardonically as he saw Herr Kreiss laboring mightily and alone to rig a catapult that could be turned to face in all directions. But he helped to bring in a supply of round stones from a distance down the shore, though the picture of this medieval weapon being effective against those broadsides of mental force was not one his mind could easily paint.

And then Towahg came! Not the silent, swiftly-leaping figure that moved on muscles like coiled steel springs! This was another Towahg who dragged a bruised body through the grass until Harkness and Chet reached him and helped him to the barricade.

"Gr-r-ranga!" he growled. It was the sound he had made before when he had seen or had tried to tell them of the ape-men. "Gr-r-ranga! Gr-r-ranga!" He pointed about him as if to say: "There!—and there!—and there!"

"Yes, yes!" Chet assured him. "We understand: you met up with a pack of them."

Whereupon Towahg, with his monkey mimicry, gave a convincing demonstration of himself being seized and beaten: and the tooth-marks on nearly every inch of his body gave proof of the rough reception he had encountered.

Then he showed himself escaping, running, swinging through trees, till he came to the camp. And now he raised his bruised body to a standing position and motioned them toward the forest.

"Gr-r-ranga come!" he warned them, and repeated it over again, while his face wrinkled in fear that told plainly of the danger he had seen.

Chet glanced at Harkness and knew his own gaze was as disconsolate as his companion's. "He's met up with them," he admitted, "though, for the life of me, I can't see how he ever got away if it was a crowd of messenger-apes who could petrify him with one look. There's something strange about that, but whatever it is, here's our guide in no shape to travel."

Towahg was growling and grimacing in an earnest effort to communicate some idea. His few words and the full power of his mimicry had been used to urge them on, to warn them that they must flee for their lives, but it seemed he had something else to tell. Suddenly he leaped into his grotesque dance, though his wounds must have made it an agonizing effort, but his joy in the thought that had come to him was too great to take quietly. He knew how to tell Chet!

And with a protruded stomach he marched before them as a well-fed German might walk, and he stroked at an imaginary beard in reproduction of an act that was habitual with one they had known.

"Schwartzmann?" asked Chet. He had used the name before when he and Towahg had led their enemy's "army" off the trail. "You have seen Schwartzmann?"

And Towahg leaped and capered with delight. "Szhwarr!" he growled in an effort to pronounce the name; "Szhwarr come!"

Chet made a wild leap for their bows and supplies.

"Come on!" he shouted. "That's the answer. It isn't the ones from the pyramid; they're coming later. It's Schwartzmann and his bunch of apes. They've followed the messenger, they're on their way, and, in spite of his being all chewed up, Towahg can travel faster than that crowd. He'll guide us out of this yet!"

He was thrusting bundles of supplies—food, arrows, bows—into the eager hands of the others, while Towahg alternately licked his wounds and danced about with excitement. Diane's voice broke in upon

the tense haste and bustle of the moment. She spoke quietly—her tone was flat, almost emotionless—yet there was a quality that made Chet drop what he was holding and reach for a bow.

"We can't go," Diane was saying; "we can't go. Poor Towahg! He couldn't tell us how close they were on his trail; he hurried us all he could."

Chet saw her hand raised; he followed with his eyes the finger that pointed toward the jungle, and he saw as had Diane the flick of moving leaves where black faces showed silently for an instant and then vanished. They were up in the trees—lower—down on the ground. There were scores upon scores of the ape-men spying upon them, watching every move that they made.

And suddenly, across the open ground, where the high-flung branches made the great arch that they called the entrance, a ragged figure appeared. The figure of a man whose torn clothes fluttered in the breeze, whose face was black with an unkempt beard, whose thick hand waved to motion other scarecrow figures to him, and who laughed, loudly and derisively that the three quiet men and the girl on the knoll might hear.

"*Guten tag, meine Herrschaften*," Schwartzmann called loudly, "*meine sehr geehrten Herrschaften!* You must not be so exclusive. Many *guten* friends haff I here with me. I haff been looking forward to this time when they would meet you."

CHAPTER XIX

"*One for Each of Us*"

For men who had come from a world where wars and warfare were things of the past, Chet, and Harkness had done effective work in preparing a defense. The knoll made a height of land that any military man would have chosen to defend, and the top of the gentle slope was protected by the barricade.

On each side of the inverted U that ended at the water's edge an opening had been left, where they passed in and out. But even here the wall had been doubled and carried past itself: no place was left for an easy assault, and on the open end the water was their protection.

Within the barricade, at about the center, the top of the knoll showed an outcrop of rocks that rose high enough to be exposed to fire from outside, but their little shelters were on nearly level ground at the base of the rocks. The whole enclosure was some thirty feet in width and perhaps a hundred feet long. Plenty to protect in case of an attack, as Chet had remarked, but it could not have been much smaller and have done its work effectively.

There was no one of the four white persons but gave unspoken thanks for the barricade of sharp stakes, and even Towahg, although his fangs were bared in an animal snarl at the sound of Schwartzmann's voice, must have been glad to keep his bruised body out of sight behind the sheltering wall.

No one of them replied to Schwartzmann's taunt.

Harkness wrinkled his eyes to stare through the bright sunlight and see the pistol in the man's belt.

"He still has it," he said, half to himself: "he's got the gun. I was rather hoping something might have happened to it. Just one gun; but he has plenty of ammunition—"

"And we haven't—" It was Chet, now, who seemed thinking aloud. "But, I wonder—can we bluff him a bit?"

He dropped behind the barricade and crawled into one of the huts to come out with three extra pistols clutched in his hand. Empty, of course, but they had brought them with them with some faint hope that some day the ship might be reached and ammunition secured. Chet handed one to Diane and another to Kreiss; the third weapon he stuck in his own belt where it would show plainly. Harkness was already armed.

"Now let's get up where they can see us," was Chet's answer to their wondering looks; "let's show off our armament. How can he know how much ammunition we have left? For that matter, he may be getting a little short of shells himself, and he won't know that his solitary pistol is the thing we are most afraid of."

"Good," Harkness agreed; "we will play a little good old-fashioned poker with the gentleman, but don't overdo it, just casually let him see the guns."

Schwartzmann, far across the open ground, must have seen them as plainly as they saw him as they climbed the little hummock of rocks. He could not

fail to note the pistols in the men's belts, nor overlook the significance of the weapon that gleamed brightly in the pilot's hand. Chet saw him return his pistol to his belt as he backed slowly into the shadows, and he knew that Schwartzmann had no wish for an exchange of shots, even at long range, with so many guns against him. But from their slight elevation he saw something else.

The grass was trampled flat all about their enclosure, but, beyond, it stood half the height of a man; it was a sea of rippling green where the light wind brushed across it. And throughout that sea that intervened between them and the jungle Chet saw other ripples forming, little quiverings of shaken stalks that came here and there until the whole expanse seemed trembling.

"Down—and get ready for trouble!" he ordered crisply, then added as he sprang for his own long bow: "Their commanding officer doesn't want to mix it with us—not just yet—but the rest are coming, and there's a million of them, it looks like."

The apes broke cover with all the suddenness of a covey of quail, but they charged like wild, hungry beasts that have sighted prey. Only the long spears in their bunchy fists and the shorter throwing spears that came through the air marked them as primitive men.

The standing grass at the end of the clearing beyond their barricade was abruptly black with naked bodies. To Chet, that charging horde was a formless dark wave that came rolling up toward them; then,

as suddenly as the black wave had appeared, it ceased to be a mere mass and Chet saw individual units. A black-haired one was springing in advance. The man behind the barricade heard the twang of his bow as if it were a sound from afar off; but he saw the arrow projecting from a barrel-shaped chest, and the ape-man tottering over.

He loosed his arrows as rapidly as he could draw the bow; he knew that others were shooting too. Where naked feet were stumbling over prostrate bodies the black wave broke in confusion and came on unsteadily into the hail of winged barbs.

But the wave rushed on and up to the barricade in a scattering of shrieking, leaping ape-man, and Chet spared a second for unspoken thanks for the height of the barrier. A full six feet it stood from the ground, and the ends that had been burned, then pointed with a crude ax, were aimed outward. Inside the enclosure Chet had wanted to throw up a bench or mound of earth on which they could stand to fire above the high barrier, but lack of tools had prevented them. Instead they had laid cribbing of short poles at intervals and on each of these had built a platform of branches.

Close to the barricade of poles and vines, these platforms enabled the defenders to shield themselves from thrown spears and rise as they wished to fire out and down into the mob. But with the rush of a score or more of the man-beasts to the barricade itself, Chet suddenly knew that they were vulnerable to an attack with long lances.

A leaping body was hanging on the barrier; huge hands tore and clawed at the inner side for a grip. From the platform where Diane stood came an arrow at the same instant Chet shot. One matched the other for accuracy, and the clawing figure fell limply from sight. But there were others—and a lance tipped with the jagged fin, needle-sharp, of a poison fish was thrusting wickedly toward Diane.

This time Harkness' arrow did the work, but Chet ordered a retreat. Above the pandemonium of snarling growls, he shouted.

"Back to the rocks, Walt," he ordered; "you and Diane! Quick! The rest of us will hold 'em till you are ready. Then you keep 'em off until we come!" And the two obeyed the cool, crisp voice that was interrupted only when its owner, with the others, had to duck quickly to avoid a barrage of spears.

Kreiss was wounded. Chet found him dropped beside his firing platform working methodically to extract the broad blade of a spear from his shoulder where it was embedded.

Chet's first thought was of poison, and he shouted for Towahg. But the savage only looked once at the spear, seized it and with one quick jerk drew the weapon from the wound; then, when the blood flowed freely, he motioned to Chet that the man was all right.

The savage wadded a handful of leaves into a ball and pressed it against the wound, and Chet improvised a first-aid bandage from Kreiss' ragged

blouse before they put him from sight in one of the shelters and ran to rejoin Harkness and Diane on the rocks.

But the first wave was spent. There were no more snarling, white-toothed faces above the barricade, and in the open space beyond were shambling forms that hid themselves in the long grass while others dragged themselves to the same concealment or lay limply inert on the open, sunlit ground.

And within the enclosure one solitary ape-man forgot his bruised body while he stamped up and down or whirled absurdly in a dance that expressed his joy in victory.

"Better come down," said Chet. "Schwartzmann might take a shot at you, although I think we are out of pistol range. We're lucky that isn't a service gun he's got, but come down anyway, and we'll see what's next. This time we've had the breaks, but there's more coming. Schwartzmann isn't through."

But Schwartzmann was through for the day; Chet was mistaken in expecting a second assault so soon. He posted Towahg as sentry, and, with Diane and Harkness, threw himself before the door-flap of the shelter where Kreiss had been hidden, and was now sitting up, his arm in a sling.

"Either you're a 'mighty hard man to kill,'" he told Kreiss, "or else Towahg is a powerful medicine man."

"I am still in the fight," the scientist assured him. "I can't do any more work with bow and arrow, but I can keep the rest of you supplied."

"We'll need you," Chet assured him grimly.

They ate in silence as the afternoon drew on toward evening.

Back by their little fire, with Towahg on guard, Chet shot an appreciative glance at a white disk in the southern sky. "Still getting the breaks," he exulted. "The moon is up; it will give us some light after sunset, and later the Earth will rise and light things up around here in good shape."

That white disk turned golden as the sun vanished where mountainous clouds loomed blackly far across the jungle-clad hills. Then the quick night blanketed everything, and the golden moon made black the fringe of forest trees while it sent long lines of light through their waving, sinuous branches, to cast moving shadows that seemed strangely alive on the open ground. Muffled by the jungle-sea that absorbed the sound waves, faint grumblings came to them, and at a quiver of light in the blackness where the clouds had been, Harkness turned to Chet.

"We had all better get on the job," Chet was saying, as he took his bow and a supply of arrows, "we've got our work cut out for us to-night."

And Harkness nodded grimly as the flickering lightning played fitfully over far-distant trees. "We crowed a bit too soon," he told Chet; "there's a big storm coming, and that's a break for Schwartzmann. No light from either moon or Earth to-night."

The moon-disk, as he spoke, lost its first clear brilliance in the haze of the expanding clouds.

"Watch sharp, Towahg!" Chet ordered. And, to the others: "Get this fire moved away from the huts—here. I'll do that, Walt. You bring a supply of wood;

some of those dried leaves, too. We'll build a big fire, we have to depend on that for light."

With the skeleton of a huge palm leaf he raked the fire out into an open space; they had plenty of fuel and they fed the blaze until its mounting flames lighted the entire enclosure. But outside the barricade were dark shadows, and Chet saw that this light would only make targets of the defenders, while the attackers could creep up in safety.

"'Way up," he ordered; "we've got to have the fire on the top of the rocks." He clambered to the topmost level of the rocky outcrop and dragged a blazing stick with him. Harkness handed him more; and now the light struck down and over the stockade and illumined the ground outside.

"Here's your job, Kreiss," said Chet, "if you're equal to it. You keep that fire going and have a pile of dried husks handy if I call for a bright blaze.

"We've got to defend the whole works," he explained. "That bunch today tried to jump us just from one side, but trust Schwartzmann to divide his force and hit us from all sides next time.

"But we'll hold the fort," he said and he forced a confidence into his voice that his inner thoughts did not warrant. To Harkness he whispered when Diane was away: "Six shells in the gun, Walt; we won't waste them on the apes. There's one for each of us including Towahg, and one extra in case you miss. We'll fight as long as we are able; then it's up to you to shoot quick and straight."

But Walt Harkness felt for the pistol in his belt and handed it to Chet. "I couldn't," he said, and his voice was harsh and strained, "—not Diane; you'll have to, Chet." And Chet Bullard dropped his own useless pistol to the ground while he slipped the other into its holster on the belt that bound his ragged clothes about him, but he said nothing. He was facing a situation where words were hardly adequate to express the surging emotion within.

Diane had returned when he addressed Walt casually. "Wonder why the beggars didn't attack again," he pondered. "Why has Schwartzmann waited; why hasn't he or one of his men crept up in the grass for a shot at us? He's got some deviltry brewing."

"Waiting for night," hazarded Walt. He looked up to see Kreiss who had joined them.

"If Towahg could tend the fire," suggested the scientist, "I could fire my little catapult with one hand. I think I could do some damage." But Chet shook his head and answered gently:

"I'm afraid Towahg's the better man to-night, Kreiss. You can help best by giving us light. That's the province of science, you know," he added, and grinned up at the anxious man.

Each moment of this companionship meant much to Chet. It was the last conference, he knew. They would be swamped, overwhelmed, and then—only the pistol with its six shells was left. But he drew his thoughts back to the peaceful quiet of the present

moment, though the hush was ominous with the threat of the approaching storm and of the other assault that must come in the storm's concealing darkness. He looked at Diane and Walt—comrades true and tender. The leaping flames from the rocks above made flickering shadows on their upturned faces.

The moment ended. A growl from where Towahg was on guard brought them scrambling to their feet. "Gr-r-ranga!" Towahg was warning. "Granga come!"

They fired from their platforms as before, then raced for the rocks and the elevation they afforded, for the black bodies had reached the stockade quickly in the half light. But they came again from one point—the farthest curve of the U-shaped fence this time—and though a score of black animal faces showed staring eyes and snarling fangs where heavy bodies were drawn up on the barricade, no one of them reached the inside.

"We're holding them!" Chet was shouting. But the easy victory was too good to believe; he knew there were more to come; this force of some thirty or forty was not all that Schwartzmann could throw into the fight. And Schwartzmann, himself! Chet had seen the bronzed faces of Max and another standing back of the assaulting force, but where was Schwartzmann?

It was Kreiss who answered the insistent question. From above on the rocks, where he had kept the fire blazing, Kreiss was calling in a high-pitched voice.

"The water!" he shouted, "they're attacking from the

water!" And Chet rushed around the broken rock-heap to see a lake like an inky pool, where the firelight showed faint reflections from black, shining faces; where rippling lines of phosphorescence marked each swimming savage; and where larger waves of ghostly light came from a log raft on which was a familiar figure whose face, through its black beard, showed white in contrast with the faces of his companions.

Still a hundred feet from the shore, they were approaching steadily, inexorably; and the storm, at that instant, broke with a ripping flash of light that tore the heavens apart, and that seared the picture of the attackers upon the eyeballs of the man who stared down.

From behind him came sounds of a renewed attack. He heard Harkness: "Shoot, Diane! Nail 'em, Towahg! There's a hundred of them!" And the wind that came with the lightning flash, though it brought no rain, whipped the black water of the lake to waves that drove the raft and the swimming savages closer—closer—

Chet glanced above him. "Come down, Kreiss!" he ordered. "Get down here, quick! This is the finish. We could have licked them on land, but these others will get us." He stood, dumb with amazement, as he saw the thin figure of Kreiss leap excitedly from his rocky perch and vanish like a terrified rabbit into the cave in the rocks.

"I didn't think—" he was telling himself in wondering disbelief at this cowardice, when Kreiss reappeared.

His one hand was white with a rubbery coating that Chet vaguely knew for latex. He was holding a gray, earthy mass, and he threw himself forward to the catapult where it stood idly erect in the wind that beat and whipped at it.

"Help me!" It was Kreiss who ordered, and once more he spoke as if he were conducting only an interesting experiment. "Pull here! Bend it—bend it! Now hold steady; this is metallic sodium, a deposit I found deep in the earth."

The gray mass was in the crude bucket of the machine. Kreiss' knife was ready. He slashed at the vine that he'd the bent sapling, and a gray mass whirled out into the dark; out and down—and the inky waters were in that instant ablaze with fire.



The inky waters were ablaze with fire.

Fire that threw itself in flaming balls; that broke into many parts and each part, like a living thing, darted crazily about; that leaped into the air to fall again among ape-men who screamed frenziedly in animal terror.

"It unites with water," Kreiss was saying: "a spontaneous liberation and ignition of hydrogen." The white-coated hand had dumped another mass into the primitive engine of war. "Now pull—so—and I cut it!" And the leaping, flashing fires tore furiously in redoubled madness where a shrieking mob of terrified beasts, and one white man among them, drove ashore beyond the end of a barricade.

Chet felt Harkness beside him. "We drove 'em off in back. What the devil is going on here?" Walt was demanding. But Chet was watching the retreat of the

blacks straight off and down the shore where the sand was smooth and neither grass nor trees could hinder their wild flight.

"You've got them licked," Harkness was exulting: "and we've cleaned them up on our side. Just came over to see if you needed help."

"We sure would have," said Chet; "more than you could give if it hadn't been for Kreiss."

"We've got 'em licked!" Harkness repeated wonderingly; "we've won!" It was too much to grasp all at once. The victory had been so quick, and he had already given up hope.

The two had clasped hands; they stood so for silent minutes. Chet had been nerved to the point of destroying his companions and himself; the revulsion of feeling that victory brought was more stupefying than the threat of impending defeat.

Staring out over the black waters, he knew only vaguely when Harkness left; a moment later he followed him gropingly around the jagged rocks, while there came to him, blurred by his own mental numbness, a shouted call.... But a moment elapsed before he was aroused, before he knew it for Walt's voice. He recognized the agonized tone and sprang forward into the clearing.

The fire still blazed on the rocky platform above; its uncertain light reached the figure of a running man who was making madly for the opening in the wall. As he ran he screamed over and over, in a voice hoarse and horrible like one seized in the fright of a

fearful dream: "Diane! Diane, wait! For God's sake, Diane, don't go!"

And the driven clouds were torn apart for a space to let through a clear golden light. The great lantern of Earth was flashing down through space to light a grassy opening in a jungle of another world, where, stark and rigid, a girl was walking toward the shadow-world beyond, while before her went a black shape, huge and powerful, in whose head were eyes like burning lights, and whose arms were rigidly extended as if to draw the stricken girl on and on.

The running figure overtook them. Chet saw him checked in mid-spring, and Harkness, too, stood rigid as if carved from stone, then followed as did Diane, where the ape-thing led.... From the far side of the clearing, where Schwartzmann's men had gone, came a great shout of laughter that jarred Chet from the stupor that bound him.

"The messenger!" he said aloud. "God help them; it's the messenger—and he's taking them to the pyramid!"

Then the torn clouds closed that the greater darkness might cover those who vanished in the shadowed fringe of a stormy, wind-whipped jungle....

CHAPTER XX

On to the Pyramid

It was like Walt Harkness to rush impetuously after where Diane was being drawn away; but who, under the same circumstances, would have done otherwise? Yet it was like Chet, too, to keep a sane and level head, to check the first wild impulse to dash to their rescue, to realize that he would be throwing himself away by doing it and helping them not at all. It was like Chet to stop and think when thinking was desperately needed, though what it would lead to he could not have told. There were many factors that entered into his calculations.

Half-consciously he had walked to the barricade that he might stare into the blackness beyond. The worst of the storm had passed, and the strong Earth-light forced its way through the thinning clouds in a cold, gray glow. It served to show the great gateway to the jungle, empty and black, until Chet saw more of the man-beasts he had called messengers.

A file of them, stolid, woodenly walking—he could not fail to know them from the ape-men of the tribe. And they moved through the darkness toward the sounds of shouts and laughter.

Chet saw them when they returned; following them were three others. Schwartzmann was not one of them; but the pilot, Max, Chet could distinguish plainly; the other two, he was sure, were the men of Schwartzmann's crew.

And, for each of them, all laughter and shouted jests had escaped. They moved like wooden toys half-come to life. And they, too, vanished where Walt and Diane had gone through the high arch of the jungle's open door.

Chet knew Kreiss was beside him; at a short distance,

Towahg, staring above the palisade, buried his unkempt, hairy head in the shelter of his arms. All of Towahg's savage bravery had oozed away at direct sight of the pyramid men; Chet, even through his heavy-hearted dismay, was aware of the courage that must have carried this primitive man to their rescue on that other black night when the pyramid had been about to swallow, them up.

To the pyramid all Chet's thoughts had been tending. There Diane and Harkness were bound; there he, too, must go, though the thought of driving himself into that black maw, through the overpowering stench and down to the pit where some horror of mystery lay waiting, was almost more than his conscious mind could accept. But, with the sight of Towahg and the abject fear that had overwhelmed him, Chet found his own mind calmly determined, though through that cool self-detachment came savage spoken words.

"If poor Towahg could go near that damned place," he reasoned, "am I going to be stopped by anything between heaven and hell?"

And his mind was suddenly at ease with the certainty of the next step he must take. He turned to speak to Kreiss, but paused instead to stare into the dark where shadows that were not the ghosts of clouds were moving. Then his whispered orders came sharply to the scientist and to Towahg.

"Come!" he commanded. "Come quickly; follow me!"

The two were behind him as he found the narrow

opening in the barrier's farther side, passed through, and crouched low in the darkness as he ran toward the lake where the shallow water of the shore took no mark of their hurrying feet.

At the end of the lake he stopped. Beside him, Kreiss, weakened by his wound, was panting and gasping; Towahg, moving like a dark shadow, was close behind.

"I saw them," said Kreiss, when he had breath enough for speech, "—more beasts from the pyramid. They were coming for us! But we can go back there after a day or so."

"You can," Chet told him; "Towahg and I are going on."

"Where?" Kreiss demanded.

"To the pyramid."

Chet's reply was brief, and Kreiss' response was equally so. "You're a fool," he said.

"Sure," Chet told him: "I know there's nothing I can do to help them. But I'm going. All I ask is to get one crack at whatever it is that is down in that beastly pit and if I can't do that maybe I can still save Diane and Walt from tortures you and I can't imagine." He touched his pistol suggestively.

"Still I say you are a fool," Kreiss insisted. "They are gone—captured; they will die. That is regrettable, but it is done. Now, besides Herr Schwartzmann who escaped, only we two remain; the savage, he does

not count. We two!—and a new world!—and science! Science that remains after these two are gone—after you and I are gone! It is greater than us all.

"But I, staying, shall contribute to the knowledge of men; I shall make discoveries that will bear my name always. This world is my laboratory; I have found deposits such as none has ever seen on Earth.

"Be reasonable, Herr Bullard. The enemy has tracked us down by his superior cleverness. We will go far away now where he never shall find us, you and I. Do not be a fool; do not throw your life away."

Chet Bullard, a figure of helpless, hopeless despair, stood unspeaking while he stared into the black depths of the jungle, and the night wind whipped his tattered clothing about him.

"A fool!" he said at last, and his voice was dull and heavy. "I guess you're right—"

Herr Kreiss interrupted: "Of course I am right—right and reasonable and logical!"

Chet went on as if the other had not spoken:

"If I hadn't been a fool I would have found some way to prevent it; I would have killed that ape-thing when first I saw it; I would have got them free."

He turned slowly to face his companion in the darkness.

"But you were wrong, Kreiss; you forgot a couple of things. You said they found us by their superior cleverness. That's wrong. They found us because you

left a trail they could follow. We threw them off once, Towahg and I, but the messenger wouldn't be fooled. Then Schwartzmann and his pack followed the messenger in.

"And you say it is logical that I should quit here, leave Diane and Walt to take whatever is coming; you say I'm a fool to stay with them till the end.

"Well,"—he was speaking very quietly, very simply —"if you are right I'm rather glad that I'm a fool. For you see, Kreiss, they're my friends, and between friends logic gets knocked all to hell.

"Come on, Towahg!" he called. "Let's see if we can travel this jungle in the night!" He set off toward the fringe of great trees, then let Towahg go ahead to find a trail.

Travel at night through the tangle of creepers was not humanly possible. Even Towahg, after an hour's work, grunted his disgust and curled himself up for the night. And Chet, though he found his mind filled with vain imaginings, was so drained by the day's demands on his nervous energy that he slept through to the rising of the sun.

Then they circled wide of the trail they had taken before; no risk would Chet take of a chance meeting with one of the pyramid apes. And he plagued his brain with vain questions of what he should do when he reached the arena and the pyramid and the unknown something that waited within, until he told himself in desperation: "You're going down, you're going into that damned place; that's all you know for

sure."

Whereupon his questioning ceased, and his mind was clear enough to think of giant creepers that barred his way, of streams to be crossed, and to wonder, at the last, when the valley of the pyramid was in sight and whether the others had reached there before him.

Another day's sun was beating straight down into the arena when again it opened before Chet's eyes. And the bleak horror of this place of black and white that had seemed so incredibly unreal under Earth-lit skies was doubly so in the glare of noon.

They entered through the jagged crack that had been their means of escape. An earthquake, one time, had split the stone, and Chet was more than satisfied to avoid the broad entrance where the rocks made a gateway and where hostile eyes might be watching.

He stood for long minutes in the cleft in the rocks where the hard earth of the arena made a floor before him, where the huge steps of ribboned white and black swung out on either hand, and where, directly ahead, in the same hard, contrasting strata, a pyramid lifted itself to finish in a projecting capstone. And now that he faced it he found himself curiously cool.

He motioned Towahg to his side, and the black came cowering and trembling. He had tried before to ask Towahg about the mystery of the pyramid, but Towahg had never understood, or, as Chet believed, he had pretended not to understand. But now he

could no longer feign ignorance of Chet's queries.

Chet pointed to the pyramid with a commanding hand. "What is there?" he demanded. "Towahg afraid! What is Towahg afraid of? Ape-men go in there—Gr-r-ranga-men; who sends for them?"

And Towahg, who must know the sense of the questions, even though some words were strange, could not answer. He dropped to his knees there in the narrow, ragged chasm in the rock and clutched at Chet's legs with his two hands while he buried his shaggy head in his arms. Then—

"Krargh!" he wailed; "Krargh there! Krargh send—Gr-r-ranga go. Gr-r-ranga no come back!"

It was perhaps the longest speech Towahg had ever made, and Chet nodded his understanding. "Yes," he agreed; "that's right. I imagine. When Krargh sends for you, you never come back."

But more eloquent than the ape-man's halting words was the trembling of his muscle-knotted shoulders in a fear that struck him limp at Chet's feet. And the pilot realized that the fear was inspired in part by the thought in the savage mind that his master might ask him to go closer to the place of dread. He had followed them once and had struck down a messenger, but this was when he was avid with curiosity and half-worshipful of the white men as gods. Now, to go that dreadful way in full daylight! —it was more than Towahg could face.

Chet patted the cringing shoulder with a kindly hand. "Get up, Towahg," he ordered and pointed

back toward the jungle. "Towahg wait outside; wait today and to-night!" He gave the ape-man's sign of the open and closed hand to signify one day and one night, and Towahg's grunt was half in relief and half in understanding as he slipped back into hiding where the jungle pressed close.

Chet turned again to the pyramid. "They're down there," he told himself, "facing God knows what. And now it's sink or swim, and I'm almighty afraid I know which it's to be. But we'll take it together: 'When Krargh sends for you, you never come back.'"

No jungle sounds were here in this silent arena, no flashing of leather-winged birds nor scuttling of little, odd creatures of the ground. It was as if some terror had spread its dark wings above the place, a terror unseen of men. But the little, wild things of earth and air had seen, and they had fled long since from a place unclean and unfit for life.

Chet felt the silence pressing heavily upon him as he took his hand from the rock at his side and stepped out into the arena. And the vast amphitheater seemed peopled with phantom shapes that sat in serried rows and watched him with dead and terrible eyes, while he went the long way to the pyramid's base, and his feet found the rough stone ascent....

CHAPTER XXI

The Monstrous Something

The way to the top of the pyramid was long. One look Chet allowed himself out over this world—one slow, sweeping gaze that took in the bare floor at the pyramid's base, a level platform of rock some distance in front of the pyramid, the hard black and white of the walled oval, the sea of waving green that was the jungle beyond, and, beyond that, hills, misty and shimmering in the noonday heat. And nestled there, beyond that last bare ridge, must be the valley of happiness, Diane Delacouer's "Happy Valley."

Chet Bullard turned abruptly where the projecting capstone hung heavy above a shadowed entrance. He entered the blackness within, stopped once in choking nausea as the first wave of vile air struck him, then fought his way on till his searching feet found the stairway, and he knew he was descending into a pit that held something inhumanly horrible—an abomination unto all gods of decency and right.

And still there persisted that abnormal coolness that made him almost light-headed, almost carefree. Even the fetid stench ceased to offend. His feet moved with never a sound to find the first step—and the next—and the next. He must go cautiously; he must not betray his presence until he was ready to strike.

Just where that blow would be delivered or against what adversary he could not tell, and perhaps it would be given him only to save Diane and Walt by the grace of a merciful bullet. It made no difference. Nothing made any difference any more; they had had their day, and now if the night came suddenly that was all he could ask. And still his cautious feet were carrying him down and yet down....

He was far below the surface of the ground when he found the foot of the stairs. They had been a spiral; his hand had touched one wall that led him smoothly around a shaft like a great well. And now there was firm rock beneath his feet, where, with one hand still guiding him along the stone wall, he followed the wall into a darkness that was an almost solid, opaque black. He seemed lost in a great void, smothered in silence, and buried under the black weight of the pressing dark, until the sound of a footfall gave him sense of direction and of distance.

It made soft echoings along rock walls that picked up every slightest rustle, and Chet realized again how cautious his own advance must be. It came toward him, soft, scuffing, followed the wall where he stood ... and Chet felt that approaching presence almost upon him before he stepped silently out and away.

And in the darkness that blotted out his sight he sensed with some inner eye the passing ape-man with arms rigidly extended, while a wave of thankfulness flooded him as he realized that in the dark the brute was as blind as himself and that the terrible thing that had sent him could see at a distance only with the ape-man's eyes.

Here was something definite to count on. As long as he remained silent, as long as he kept himself hidden, he was safe.

The scuffling footsteps had gone to nothing in the distance when Chet reached out for the wall and went swiftly, carefully, on. The messenger had come this way; he could hurry now that he knew there was safe footing in the dark.

The wall ended in a sharp corner; it formed a right

angle, and the new surface went on and away from him. Chet was debating whether he should follow or should cast out into the darkness when his staring eyes found the first touch of light.

It came from above, a wavering line that trembled to a flame which seemed curiously cold. The line grew: a foot-wide band of light high up on the wall, it thrust itself forward like a tendril of the horrible plants he had seen. It grew on and wrapped itself about a great room, while, behind it, cold flames flickered and leaped. And Chet, so interested was he in the motion of this light that seemed almost alive, realized only after some moments that the light was betraying him.

He glanced quickly about and found himself within a chamber of huge proportions. Walls that only nature could form reared themselves high in the putrescent air of the room; they curved into a ceiling, and from that ceiling there hung a glittering array of gems.

Chet knew them for great stalactites, and, even as he cast about desperately for some secluded nook, he marveled at the diamond brilliance of the display. But on the smooth floor of stone, where corresponding stalagmites must have been, were no traces of crystal growths, from which he knew that though nature had formed the room some other power had fitted it to its own use.

Chet's eyes were darting swift glances about. There was no single moving thing, no sign of life; he was still undiscovered. But it could not last long, this safety; he looked vainly for some niche where the

light would not strike so clearly, so betrayingly.

Across the great chamber was a platform fifteen feet above the floor. Even at a distance Chet knew this was not a natural formation; he could see where the stones had been cleverly fitted. And now his eyes, accustomed to the light, saw that the platform was carpeted with hides and strange furs. There were some that hung over the edge; they reached almost to the upright block like a table or altar at the platform's base. On this altar another great hide of thick leather was spread; it dragged in places on the floor.

Bare floors, bare walls—no place where an intruder could remain concealed! Suddenly from the lighted mouth of another passage he heard sounds of many feet; the sounds of approaching feet.

The impulse that threw him across the room was born of desperation; he raced frantically to cross the wide expanse before those feet brought their owners within view, and he fought to keep his panting breath inaudible while he tugged at the heavy leather altar covering, stiff and thick as a board; while he forced his crouching body beneath and found space there where he could move freely about.

It walled him in completely on the platform side where it hung to the floor, but on the other three sides there were gaps near the floor where the light shone in on two pedestals of stone that supported the stone top.

Between the pedestals Chet crouched, hardly daring

to look, hardly daring to breathe, while feet, bare and black, tramped shufflingly past. They went in groups—he lost count of their number but knew there were hundreds; he heard them going to the platform above. And, through the sound of the naked feet, came disjointed fragments of thought that reached his brain, transformed to words.

Mere fragments at first: "... back; the Master goes first!... The lights—how grateful is their coolness!... Who stumbled? Careless and stupid ape! You, Bearer-captain, shall take him to the torture room; a touch of fire will help his infirmity!"

And there was a cold rage that accompanied the last which set Chet's tense nerves a-tingle. But there was no fear in the emotion; he was quivering with a fierce, instinctive, animal hate.

The black feet retraced their steps. Then there was silence, and Chet knew there was something above him on the platform; whether one or many he could not tell until an interchange of thoughts reached him to show there was at least more than one.

"A presence!" some unseen thing was thinking. "I sense a strange mental force!"

A moment of panic gripped Chet at the threat of discovery. Then he forced himself to relax; he tried to make his mind a blank; or if not that, to think of anything but himself—of the jungle, the ape-men, of the two comrades who had been captured.

"Patience!" another thinker was counseling. "It is the captives; they draw near." And across the great room,

from the same passage where he had entered, Chet heard again the sound of bare, scuffing feet.

He could see them at last; he dared, to stop and peer along the floor. Bare feet—black, hairy legs, and then came sounds of clumping leather that brought Chet's heart into his throat, until, directly before the altar that made his shelter, he saw the stained shoes and torn leggings of Walt Harkness, and beside them, the little boots and jungle-stained stockings that encased the slender legs of Mademoiselle Diane.

They were there before him, Walt and Diane; he would see them if he but dared to look. And, from somewhere above, a confusion of thought messages poured in upon him like the unintelligible medley of many voices. Out of them came one, clearer, more commanding:

"Silence! Be still, all! Your Master speaks. I shall question the captives."

And there came to Chet, crouched beneath the altar, hardly breathing, listening, tense, a battering of questioning thoughts. He heard no answer from Harkness and Diane, but he knew that their minds were open pages to the one from whom those thought-waves issued.

"Where are you from?—what part of this globe?... Another world? Impossible! This is our own world, Rajj. It is alone. There is no nearby star."

And after a moment, when Harkness had silently answered, came other thoughts:

"Strange! Strange! This creature of an inferior race says that our world has joined hands with his; that his is greater; that our own world, Rajj, is now a

satellite of his world that he calls by the strange name of 'Earth.'"

To Chet it seemed that this one mysterious thinker, this "Master" of an unknown realm, was explaining his findings to other mysterious beings. There followed a babel of released thoughts from which Chet got only a confused impression of conflicting emotions: curiosity, rage, hate, and a cold ferocity that bound them into one powerful, vindictive whole.

Again the leader quieted the rest; again he laid open the minds of Walt and Diane for his exploring questions, while Chet mentally listened and tried to picture what manner of thing this was that held two Earth-folk helpless, that called them "creatures of an inferior race."

Super-men? No? Super-beasts, these must be. Chet was chilled with a nameless horror as he sensed the cold deadliness and implacable hate in the traces of emotion that clung and came to him with the thoughts. And his imagination balked at trying to picture thinking creatures so abominably vile as these thinkers must be.

The questions went on and on. Chet lost all sense of time. He had the feeling that the two helpless prisoners were being mentally flayed. No thought, no hidden emotion, but was stripped from them and displayed before the mental gaze of these inhuman inquisitors. No physical torture could have been more revolting.

And at list the ordeal was ended. Chet had forgotten Schwartzmann's men until the "Master's" order recalled them to his mind. "Bring the other captives!" the unspoken thought commanded.

Chet crouched low to see from under the hanging leather. Naked feet shuffled aimlessly; they were raised and put down again in the same position, until the dazed and hypnotized blacks received their orders and drew Diane and Harkness to one side. Then other leather-shod feet came into view as Max and his companions were brought forward.

But there was no more questioning. "Perhaps another day we shall amuse ourselves with them," a thinker said. Chet, for the first time was paying no attention.

A slit in the leather—it might bare been where a spear had entered to slay a dinosaur in some earlier age—served now as a peep-hole from which Chet saw two gray and lifeless faces that were expressionless as stone. And, as if their bodies, too, were carved from granite, Diane and Harkness stood motionless.

He saw the blacks, saw that all eyes were on the other prisoners. Only Harkness and Diane stood with lowered gaze, staring stonily at the floor where the leather hung. And through Chet's mind flashed a quick impulse that set his nerves thrilling and quivering, though he checked the emotion in an instant lest some other mind should sense it.

Those other minds were not contacting Walt and Diane now. Could he reach them? Chet wondered.

That they were conscious, that they knew with horrible clearness every detail of what went on, Chet was certain: his own brief experience that first night on the pyramid had taught him that. And now if these two could see and comprehend what they saw: if only he could send them a word—one flashing message of hope! His hands were working swiftly at his belt.

The detonite pistol slipped silently from its sheath. And as silently he placed it on the floor where the two were looking, then slid it cautiously underneath the leather that just cleared the floor.

His eye was close to the narrow slit. Did a change of expression flash for an instant across the face of Walt Harkness? Was it only imagination, or was there the briefest flicker of life in the dead eyes of Diane Delacouer? Chet could not be sure, but he dared to hope.

The "Master" was speaking. To Chet came a conviction that he must not fail to hear these thoughts. He restored the pistol to his belt.

"And now the time has come," flashed the message. "One thousand times has Rajj circled the sun since we put his light behind us and came down to the dark place that had been prepared.

"One hundred others and myself; we were the peerless leaders of a peerless race. To produce the marvelous mentality that made us what we were, all the forces of evolution had been laboring for ages. We were supreme, and for us there was nothing left;

no further growth.

"Then, what said Vashta, the All-Wise One? That I and a hundred chosen ones should descend into the dark, there to live until a new world was ready for us, lest our great race of Krargh perish." Chet started at the name. Krargh! It was the same word that Towahg had used.

The mental message went on:

"And we alone survive. Our world of Rajj is a wasteland where once we and our fellows lived. And we have been patient, awaiting the day. The biped beasts, as you know, have been our food; we have trained them to be our slaves as well. By the power of our invincible minds we have sent them out to do our bidding and bring in more of the man-herd for slaughter when we hungered.

"And now, remember the words of Vashta, the All-Wise: 'until a new world is ready.' O Peerless Ones, the new world waits. These ignorant, white animals have brought the word. We had thought that Vashta meant us to make a new world of our old world of Rajj, but what of this new world called Earth? Perhaps that will be ours."

Chet felt the thinker break in on his own thoughts.

"One thousand years, but not to a day. Tell us, O Keeper of the Records, when is the time?"

And another's thoughts came in answer: "Six days, Master; six days more."

The leader's thoughts crashed in with an almost physical violence:

"On the sixth night we shall go out! In darkness we

have lived; in darkness we shall emerge. Then shall we feast in the arena of Vashta as we did of old. We shall see this new world; we shall breed and people the world; we shall take up our lives again.

"Let the captives live!" he commanded. "Feed them well. They shall be the sacrifice to Vashta—all but the woman. She shall see the blood of the others flow on the altar stone; then shall she come to me."

There was a chorus of mental protests; of counter claims. The leader quieted them as before.

"I am Master of All," he told them. "Would you dispute with me over this beast of the Earth—a creature of no mental growth? Absurd! But she interests me somewhat; I will find her amusing for a time."

There were bearers who came crowding in; and again in groups they left. They were on the side where Chet dared not look, but he knew each group of blacks meant a mysterious something that was being carried carefully.

And somewhere in the confusion of black, shuffling feet the others vanished. No sight of Walt or Diane did the slitted leather give; only a motley crew of blacks who were left, and a wall, high-sprung to a glittering ceiling, and flaming, cold fire that ebbed and flowed till the room's last occupant was gone. Then the flames faded to dense blackness where only fitful images on the retina of Chet's staring eyes flared and waned, and ghostly voices seemed still whispering through the clamoring silence of the

room....

They were echoing within his brain and harshly at his taut nerves as he made his slow way toward the passage through which he had come. Despite their terror-filled urging he did not run, but took one silent, cautious step at a time, until, after centuries of waiting, his eyes found a square of light that was blinding; and he knew that he was stumbling through the portal in the top of the pyramid of Vashta—Vashta the All-Wise—unholy preceptor of an inhuman race.

CHAPTER XXII

Sacrifice

"Down in the pyramid! You went down there?" Herr Kreiss forgot even his absorbing experiments to exclaim incredulously at Chet's report.

Guided by Towahg, Chet had returned to Happy Valley. There had been six days and nights to be spent, and he felt that he should tell Kreiss what he had learned.

"Yes," said Chet dully; "yes, I went down."

He was seated on a rock in the enclosure they had built. He raised his deep-sunk, sleepless eyes to stare at the house where he and Walt had worked. There Walt and Diane were to have made their home; Chet found something infinitely pathetic now in the

unfinished shelter: its very crudities seemed to cry aloud against the blight that had fallen upon the place.

"And what was there?" Kreiss demanded. "This hypnotic power—was it an attribute of the ape-men themselves? That seems highly improbable. Or was there something else—some other source of the thought waves or radiations of mental force?"

Chet was still answering almost in monosyllables. "Something else," he told Kreiss.

"Ah," exclaimed the scientist, "I should have liked to see them. Such mental attainment! Such control of the great thought-force which with us is so little developed! Mind—pure mentality—carried to that stage of conscious development, would be worthy of our highest admiration. I should like to meet such men."

"They're not men," said Chet; "they're—they're—"

He knew how unable he was to put into words his impression of the unseen things, and he suddenly became voluble with hate.

"God knows what they are!" he exclaimed, "but they're not men. 'Mind', you say; 'mentality!' Well, if those coldly devilish things are an example of what mind can evolve into when there's no decency of soul along with it, then I tell you hell's full of some marvelous minds!"

He sprang abruptly to his feet.

"I've got to get out of here," he said; "I can't stand it. Four more days, and that's the end of it all. I'm going back to the ship. I saw it from up on the divide. Still

buried in gas—but I'm going back. If I could just get in there I might do something. There's all our supplies—our storage of detonite; I might do some good work yet!"

He was pacing up and down restlessly where a path had been worn on the grassy knoll, worn by his feet and the pitiful, bruised feet he had seen from his shelter in the pyramid; worn by Walt and Diane—his comrades! And they were helpless; their whole hope lay in him! The thought of his own impotence was maddening. He poured out the story of his experience in the pyramid, as if the telling might give him relief.

Kreiss sat in silence, listening to it all. He broke in at last.

"Wait!" he ordered. "There are some questions I would have answered. You said once that they found us—these devils that you tell of—because of the trail that I left. That is true?"

"Yes," Chet agreed irritably, "but what of it? It's all over now."

"Possibly not," Herr Kreiss demurred; "quite possibly not. The fault, it appears, was mine. Who shall say where the results of that fault shall lead?

"And you say that these thinking creatures are devils, and that they plan to sacrifice your good friends to strange gods; and still the fault leads on." Herr Kreiss, to whom cause and effect were sure guides, seemed meditating upon the strange workings of immutable laws.

"And you say that if you could reach the interior of your ship you might perhaps be of help. Yes, it is so! And the ship is engulfed in a fluid sea, but the sea is of gas. Now in that I am not to blame, and yet—and —yet—they all tie in together at the last; yes!"

"What are you talking about?" demanded Chet Bullard harshly. "It's no use to moralize on who is to blame. If you know anything to do, speak up; if not —"

Herr Kreiss raised his spare frame erect. "I shall do better than that," he stated; "I shall act." And Chet stared curiously after, as the thin figure clambered up on the rocks and vanished into the cave.

He forgot him then and turned to stare moodily across the enclosure that had been the scene of their battle. Kreiss had done good work there; he had scared the savages into a panic fear. Chet was seeing again the scenes of that night when a faint explosion came from the rocks at his side. He looked up to see Herr Kreiss stagger from the cave.

Eyebrows and lashes were gone; his hair was tinged short; but his thick glasses had protected his eyes. He breathed deeply of the outside air as he regarded the remnant of a bladder that once had held a sample of green gas. Then, without a word of explanation, he turned again into the cave where a thin trickle of smoke was issuing.

Ragged and torn, his clothes were held together by bits of vine. There were longer ropes of the same material that made a sling on his shoulders when he

reappeared. And, tied in the sling, were bundles; one large, one small, but sagging with weight. Both were bound tightly in wrappings of broad leaves.

"We will go now," Herr Kreiss stated: "there is no time to be lost."

"Go? Go where?" Chet's question echoed his utter bewilderment.

"To the ship! Come, savage!"—he motioned to Towahg—"I did not do well when I made my way alone. You shall lead now."

"He's crazy," Chet told himself half aloud: "his motor's shot and his controls are jammed! Oh, well; what's the difference? I might as well spend the time this way as any. I meant to go back to the old ship once more."

Kreiss' arm still troubled from the wound he had got in the fight, but Chet could not induce him to share his load.

"*Es ist mein recht*," he grumbled, and added cryptically: "To each man this only is sure—that he must carry his own cross." And Chet, with a shrug, let him have his way.

There was little said on the trip. Chet was as silent and uncommunicative as Kreiss when, for the last time, he paused on the divide to see the green glint from a distant ship, then plunged with the others into a forest as unreal as all this experience now seemed.

And at the last, when the red light of late afternoon ensanguined a wild world, they came to the smoke of Fire Valley, and a thousand fumeroles, little and big, that emitted their flame and gas. And one, at the lower end of the valley had built up a great mound of greasy mud from whose top issued hot billows of green gas. It was here that Kreiss paused and unslung his pack.

"Take this," he told Chet; and the pilot dragged his reluctant eyes from the view of the nearby cylinder enveloped in green clouds. The scientist was handing him the larger of the two packages. It was bulky but light: Chet took it by a loop in one of the vines.

"Careful!" warned Kreiss. "I have worked on it for a month; you see, my equipment was not so good. I thought that the time might come when it would be put to use, only first I must conquer the gas—which I now prepare to do."

"I don't understand," Chet protested.

"You are a Master Pilot of the World?" questioned Kreiss, and Chet nodded.

"And the control on your ship was a modification of the new ball-control mechanism such as is used on the latest of the high-level liners?"

Again Chet nodded.

"Then, if ever you are so fortunate, Herr Bullard, as to see once more that device on one of those ships, will you examine it carefully? And, stamped on the under side, you will find—"

"The patent marking," said Chet; then stopped short as the light of understanding blazed into his brain.

"Patented," he reflected; "that's what it says," and a wondering comprehension was in his voice: "patented by H. Kreiss, of Austria! You—you are the inventor?"

"I did not speak with entire truth to Herr Schwartzmann," admitted Kreiss, "on that occasion when I told him I could not rebuild the control you had demolished. With your equipment on the ship I could have done a quite creditable job, but even now,"—he pointed to the leaf-wrapped bundle in Chet's hand—"with copper I have hammered from the rocks, and with silver and gold and even iron which I found occurring in a quite novel manner, I have done not so badly."

"This is—this is—" Chet stared at the object in his hand; his tongue could not be brought to speak the words. "But what use? How can I get in? The gas—"

"Cause and effect!" stated Herr Doktor Kreiss of the Institute at Vienna, and once more he seemed addressing a class and taking pleasure in his ability to dispense knowledge. "It is the law of the universe.

"I perform an act. It is a cause—I have invoked the law. And the effects go out like circling waves in an endless ocean of time forever beyond our reach.

"But we can do other acts, produce other causes, and sometimes we can neutralize thereby the effects of the first. I do that now." He picked up the second bundle in its wrapping of leaves; it was heavy for him to manage with his wounded arm. "This is all that I have," he said! "I must place it surely.

"Go down toward the ship," he ordered. "Wait where it is safe. Then when the gas ceases you will have but three minutes. Three minutes!—remember! Lose no time at the port!"

He had reached the base of the hill of mud. He was on the windward side; above him the fumerole was grunting and roaring. And, to Chet, the thin figure, gaunt and ungainly and absurd in its wrappings of dilapidated garments, became somehow tremendous, vaguely symbolic. He could not get it clearly, but there was something there of the cool, reasoning sureness of science itself—an indomitable pressing on toward whatever goal the law might lead one to; but Kreiss was human as well. He stopped once and looked about him.

"A laboratory—this world!" he exclaimed. "Virgin! Untouched!... So much to be learned; so much to be done! And mine would have been the glory and fame of it!"

He turned hesitantly, almost apologetically, toward Chet standing motionless and unspeaking with the wonder of this turn of events.

"Should you be so fortunate as to survive," began Kreiss, "perhaps you would be so kind—my name—I would not want it lost." He straightened abruptly.

"Go!" he ordered. "Get as near as you can!" His feet were climbing steadily up the slippery ascent.

The faintest breath of the gas warned Chet back. Almost infinitely diluted, it still set him choking while the tears streamed down his face. But he

worked his way as near the ship as he dared, and he saw through the tears that still blinded his stinging eyes the tall figure of Kreiss as he reached the top.

A table of steaming mud was there, and Kreiss was sinking into it as he struggled forward. At the center was a hot throat where fumes like a breath from hell roared and choked with the strangling of its own gas. The figure writhed as a whirl of green enveloped it, threw itself forward. From one outstretched hand an object fell toward the throat; its leafy wrapping was whipped sharply for an instant by the coughing breath....

And then, where the hot blast had been, and the forming clouds and the erupting mud, was a pillar of fire—a white flame that thundered into the sky.

Straight and clean, like the sword of some guardian angel, it stood erect—a line of dazzling light in a darkening sky. And the fumes of green had vanished at its touch.

But Kreiss! Chet found himself running toward the fumerole. He must save him, drag him back. Then he knew with a certainty that admitted of no question that for Kreiss there was no help: that for this man of science the laws of cause and effect were no longer operative on the plane of Earth. The heat would have killed him, but the enveloping gas must have reached him first. And he had sacrificed himself for what?—that he, Chet, might reach the ship!... Before Chet's eyes was a silvery cylinder whose closed port was plainly marked.

No gas now! No glint of green! The way was clear, and the slim figure of Chet Bullard was checked in its rush toward a mound of mud and the body of a man that lay next to a blasting column of flame; he turned instead to throw himself through the clean air toward the ship that was free of gas.

"Three minutes!" This was what Kreiss had said; this was the allotted time. In three minutes he must reach the ship, force open the long unused port, get inside —!

At one side, across the level lava rock he saw Towahg. The savage was running at top speed. He had thrown away his bow, dropping it lest it impede his flight from this terrifying witchcraft he had seen. There had been a witch-doctor in Towahg's tribe; the savage knew sorcery when he saw it. But never had his witch-doctor changed green gas to a column of fire; and this white sorcerer, Kreiss, powerful as he was, had been struck down by the fire-god before Towahg's eyes. Towahg ran as if the roaring finger of flame might reach after him at any instant.

Chet saw this in a glance—knew the reason for the black's desertion: then lost all thought of him and of Kreiss and even of the waiting ship. For, in the same glance, he saw, springing from behind a lava block, the heavy figure of a man.

Black as any ape, hairy of face, roaring strange oaths, the man threw himself upon Chet! It was Schwartzmann; and, mingled with profane exclamations, were the words: "the ship—und I take it for mineself!" And his heavy body hurled itself down upon the lighter man in the instant that Chet drew his pistol.

But, tearing through Chet's mind, was no rage against this man as an enemy in himself; he thought only of Kreiss' words; "Three minutes! Lose no time at the port!" And now the brave sacrifice! It would be in vain. He twisted himself about, so that his shoulder might receive the human projectile that was crashing upon him.

CHAPTER XXIII

The Might of the "Master"

As with other measures of matters earthly, time is a relative gauge. Nowhere is this more apparent than in those moments of mental stress when time passes in a flash or, conversely, drags each lagging minute into hours of timeless length.

"Three minutes!" The words clanged and reverberated through Chet's brain. And it seemed, as he strained and struggled and was forced backward and yet backward by the weight of his antagonist, that those three minutes had long since passed, and other three's without end.

The enemy's leaping body had been upon him before the detonite pistol was half drawn. And now he fought desperately; he felt only the jar of blows that landed on his half-covered face. There was no sting or pain, only the crashing thud that made strange clamor and confusion in his head. But he ducked and blocked awkwardly with the one arm that held the package Kreiss had given him, while the other hand

that gripped the pistol was twisted behind him.

No chance here for clever blocking, no room for quick foot-work; weight was telling, and the weight was all in favor of his big opponent.

Chet knew that possession of the gun was vital. Flashingly it came to him that Schwartzmann had not fired: his pistol, then, was lost, or he was out of ammunition. And now Chet's hand that held the gun with the six precious charges of detonite was fast in the clutch of a huge paw, and the pain of that twisted arm was sending searing flashes to his brain.



With the free hand he shot over a blow.

A twist of the body, and the pain relaxed. He dropped the leaf-wrapped package to the ground, and, with the free hand, shot over a blow that brought a grunt of pain from Schwartzmann and a gush of blood that smeared the black, hairy face. He took one stiff jolt himself on his half-averted head that he might counter with another to flatten that crushed and painful nose.

For one brief instant Schwartzmann's free hand was raised protectingly to his face so contorted with rage; for one brief instant, below that big fist, there showed the contour of a jaw; and, with every ounce of weight that Chet could put into the swing, he came up from under in that same instant with a smashing left that connected with the exposed jaw.

The hand that gripped his gun-hand did not let go completely, but Chet felt the steel-hard rigidity of that arm relax, and abruptly he knew that he could beat this man down if he once got clear. He didn't need the gun; he needed only to get both hands free. And, despite the arm that clung and swung with his, he managed to wrench himself into a sideways throw of his whole body at the instant he unclosed his hand. The slim barrel of the detonite pistol described a flashing arc through the clear air and clattered along the lava underneath a big shining surface of metal.

And then, in a breath-taking flash of understanding, Chet knew.

He knew he was beside the ship: he saw the closed port and the self-retracting lever that would open it,

and he saw it through clear air where no taint of the green gas was apparent.

He was certain that he had been fighting for an interminable time, yet before him the air was clear. It was impossible, but true; and he threw the half-stunned body of Schwartzmann from him. Then, instead of following it with punishing blows, he sprang toward the port.

With one hand on the lever, he turned to dart a glance toward the column of flame. It was gone! And in its place came green, billowing gas that was coughed and spewed into the air to be caught up in the steady breeze that blew directly from the vent.

Beside him, his antagonist, prone on the lava floor, dragged himself beneath the ship to reach for the gun. Chet paid no heed; his every thought—his whole being, it seemed—was focused upon the lever that turned so slowly, that let fall, at last, a lock whose releasing mechanism clanged loudly through the metal wall.

The outer port, a thin door that served only to streamline the opening, swung open under Chet's hand. And, while he held his breath till his pumping heart set his whole body to pulsing, he drew himself into the ship as the green cloud wrapped thickly about. But first he bent to grasp the knotted vines and leathery leaves that enclosed a bulky package.

The port closed silently upon its soft-faced gasket; it was gas-tight when no pressure was applied. And Chet stumbled and reached blindly till he fell beside

the huge inner compression port, while the breath of gas that had touched him tore with ripping talons at his throat.

More measureless time—whether hours or minutes Chet could never have told—and he sat upright and tried to believe the utterly incredible story that his eyes were telling.

A short passage and a control room beyond! It was just as they had left it; was it days or years before? The shattered control cage was there, the familiar instrument board, the very bar of metal with which he had wrought such havoc in that wild moment of demolition; it was all crystal clear under the flooding light of the nitron illuminator!

Yes, it was true! He, Chet Bullard, was staring wide-eyed at his own control-room, in his own ship—his and Walt's—and he was alone! The remembrance of Walt and Diane, and the realization that now, by some miracle, he might be of help, brought him to his feet.

He sprang toward a lookout where the last light of day was gone and a monstrous moon shone down upon a world of ghastly green. Yet, through the gas, every detail of the world outside showed clear; even the giant fumerole that had been the funeral pyre of a man of science; even the mound of ashes at its top which the moving air was blowing in dusty puffs until spouting mud fell back to hide them from sight.

Chet cursed the gas for the dimness that clouded his eyes, and he rubbed at them savagely as he turned

and walked to a side lookout.

Through the riot of impressions of the fight outside the port, he had known that there was a human body over which he stumbled at times. He saw it now—the body of Schwartzmann's henchman, killed these long weeks before but preserved in the ceaseless flow of gas.

But now, sprawled across it, was another and bulkier shape. Sightless eyes stared upward from a face turned to the cruel gas clouds and the hideous green moon above. The mouth sagged open in a black, bearded face, and one hand still clutched a pistol. It would have shattered his human opponent had the man been given an instant more, but against the enemy that rolled down and overwhelmed him in billowing clouds no weapon could prevail. Herr Schwartzmann had fought his last fight.

The package—the last gift of Kreiss—was still securely wrapped. It lay on the metal floor. Chet stooped to lift it, to work at the knotted vines and lay off the thick wrappings of fibrous leaves, until he stood at last, under the white glare of the bubbling nitron bulb, to stare and stare wordlessly at the cage of metal bars in his hand.

Crude!—yes; no finely polished mechanism, this; no one of the many connection clips that the other had had, either. But Chet knew he could solder on the hundreds of wires that made the nervous system of the control and fed the current to the cage; and Kreiss had believed it would work!

There was no thought of delay in Chet's mind, no waiting for daylight. This was the fourth night since he had been in that place of horror, since, above him in that Stygian pit, an inhuman satanic *something* had said: "... the captives ... a sacrifice to Vashta ... on the sixth night...."

Chet threw off the rags that once had been a trim khaki jacket and went feverishly to work. And through the time that was left he drove himself desperately. The hours so few and each hour so short! As he worked with seemingly countless strands of heavy cables, where each strand must be traced back and its point of connection determined, he knew how long each dreadful minute must be for the two captives deep inside the Dark Moon.

It was as well, perhaps, that Chet did not have the power of distant sight, that he had no messenger like those from the pyramid who might have gone down in that place and have sent him by mental television a picture of what was there. For he would have seen that which could have lent no clarity of vision to his deep-sunk eyes nor skill to the touch of fumbling, tired hands.

Walt Harkness, no longer under hypnotic control, stood in a dim-lit room carved from solid stone; stood, and stared despairingly at the surrounding walls and at the pair of giant ape-men who guarded the one doorway. And, clinging to his hand, was a girl; and she, too, had been released from the invisible bonds. She was speaking:

"No, Walter; we both saw it; it must be true. It was

Chet's pistol; he was there in that horrible place. And I will not give up. He will save us at the last; I know it! He will save us from the inhuman cruelty of those terrible things. He shoots straight, Chet does; and he will give us a bullet apiece from the gun—the last kindly act of a friend. That's what the signal meant."

"Then why did he wait! Why didn't he do it then?" Walt Harkness had made the same demand a hundred times.

And Diane answered as always: "I don't know, Walter, I—don't—know."

Chet, cursing insanely at strange machines—equilibrators that controlled the longitudinal and transverse and rotative stability of the ship and that refused to take their electrical charge—knew with horrible certainty that the last night had come. But to the two humans, in the depths of this world where all knowledge of time was lost, the knowledge came only when they were dragged by their guards into a familiar room.

Ape-men were all about; they stared unwinkingly at the captives who stared back again in an effort to keep their eyes averted from the monstrous repulsiveness on the platform above them, till their eyes were drawn to meet the compelling gaze of the "Master" of a lost race.

A something which, at first glance, seemed all head—this was the "Master." The naked body, so skeleton-thin, was shrunken and distorted; it was withered and leathery-brown, like the aged parchment of

mummified flesh. It was seated in a resplendent chair, whose radiating handles were for its carrying; and, above it, the head, so incredibly repulsive, was made more hideous by its travestied resemblance to human form.

Soft, pulpy and wetly smooth—a ten-foot sac, enclosed in a membrane of dead gray shot through with flickerings of color that flamed and died—the whole pulsing mass was supported in a sling of golden cloth. And, dominating it, in the center of that flabby forehead, a focal point for the gaze of the horrified observers, was a single glassy and lidless eye.

Cold, unchanging, entirely expressionless except for the fixed ferocity that was there, the eye was a yellow disk of hate, where quivering lines of violet culminated in a central, flaming point; and that point of living fire swelled prodigiously before their staring eyes. It seemed to expand, to slowly draw their senses—their very selves—from their bodies, to plunge them down to annihilation in that fiery pit where a soundless voice was speaking.

"Slaves! Apes! Take the captives to the great altar rock of Vashta, to the Holy of Holies. The others you were permitted to slaughter for our food; hold these two safely. For one shall die slowly for Vashta's pleasure, and one shall live on for mine. And we would not have them under our mental control, so guard them well; the offering is more pleasing to Vashta when the blood in his cup flows from a creature unbound both in body and mind." And the two helpless humans found themselves released from the flaming pit that became again but an eye in the forehead of a loathsome thing.

They were fully conscious of their surroundings as they were herded up through the pyramid and out into the night, where rough, calloused hands seized them and dragged them to a smooth table-top of rock that stood only slightly above the ground before the great rocky pile. Stunned, waiting dumbly, they saw swarming ape-men clustered like bees on the lower pyramid face; they saw coverings of stone being removed and a great recess laid open, while the ape-things dropped in awe before a grotesque and horrible beast-head carved from a single piece of stone.

The eyes of the beast shone with some cold, hidden light. They seemed fixed hungrily upon a cup in a distorted hand, and, though the cup was empty, there was promise of its being filled. For little sluices of stone sloped from the place where the captives stood, and they ended above the cup so that the life-blood of a slaughtered creature, or a sacrificed man, might pour splashingly in, a streaming draught for this blood-thirsty god.

The arena filled with abominable life. Now, in the dark silence of a moonless night, the cold stars shone down on a gathering of spectators, wild and unreal—nameless, spectral horrors of a blood-chilling dream.

The flat capstone of the pyramid was the resting place of the "Master"; his huge head showed pulpy and gray above the glittering gold of the metal carrying-chair where a misshapen body was seated. Others like him had poured from the pyramid, carried by thousands of slaves to their places about the arena.

Monsters of prodigious strength, their forebears must have been, but this degenerate product of

evolutionary forces had lost all firmness of flesh. Their bodies, sacrificed for the development of the bulbous heads, were mere appendages, fit only for the propagation of their kind and for the digestion of human food.

The clean air of night was polluted with abominable odors as it swept over the exudations of those glistening, pulpy masses. To the two waiting humans on the great sacrificial stone came a deadening of the senses, as an executioner, armed with strange torturing instruments, drew near. But, of the two, one, clinging hopelessly to the other, abruptly stifled the dry choking sobs in her throat to lift her head in sharp, listening alertness.

Walt Harkness was speaking in a dead, emotionless tone:

"Chet has failed us; he is probably dead. Good-by, dear—"

But his words were interrupted and smothered by a breathless, strangling voice. Diane Delacouer, staring with agonized eyes into the night was calling to him:

"Listen! Oh, listen! It's the ship, Walter! It's the ship! It's not the wind! I'm not dreaming nor insane!—Chet is coming with the ship!"

It was as well that Chet Bullard could not see the two, could not hear that voice, trembling and vibrant with an impossible, heart-gripping hope; and surely it was well that he could not share their emotions when, for them, the silence became faintly resonant, when the distant, humming, drumming reverberation

grew to a nerve-shattering roar, when the black night was ripped apart by the passage of a meteor-ship that shrieked and thundered through the screaming air close above the arena, while, with the rock beneath them still shuddering from the blasting voice of that full exhaust, the sky above burst into dazzling flame.

For Chet in that control-room that was darkened that he might see the world outside—Chet, grim and haggard and stained of face and with thin-drawn lips that bled unheeded where his teeth had clamped down on them—Chet Bullard, Master Pilot of the World, had no thought nor emotion to spare for aught beyond the reach of his hand. He was throwing his ship at a speed that was sheer suicide over a strange terrain flashing under and close below.

He overshot the target on the first try. The twin beams of his searchlights picked up the dazzling black and white of the arena; it was before him!—under him!—lost far astern in one single instant that was ended as it began. But his hand, ready on a release key, pressed as he passed, and the sky behind him turned blazing bright with the cloud of flare-dust that made white flame as it fell.

Such speed was not meant for close work; nor was a ship expected to hit dense air with a blast such as this on full. Even through the thick insulated walls came a terrible scream. Like voices of humans in agony, the tortured air shrieked its protest while Chet threw on the bow-blast to check them and slanted slowly, slowly upward in a great loop whose tremendous size was an indication of the speed and

the slow turning that was all Chet could stand and live through.

He came in more slowly the next time. Floodlights in the under-skin of the ship were blazing white, and whiter yet were the star-flares that he dropped one after another. Brighter than the sunlight of the brightest day this globe had ever seen, the sky, ablaze with dazzling fire, shone down in vivid splendor to drain every shadow and half-light and leave only the hard contrast of black and white.

In the nose of the ship was a .50 caliber gun. Chet sprayed the pyramid top, but it is doubtful if the two below heard the explosions. They must have seen the whole cap of the mountain of rock vanish as if, feather-light, it had been snatched up in a gust of wind. But perhaps they had eyes only for each other and for a glittering, silvery ship that came crashing toward the place where they stood, that checked itself on thunderous exhausts; then touched the hard floor of the arena as softly as the caress of a master hand on the controls.

But from them came no cry nor exclamation of joy; they were dazed, Chet saw, when he threw open the port. They were walking slowly, unbelievingly, toward him till Diane faltered. Then Chet leaped forward to sweep the drooping, ragged figure up into his arms while he hustled Harkness ahead and closed the port upon them all. But, still haggard and stern of face, he left the fainting girl to Harkness' care while he sprang for a ball-control and a firing key that released a hail of little .50 caliber shells whose touch could plough the earth with the ripping sword of an

avenging god.

And later—a pulverous mass where a huge pyramid had been; smoking rock in a great oval of shattered crumbling blocks; and, under all the cold light of the stars, no sign of life but for a screaming, frantic mob of ape-men, freed and fleeing from the broken bondage of masters now crushed and dead!

All this Chet's straining, blood-shot eyes saw clearly before his hand on the firing key relaxed, before he covered his eyes with trembling hands as realization of their own release rushed overwhelmingly upon him.

There were supplies of clothing in the ship—jackets, knee-length trousers, silken blouses, boots, and even snug-fitting, fashionable caps. Very unlike the ragged wanderers of the mountainous wastes were the three who stood safely to windward of a spouting fumerole.

Mud, coughed hoarsely from a hot throat, and green, billowing gas!—there was nothing now to show that here was the scene of a companion's last moments. With heads bared to the steady breeze that had been their undoing, they stood silent for long minutes.

Behind them, at a still safer distance, where no chance flicker of a fire-god's finger might strike him down as it had the white man, a black figure danced absurdly from foot to foot and indulged in unexpected gyrations of joy.

For did not Towahg hold in one hand a most marvelous weapon of shining, keen-edged metal,

with a blade that was longer than his two hands? What member of the tribe had ever seen such an indescribably glorious thing? And, lacking the words even to propound that question, Towahg spun himself in still tighter spirals of ecstasy.

Then there was the ax! Not made of stone but fashioned from the same metal! And besides this a magic thing for which as yet there was not even a name! It made flashing reflections in the sun; and if one held it just so, and moved one's head before it, it showed a quite remarkably attractive face of a man who was more than half ape—though Towahg had never yet been able to catch that man beyond the magic that the white men called "mirror."

He was still enthralled in his grotesque posturing when Diane looked down from the floating ship.

"He'll be the Lord Chief Voodoo Man for the whole tribe," she said, and, for the first time since they had stood at the fumerole, she managed to smile. "And now," she asked, "are we off? What comes next?"

Chet's hand was on a metal ball in a crudely constructed cage of metal bars. He looked at Harkness, and, at the other's almost imperceptible nod, he moved the ball forward and up.

"We're off!" Harkness agreed. "Off for Earth—home! And it will look good to us all. We will take up things where we left them when we were interrupted: there's no Schwartzmann to fear now. We can show our ship to the world—revolutionize all lines of transportation; and we can plan—"

He failed to finish the sentence. To his reaching vision there were, perhaps, more potentialities than he could compass in words.

And Chet Bullard, fingering the triple star on his blouse—the insignia that had gone with him through all his hopes and despairs—looked out into space and smiled.

Behind him a brilliant world went slowly dark; it became, after long watching, a violet ring—then that was gone; the Dark Moon was lost in the folds of enshrouding night. Ahead was an infinity of black space where only the distant stars struck sparks of fire in the dark. And still he smiled, as if, looking into the unplumbed depths, he, too, made plans. But he moved the little ball within his hand and swung the bow sights to bear upon a glorious globe—a brilliant, welcome beacon.

"Home it is!" he stated. "We're on our way!"

But there was needed the rising roar from astern that his words might have meaning; it thundered sonorously its resounding hum in a crescendo of power that brooked no denial, that threw them out and onward through the velvet dark.

The End.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK BROOD OF THE DARK MOON ***

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