

FALL
1945

PLANET

STRANGE ADVENTURES
ON OTHER WORLDS
—THE UNIVERSE OF
FUTURE

STORIES 20c



DICK PASKHURST

BUBBLE DWELLERS

BY ROSS ROCKLYNNE

JUGGERNAUT OF SPACE

BY RAY CUMMINGS

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Juggernaut of Space

Ray Cummings

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Never had the mind of man conceived so horrible a doom as was reaching for Earth. Never had a greater need for Earth's valiant champions been needed. And yet the only ones who could fight the menace—were five futile humans, prisoners on another world.

My name is Robert Rance. You've heard of me, of course—through the recent weird affair of the Crimson Comet, if for nothing else. It seems to me rather ironic: for five years I have been reporting popular science items on the split-wave band of non-visual broadcasting. Station WANA-NYC—the main outlet of *Amalgamated Newscasters' Association*, for whom I work. I struggled for personal publicity. Then I was plunged—certainly entirely against my will—into the blood-chilling, gruesome adventure which is now popularly known as “The Death of the Crimson Comet.” Out of it has come publicity beyond my wildest dreams. And now that I've got it, I don't want it. I'm not a hero, of dauntless, fearless courage. I'm not a scientific genius, who has made possible to Earth the New Era of Interplanetary Travel. But I've been called all that by broadcasting asses who are my friends.

I'm just a plain American, who, when his life is in danger gets frightened as the devil, fighting to get himself out of a jam, and with not much thought of anything else. I didn't relish that Crimson Comet business, and I don't want ever to experience anything like it again. I'm not alone in this. There were four others in it with me. They don't like all this public fuss being made over them any more than I do. They weren't heroic. They just tried their best not to get killed. So on their behalf, and my own, I'm writing this narrative of exactly what happened to us. Not the professionally glamorized version which you've heard so many times. Just the facts.

The thing must have been brewing, under cover, for many months. Like a smouldering, unnoticed fire. No one knows; we can only guess at what happened. But looking back on it now, there were incidents, seemingly unrelated at the time, which now I can see were significant. The first of them was in August, 1985—about a year ago. I had just finished a broadcast on some trivial, popular science subject, which I had tried to make sound important to my listeners. And Dr. Johns of the White Mountains Observatory telephoned me. I knew him quite well; he had often steered me into little subjects for my broadcasts, but this, I could see at once, was something different. The tel-grid showed his thin face without its usual smile. His grey hair was rumpled; his eyes bloodshot. He looked as though he hadn't slept for much too long.

“I thought you might want to come up and see me, Bob,” he suggested.

“Sure I will. I always appreciate your tips, Dr. Johns.”

His smile was queer. “I haven’t got anything—not that you can use,” he said. “Certainly not yet. I guess I just figure I’ll feel better, talking about it. When can you arrive?”

“I’ll come right away,” I told him. “Not busy tonight. I’ll be there by midnight.”

We disconnected. I was just about to leave when Shorty Dirk walked in on me. Shorty was—and still is—connected with the *American Newsprint Publishers*—a reporter in the Crime Division, specializing in reporting the work of the Bureau of Missing Persons. He and I were good friends, perhaps because we are so different. I’m big and rangy, slow-going and easy-tempered. In college I was a good athlete, but now this radio work was putting quite a bit of soft poundage on me which didn’t belong—poundage which, I do assure you, the Crimson Comet business got rid of in a hurry. Like all of us five, I was something like an undernourished greyhound when we got back.

Shorty isn’t much over five and a half feet, thin and wiry and alert—a sort of little human dynamo; a freckle-faced fellow with a shock of bristly red hair and a good-natured grin.

“Where you going?” he asked.

I told him. “I’ll go with you,” he said. He grinned. “I’m only here, Bob, because I haven’t got anything better to do.”

We took my small flyer from the roof stage and headed north. It was a handsome night, warm and almost cloudless with the upper air so clear that the stars were packed solid on the purple-blue vault of the heavens. Shorty and I didn’t theorize, during the brief trip up to the White Mountains, on what Dr. Johns might have to say. Shorty wasn’t much interested in astronomy, anyway—to him, as he often said, it was an uninteresting enigma. He mentioned that tonight.

“Good,” I said. “Then, how is crime coming? Many people missing lately?”

Things were dull, he assured me. Nothing but the usual run of stuff that you couldn’t write up or broadcast because nobody but a few relatives were interested. As it happened, the Crimson Comet affair caused five mysterious disappearances, Shorty, myself and three others. I think I can understand now why it happened that I knew them all. I must have been marked, through my widely broadcast popular science. That involved Shorty, because he was so much with me. And as for the other three—looking back on it now I realize that each of them vanished soon after having been with me. I was being trailed and was seized last.

We landed on the private stage of the big Observatory about midnight and presently were with Dr. Johns in his study. What he had to tell us didn't seem very startling at the time. But in the light of what was to happen, looking back on it now I can see its deadly significance. Like a great pattern of evil, to involve disaster and death to all the world! Grim, stealthy events creeping upon us—little things here on Earth just involving me and those few others; and with them, giant events mysteriously taking place out in the great vault of the stars.

“Here at the Observatory,” Dr. Johns was saying, “we thought that somehow we must be making miscalculations. A fraction of a second in the axial and orbital movements of the Earth, which involved the visual movement of all the starfield. But we checked and rechecked. And then other observatories reported it.”

The Earth's axial rotation, and its movement around the Sun apparently were changing infinitesimally.

“Too bad,” Shorty commented. “I'm sure sorry.”

But Dr. Johns didn't smile. “There seem to be many unrelated things,” he said. “You can shrug any of them off. But then, if it once occurs to you that they might be connected—”

“What other things?” I asked.

Meteorologists were admitting that the weather was peculiar. Nothing which had not occurred before, of course—unusual, freakish storms in many parts of the Earth.

“And for a month now,” Dr. Johns went on, “there has been noticeable a peculiar purple radiance in the air at night.”

“Purple radiance?” Shorty echoed. “Hadn't noticed it.”

“Because it isn't visible to the naked eye,” Dr. Johns retorted. “But it has disturbed the exposure time of our photographic work. Slowed it down. And our spectrograms show it, or at least they show its effects so that we know if we could see it—it would be a purplish glow.”

And there was a new comet which several of the observatories recently had located. I had heard that much—had mentioned it in one of my broadcasts.

“We call it a comet,” Dr. Johns explained, “because there's a crimson radiance streaming back from it as it comes in toward the Sun. But its nucleus seems sizable—five hundred miles in diameter possibly. A planetoid, with a radiance. You might just possibly call it that.”

“And it's just about now crossing the orbit of Mars,” I said. “That was the last report made public, wasn't it?”

Dr. Johns nodded. “Our calculations of its orbit—made a month ago—showed it would pass within about twenty million miles of Earth. But that's all changed now.

It's erratic."

I was beginning to see why he was startled. This new Crimson Comet wasn't obeying the normal laws of Celestial Mechanics. It was swimming erratically in Space. Could it be a solid body as big as five hundred miles in diameter? Solid enough to be the cause, by its proximity, of the Earth's axial and orbital disturbances?

"And this purple radiance," Dr. Johns said soberly, "we've just been wondering if that could be coming from the comet."

I need not specify all the weird theories that Dr. Johns and I talked of that evening. With me, a broadcaster of popular science as lurid always as I could make it, weird, gruesome theories came natural. But with him, a man of cold logic and careful science—well, it must have been a premonition. Was this Crimson Comet hurling a lethal radiance at us, attacking the Earth? A tiny, inhabited world of diabolic science enabling it to direct its own course through Space, peopled with weird enemies coming at us now, bent on destroying us?

You couldn't make such speculations public. People would laugh. But some wouldn't. Some would believe you, and go into a wild panic. And Dr. Johns had sent for me—a sort of kindred spirit in the concocting of wild tales.

"You two, say nothing of this," he warned us. "And if it goes on, you can announce it, Bob." He shrugged again, and tried to laugh lugubriously. "I feel like an idiot, talking about the end of the world with a couple of news-hounds. And yet, somehow, I also feel that maybe everyone of us on Earth is in more deadly danger than he ever was before!"

And we certainly were!

That was the general gist of our talk that night with Dr. Johns. I never found out more from him—I had no time. The thing struck at me four days later. During those four days, it happened that quite by chance I met the three other people who were destined to be plunged with Shorty and myself into adventure. The first was Peter Mack. I was walking at night in Washington Square, in New York City—small remaining tradition of little old New York. To me it's like a Monks' Garden, flowered, tree-lined rectangle enclosed by the massive building walls with the canyon of Fifth Avenue running into it.

The night was hot and clear. The little tent of blue over the Square was star-filled. I chanced to sit down for a moment on a bench.

"Got a light?" There was a young fellow on the bench with me. He shifted toward me. He was a thin, lanky fellow about my own age, hatless, with the starlight

on his sparse, ruffled sandy hair. A slack-jawed fellow, with shabby clothes. He had a grimy cigarette butt between his fingers.

“I can do better than that,” I smiled. I gave him a cigarette and lighted it for him.

“Thanks.” He would have turned away, but I stopped him. I don’t know why, but there seemed something about him that was likable. He needed a shave badly; his clothes were torn. I had a look at his eyes, red-rimmed, bloodshot. Just a down-and-outer on a park bench. But you don’t see many of them these days.

“Maybe you haven’t got a job,” I said. “I can tell you a dozen places—easy work too—in case you’re a stranger in town.”

“I’m not,” he said. “Thanks for the cigarette. I’m just minding my own business.”

I shrugged; and as he gave me a resentful look and shifted back to his own end of the bench, I let him alone.

I know now a lot of things that were the matter with Peter Mack, but he has asked me not to go into details. It isn’t important anyway; resentfulness at a girl; the escape mechanism of too much drink; trouble with the authorities in a lot of minor ways. And then a sort of sullen resentment at everything and everybody. A derelict who could salvage himself but he didn’t want to.

Anyway, that was Peter Mack. And then there was Vivian La Marr. I met her back stage at the *Gayety* with Shorty who was there to see the stage manager who was to be a witness in some trivial crime-affair that Shorty was reporting. This Vivian La Marr was the main reason why the *Gayety* was having trouble with the Anti-Vice League and was about to lose its license. She came up to me back stage—a lush, artificial blonde, heavy with makeup; with an amazing expanse of flesh smooth as satin, and a negligible tinsel costume that the Anti-Vice League did not like at all but which pleased the *Gayety’s* customers very much.

“You’re Robert Rance,” she said. “I saw your picture an’ wasn’t you televized a few times.”

I agreed that was so.

“I also heard one of your astronomy lectures,” she added with a wry grimace. “I was wonderin’ how a guy like that could live with himself.” She looked me up and down. “Now I see you ain’t so bad,” she said. She was grinning.

“Much obliged,” I said. “Maybe I can teach you astronomy some time!”

“From you I would be glad to learn anything,” she retorted, mockingly. We were standing by the stage door where it was cooler, and a moment later she was called back on the stage.

That was Vivian La Marr. The other person who was destined to be involved

with us was J. Walter Blaine, the International Financier. I interviewed him at his Fifth Avenue Club. He tells me now that I may say what I like concerning my impression of him that first time I met him. So I will be absolutely frank.

A man of multi-millions and international importance makes many friends, and inevitably many enemies. Seldom can he know what people really think of him. His enemies exaggerate the worst, and his friends mostly fawn. Blaine's personal reputation, by hearsay, had reached me, of course. I had no expectation of liking him, and, very frankly, I didn't. I found him a big man, as tall as myself, heavy, portly from easy living. But I must say his appearance was impressive—a big mane of shaggy hair, a rather handsome, large-featured face, keen dark eyes under heavy brows, a jutting chin.

He was playing chess with a fellow club member and I sat down to watch. I know something about chess and I think his playing very well displayed his character. He won, with skill of aggressive attack. But there was about it something you didn't like. His incisive moving of his men, as though there could be no doubt that it was the correct move; and his whole attitude made you hope it wasn't. It was a quite informal game. Once Blaine made an obvious, rather silly mistake, exposing a piece. His opponent offered to have him take it back. He didn't; he pretended it was what he wanted to do, taking the loss rather than admit his error.

Then he was finished and turned to me. I was there to interview him for the Editor of a booklet being issued by the Royal Astronomical Society of London. It seems that the Society was issuing a booklet with little character sketches of the people from whom they had obtained donations—sort of a tribute of thanks. I was commissioned to write the one on Blaine.

“Did they tell you how much I gave them?” he demanded of me now.

I shook my head.

“No,” I said.

His smile was ironic. “I gave them a hundred pounds. What they wanted, and expected, was ten thousand. So now you'll write something very nice about me which they hope will flatter me so I'll give them more. Don't bother, young man.”

Blaine was a bachelor. My first impression of him was that he was doing some woman a favor by keeping himself in that category.

So much for J. Walter Blaine.

It was the next night that the weird thing struck at me. I was walking along the edge of the park, alone on my way to the mid-town office of Amalgamated Newscasters. The street was fairly brightly lighted. I recall that there chanced to be no pedestrians near me, just an empty length of grey-white stone pavement in front

of me, with the park on one side. And quite suddenly it was as though I had stepped through a black door into nothingness! I could have been stricken blind, yet it was not that, for in another split-second I could see a dim, red radiance and hear voices. Then I could see the shapes of people—three men and a woman—stumbling like myself on a strange earthy ground here in the red darkness.

“Look! Here comes another one of us!” It was a terrified man’s voice, vaguely familiar.

“My Gawd, it’s the handsome astronomer! *I know him!*” The voice of Vivian La Marr.

And then there was Shorty’s voice! “Bob! Bob Rance!” I could feel him gripping me and there was the vague outline of his frightened white face at my shoulder. “Bob! Tell us—what’s happened to all of us?”

And Vivian cried: “Hang onto him! There he goes!” I was trying to speak but my tongue was thick, my throat dry and congested.

Things were dim and hazy in my mind; and I could feel the cool blankness stealing through my muscles. The touch of hands on my arms faded, until at last there was no more sensation. I made one last great effort to bring myself out of the fog.

Then I felt myself falling into a soundless blackness.

II

I think I did not quite lose consciousness. I was aware that I had fallen to the earthy ground, with Shorty and Vivian bending over me. My head was roaring; I was bathed in cold sweat. Then I began to feel better, trying to sit up, with Shorty's arm holding me.

"You're all right now, Bob? Can't you speak?"

"Yes. I—guess so."

Whatever had happened which had brought me here when an instant ago, it seemed, I was walking alone by the park, none of us could imagine. The identical experience had happened to Shorty, to Vivian La Marr; and to Peter Mack, and J. Walter Blaine.

"But—where are we?" I demanded, when in another moment I was strong enough to struggle upright in the crimson glowing darkness.

"Damned if we know," Shorty said. It seemed a sort of underground grotto. I could begin to make out its rocky walls and ceiling now, with that glow like a crimson phosphorescence streaming from them. One by one my companions had found themselves here. Blaine was the first. Then at intervals it seemed as though the wall across the grotto had opened and Shorty, Vivian and Mack came stumbling in, standing an instant, dazed, and then falling, as I had fallen, almost in a normal faint.

"No way of getting out of this damned place," Shorty was saying. "The rock-wall over there moves like a door, but we haven't been able to open it."

How much time had passed since we were stricken with this weird thing, none of us could guess. Suddenly I was startled. My clothes were too big for me. My body felt thin; I had lost twenty or thirty pounds. And in the dim crimson glow now I could see Mack, Vivian and Blaine fairly well. All of them thinner than I remembered them, with faces drawn and haggard and big glowing smouldering eyes. And we men had a growth of beard.

Weeks could have passed! Vivian laughed lugubriously as she met my startled stare. "De-glamorized," she said. "I feel like a lost alley cat." She was clad in a thin, summer street dress. Her lush lissome curves were gone so that it hung drably on her. The vivid artificial blonde hair was darkish at the roots; it fell in a tangled mass to her shoulders. Her makeup was gone; her lips pallid. "We're all about starved to death, if you ask me," she added.

"He brought us food a while ago," Blaine put in.

“Try to eat it,” Mack said. “There’s some of it over by the wall. If that’s what we’ve been living on, no wonder we’re starved.”

“He? Food?” I stammered.

Since Blaine had found himself here, what seemed like perhaps twelve hours had passed. Our captor had come twice. They had only seen him dimly.

“But he’s human—semi-human, anyway,” Shorty said. “And he seems to talk English a little.”

“Look!” Vivian suddenly murmured. “Here he comes again.”

The red glow across the cave for an instant brightened. It seemed as though a rock had slid aside and closed again. A dim upright shape moved toward us; stopped and stood regarding us with eyes that gleamed green, smouldering in the dimness.

“The Great Mind—ready—see you soon,” the figure’s weird, guttural voice said.

I moved forward, unsteadily on my feet. “I want to talk to you,” I said. I could see him now, quite plainly. A man? I suppose you could call him that. He was about five feet tall, squat and square, with high square shoulders, a rectangular torso and two legs which seemed encased in a flexible metal grey fabric. His head was round, set upon a triangular neck with its apex under his chin—a bullet head, hairless, with a weird, boxlike face, square-chinned and broad square nose. His two arms, long and powerful-looking, dangled at his sides.

This, we were soon to learn, was a Radak. I recall my first clear impression that there was about him a queer sense of power. And something else, mysterious, yet even more apparent. An automaton-like quality. It was as though here were an individual who was only acting his role as a tiny part of some great, organized thing. A cog in a machine. The German Nazis of my father’s boyhood, must have been like that. And here with these Radaks of the Crimson Comet it seemed intensified to be almost gruesome. You could not tell why, but you could sense it. Human individuals who lived only to do what they were told. A great mental force dominating them from birth to death, so that they thought what they were told to think; only did what they were told to do.

This Radak answered our questions now; he seemed willing enough to talk, though in many ways his knowledge of our language, newly absorbed by his weird brain, was inadequate. I think it best to summarize briefly here, the total of what we learned and saw of the strange little world and its people. In actuality we were destined to see very little. Doomed little world! And since its death now, as you all

know, most of its secrets will forever remain a mystery.

It was some five hundred Earth-miles in diameter, doubtless of immense density because we were not aware of much change of gravitational force. Of its past history, no one knows much. Somewhere out in Interplanetary Space it must once have had a normal orbit. I shall explain more of that later.

Two human races were here now. The Radaks—there were perhaps something like a thousand or two of them—were the rulers. The others were the Lei—a primitive, gentle people, no more than slaves to the dominating Radaks. Nature always had been cruel, uncompromising, here on Zelos. (Which was the word their native language seemed to call their world.) Both Radaks and Lei lived always in great underground caverns with which this section of the surface was honeycombed. Above them, on the outer surface, weird storms and erratic extremes of heat and cold were prevalent. And out there strange monsters roamed—the Deathless Things, as they were called, since it was impossible to kill them. Creatures of indescribable horrible quality who seemed unwilling to come into the confines of the underground corridors and grottos, so that all the humans were of necessity driven here, eking out a drab and grim existence.

How the strange science of the Radaks developed will forever remain a mystery. Perhaps it was brought here from some other planet. Despite the science, life here was primitive—a struggle for the bare necessities. Queerly enough, the Radak science seemed not concerned with better living. They had a few small space-fliers—the secret of interplanetary travel was known to them. Perhaps only recently—that seems rather certain. Beyond that, there was nothing save the weird, mysterious mechanisms by which at last they had been able to control the space-movements of their tiny world. It was all here, in what they called the “Great Cavern of Machines.” Shorty and I were there for a brief time—an unforgettable time of horror.

“The Great Mind will see us soon?” I was saying now to this Radak who stood stiff and stolid beside me. “Who—what is that?”

We were soon to see. Another Radak appeared, motioning us imperiously to follow him. Neither of these fellows seemed to have any weapons on them, though of course there was no way of telling. Shorty nudged me, muttering something about starting a fight.

“You’re crazy,” I whispered. “We’d be killed.”

“The Great Mind—want see you now,” one of the Radaks said. He led us, and we followed him, with the other Radak behind us, out into a dim rock-corridor gleaming with that same crimson phosphorescence.

The banker, Blaine, pushed past me. “I’ll attend to this,” he said. “This Ruler,

whoever he is, he can be bought. I'll get him to take us back to Earth—promise him riches—”

The ragged, cadaverous Mack gave Blaine a glance of contempt. “I guess it's strange to you, not being able to buy everything with your money, isn't it?” he commented.

A distant murmur of voices sounded ahead of us now, and we could see where the light-glow widened as the corridor emerged into another grotto. More Radaks were around us now, herding us with their stiff, jerky movements, jabbering with their strange guttural voices. The murmur ahead of us grew louder; then we emerged from the tunnel.

It was at first almost like being above ground—a huge grotto with red-glowing ceiling high up, dim in the crimson haze. To the sides the precipitous rock-walls widened rapidly out. Ahead of us, down a ragged, undulating slope, there was only a red haze of distance. There seemed to be distant fields, with things growing in them. There was a spindly blue and red stalk-like vegetation growing like trees perhaps to a height of a hundred feet. And off to the left, under the trees, there were mound-shaped little buildings.

We were on a broad level space at the top of the slope. A hundred or more Radaks were here, some crowding at us, but most standing stiff, gazing at us with gleaming, animal-like eyes. And now I saw Radak women and children among them—the women broader-hipped, narrower shouldered. But they were all cast in the same mold—even the children stood at attention, like rows of little statues waiting for something to move them, with only their eyes in motion.

Most of the murmuring voices were further down the slope. A crowd of figures milled about, down there, trying to see us better. A thousand perhaps. The Lei, the slaves of this little world. Certainly they seemed far more human than the Radaks—slim and slight, and some of them as tall as Shorty. They were dressed in simple flowing fabric garments. A bronzed-skinned people, the women with long-flowing hair.

“You come—this way,” the Radak said. “Now—you stand still—the Great Mind speak to you.”

Ruler of the Crimson Comet. He sat on a sort of stone throne with a leafy canopy over him. Our captors shoved us forward until we stood in a wavering line, all of us staring blankly at this Being whose mentality encompassed and dominated every living human on his tiny world. He looked as though once he had had the aspect of a Radak. But that perhaps was a hundred or two hundred Earth-years

ago. He sat now with his shriveled, wrinkled grey body small as a child, encased in a single garment of woven fabric. His round head, devoid of hair, wobbled on a spindly neck. Skin like shriveled grey parchment covered his shrunken bony face giving him a mummy-like appearance of immense age. His shiny, smooth-grey skull seemed bloated by the pulsating brain-tissue within it. It bulged in places, with worm-like knots under the scalp, dilating, quivering, as his huge green-glowing eyes regarded us.

Then he spoke, slowly with a measured, sonorous voice of weird sepulchral tone. And what he said—it was as though here we faced a mental power too great to resist; as though there could be no question but that his thoughts must be our thoughts. I felt it with a sudden strange shudder—a radiance of thought from him, beating down, destroying whatever was within me of independent individualism. And the realization swept me; if I yielded to this radiance—these thought-waves, whatever they might be, then all that was Robert Rance would be gone. I would be nothing but an automaton.

He was saying, “You will listen. There are things I shall explain to you Earthmen. I have sent to Earth and brought you here—because each of you has a knowledge of many things on Earth that I wish to know.”

I listened, numbed, somewhat perhaps as though hypnotized. In this Radak ruler’s judgment, Blaine the banker, Mack the derelict, Shorty, myself and Vivian—the sum total of the myriad things that were stacked in our brains—were what now must go into his. Certainly a varied, representative strata of Earth-knowledge.

“You want to learn everything we know?” Blaine suddenly said. “How can you do that? Suppose we don’t want to teach you? And why do you want to learn it? What are your plans? What I want to know is—do you realize who and what I am, on Earth?”

Of us all, undoubtedly the dominating nature of J. Walter Blaine made him best able to resist that weird mental force that was engulfing us. Yet his manner, his querulous, arrogant questions under these strange, unearthly conditions here on the Crimson Comet certainly were fatuous, childish. Mack gave a short, disagreeable laugh.

“On Earth, okay,” Mack muttered. “But you don’t amount to much here.”

“Money of course, won’t mean anything to you,” Blaine was saying. “But I have other things on Earth—things you would want. Look here, if you’ll send all these people away, I’ll have a talk with you. I’ll—”

He got no further. It seemed that a look of wonderment was upon the shriveled,

ancient grey face. The eyes were darting little green fires. The measured voice said, "I shall attend to you later—" And then droned into the Radak tongue. Four of the squat little men marched upon Blaine, seizing him.

"What in the devil—stop that!" Blaine remonstrated. There was a scuffle beginning. I recall that I shouted,

"Blaine! Take it easy! You'll be killed!"

Amazing power of these squat little men! A claw-like hand was clapped over Blaine's mouth; his flailing arms and kicking legs were pinned by the Radak's clutches; and then they picked him up and carted him away.

"I shall begin with you, Peter Mack," the Radak ruler said quietly. "Come forward, bend before me."

For a second Mack hesitated, flinging Shorty and me a questioning glance. But we had nothing to offer. Then the shabby, lanky figure of the bearded Mack shambled forward, guided by two Radaks until he was standing with head bent before the Ruler. Down the slope the murmurs of the crowd of Lei rose into a babble. The milling throng of slave-people a hundred yards or so from us crowded curiously forward to see Mack better. There was a sudden, low-voiced command from the Radak Ruler. A dozen or more of the squat, grey Radaks ran at the Lei, cuffing them, knocking them back . . . I saw a young Lei girl, slim, with flowing white and tawny hair framing her face. The little automaton Radak ran at her, struck her in the mouth so that the blood spurted out.

And through it all, near me a row of Radak children stood stiffly at attention, motionless, with only their round green eyes turning sidewise to watch the scene.

Then the ancient Radak Ruler's smouldering gaze was upon Mack's head. An awed silence fell over the scene as Mack stood motionless. Who shall say by what weird and gruesome process Mack was now being sapped! No one on Earth knows what a thought is. No one can say what is within our brain cells to constitute knowledge. But something is there, something in our conscious and subconscious minds upon which our memory can draw. And we do know that thought is a wave of vibration—an infinitely tiny, infinitely rapid vibration. A thing that at least has a tangible entity. And this Radak's mind now was drawing, sapping from Mack.

A minute. Five minutes. In the tense silence, I felt Shorty clutch at me, heard him mutter: "God, it's weird!"

Mack now was drooping. A mental agony, rasping his nerves now, drawing vitality from him so that he drooped, swayed, and suddenly let out a groan. Mental anguish, with screaming nerves translating it into physical pain.

"It's torture!" Vivian murmured. "Look at him—stop it! Stop it!"

Mack had fallen to the ground, writhing now, mumbling with futile hands clawing at his face and head as though to pluck away that damnable, torturing gaze. But still, calmly, inexorably the green-eyed, monstrous little Radak held him—this shriveled Radak Ruler, avidly, greedily drawing in the knowledge of Mack’s past life—those myriad little things of Earth-life stored within Mack’s brain. Surely it must have been a torture most horrible.

Shorty and I were starting to leap forward in protest. But Vivian was ahead of us, raging, rushing heedlessly at the old Radak. She almost reached him. She was screaming, “You—you rotten damn Thing—you—”

Her hand went up to strike him. It was all a sudden chaos, just a few seconds. Radaks caught Shorty and me; with almost machine-like strength their arms pinned us. I think I yelled at Shorty not to struggle. In that same second, I saw Vivian’s arm with clenched fist trying to hit the Radak Ruler, but a little squat grey figure standing guard there, jumped and seized her. It was an amazing tableau. At the threatened blow, the Ruler shrank back. His whole little body quivered, pulsated; and on the weird, almost unhuman face, there was a look, not of fear, but of strange revulsion—as though the threat of that physical blow were something too horrible to contemplate.

“Vivian! Vivian—you—they’ll kill you! Run—Vivian, run—”

Mack was staggering to his feet, stumbling, half falling. But he reached Vivian, clutched her. Both of them were confused, dazed so that all they could do was stand there, holding onto each other. I saw Mack gazing defiantly at the oncoming Radaks—Mack who on Earth probably wouldn’t have lifted a hand to help anyone, ready now to fight to protect this girl.

“You will all—stand—away from them.” It was the Ruler’s quiet, measured voice. And abruptly I saw that his shriveled hand had gone to his belt. A weapon was hanging there—a little pot-bellied black cylinder. His fingers shifted it, seemed aiming it at Vivian and Mack. Shorty and I were struggling, but the Radaks held us. And we were both shouting. Then there was a soundless, almost invisible flash, just a vague spitting glow of light from the little cylinder. It leaped and for a second clung upon Mack and the girl. They seemed to stiffen. Just that; nothing else. Still clutching each other they stood transfixed, and on their faces there was a blankness, a strange emptiness.

“You will walk together, hand in hand,” the Ruler’s soft voice was droning. “One of my Radaks will lead you to the upper exit. And then you will walk together alone—out into the Realm of the Deathless Things.”

He added something in his own language. A little Radak moved in front of Mack and Vivian now. Hand in hand they were standing docile, and then they were following the Radak—following him with slow measured steps, their faces blank, their eyes staring straight ahead of them. Like somnambulists, walking in their sleep.

“Good Lord,” Shorty murmured. “That could be the way we were abducted on Earth! Do you suppose—”

His words were cut off. The Ruler had given another command. The Radaks gripping us were pulling us away—shoving us back into the dim crimson tunnel from which they had brought us. I turned to look behind me. The stiff figures of Mack and Vivian still were visible, walking in a trance, following the square, box-like little Radak who marched silently ahead of them. For a moment they wound along the edge of the slope; then the crimson murk of radiance enveloped them and they were gone.

Roughly Shorty and I were shoved along the tunnel by our captors. Then a rock panel slid aside. We were shoved in, and the panel slid closed.

“Well,” Shorty murmured. “That’s that. We’re in a jam, Bob—a damn weird jam.”

It was soundless in here, and darker than out in the main open grotto. But still there was that dim crimson glow. We were in a small cave-cell now. The air was hot, fetid, earthy. Presently we could see a little better. There was nothing but black, spongy ground, glowing red rock walls and a rock ceiling close over us. In the dimness I fumbled, feeling the wall, trying to find the crevice of the sliding door panel; but could not.

Time passed. Shorty and I both realized now that we were weak and faint from hunger—not altogether the hunger from missing a meal or so, but the depletion of long under-nourishment. Together we lay down on the fibrous ground. I think at that moment I was more despairing than ever before in my life. I seemed unable to cope with even the thought of what we might possibly plan. I closed my eyes. I seemed just to want to drift into the blessed relief of sleep.

“This is one jam we might not get out of, Bob,” Shorty murmured presently.

“Yes, looks so.”

Then suddenly both of us were galvanized into alertness. The door-panel was sliding open with a little rasp and an influx of brighter red glow. Outside in the corridor we saw a group of Radaks on guard. But none of them came in. They moved aside and a figure came past them—a Lei girl. Her slim body was draped in a bluish garment of thatch. Her long tawny hair flowed down over her shoulders. She

was carrying a slab on which there was food and drink for us.

Then she set the slab on the ground near us. She was between us and the door, almost a silhouette but I could see that her hand was at her lips and her glowing eyes seemed warning us to be silent.

For an instant she leaned close toward me. “I am Tahn—the wife of Taro, the Lei.” Her voice barely whispered it. “You say nothing. I come again—with Taro’s plan to help you! We would save you and your Earth—if we can!”

Silent, Shorty and I just stared. Then she had turned and was gone. The rock panel slid closed upon us.

III

I must explain now what was happening to Mack and Vivian as they afterward told it to me. Mack recalls quite clearly that moment of dazed, numbed anguish when he writhed on the ground with the horrible sapping gaze of the Radak Ruler upon him. Then he heard Vivian scream, saw her rushing at the shriveled old Radak.

He called, "Vivian! Run—they'll kill you—"

He found himself staggering to his feet, stumbling until he was by her side. He felt her clutch him, both of them standing there, numbed and dazed, terrified, with the feeling that the rushing Radaks would instantly kill them. He remembers that the girl and himself took a stumbling step forward. To Mack it was like stumbling through a suddenly appearing black curtain of emptiness. Just an abyss of soundless nothingness, except that there seemed still to be Vivian's clutch on his arm. No, it was her hand holding his as they stood peering at a distant blur of red radiance.

"Viv—where are we? What happened?"

"Pete—I'm frightened—can't—see anything—"

But the red radiance was growing, spreading to dispel the blank empty darkness so that in a moment he could see the drab, disheveled form of the girl beside him, her moist, cold hand convulsively clutching his, and the red light on her pallid, terrified face. And in the distance now there were outlines—a sort of red line that looked like a shimmering cliff with jagged spires upstanding in a row.

"Vivian—everything's gone—the Radaks—we're not where we were—Bob and Shorty—gone—"

The red glow in a moment had brightened to be far more luminous than they remembered it in the caverns. Obviously there was a sky overhead now—a lurid, murky, blood-red haze of infinite distance. This was the outer surface of the little planetoid. The Realm of the Deathless Monsters! Mack realized it with a shudder of terror. He and Vivian now could see that they were standing upon a little rise of ground, in what could have been called a forest. Everywhere great stalks of spindly blue and grey vegetation towered into the air. Growing things of fantastic shape, woven in places to be a solid jungle. Or again there were open glades of rocky ground—buttes and little spires, small ravines and crevices. All of it bathed in crimson, as though here were a bloody landscape of unutterable horror. The horror of things not yet seen . . . things lurking—

"Oh Pete, what can we do?" Hungry and faint she swayed against him. But in

the blood-red light she was trying to smile. “You tell us what we ought to do—I will help us do it, Pete. I’m not—not afraid.”

But the terror of despair was clutching at both of them. Mack tried to gather his wits. Alone here on an alien world. Could they find food and drink? Wander here, until some ghastly monster engulfed them? Or should they try to get back underground? Why? To have the murderous Radaks fall upon them and kill them?

But the will to live in every human is very strong. No one will lie down and just hopelessly wait for death.

“Viv—those cliffs over there—cliffs with the spires—there ought to be tunnels maybe at the bottom of them. If we could get back—maybe get to Bob and Shorty—” His voice trailed away. It all seemed so hopeless.

Then he felt the girl clutch at his arm. “Look! Maybe that’s water? I’m so thirsty—”

“I see it. Maybe it is. Come on.”

In a nearby open glade, surrounded by stalks of the towering fibrous vegetation, what could have been a shallow pool of water was spread on the open rocks. A little pool, twenty feet or so in diameter. Rivulets extended off to the sides of it in crevices of the rock-surfaces. It was quite shallow, seemingly only a few inches deep. The red radiant glow that suffused everything stained it like blood, but it was translucent so that the rocks showed through it.

Was it water? As they approached, Vivian stepped over one of the branching rivulet arms. The translucent red stuff suddenly lifted from the rocks, the little tentacle arm of it wrapping itself around her ankle!

The girl screamed. In a panic Mack reached down, plucking at the red mass. Ghastly horror! It was like quivering, sticky glue. Frantically he tore at it. Warm, pulsating, protoplasm. It stuck to his fingers, greedily fastening upon his flesh until he wiped it away. Vivian, too, was frantically flailing at the stuff. And in that second Mack was aware that the whole twenty-foot spread of it on the rocks was in motion now—rolling itself up from the rocks, congealing, gathering itself into a great circular mass. Huge, eight-foot ball of blood-red, pulsating protoplasm. Yet now it seemed there was a nucleus, a little central part, more solid than the rest, suddenly growing to look almost like a head and face in the center of the mass. Red-gleaming eyes; a sucking mouth, yawning.

All this Mack saw in a horrified second or two while still he was flailing to cast away the broken, pulpy arm of the monster. And he saw now that the great ball of it was rocking. Then it started to roll and bump toward them!

“Vivian! Run—good Lord, here it comes!”

They fled. But behind them it was coming, gathering speed, bumping and squishing over the rocks. Mack tried to keep his wits. The monstrous thing was only twenty feet behind them now. And as it rolled, it was expanding. A lashing ball twice as high as their heads. Then ahead of them Mack saw a narrow pass between two huge rocks—a space some three feet wide. He shoved Vivian into it—a space too small for the monster to follow. It was a crevice only some ten feet long. They dashed through it.

Mack turned to see what the crimson Deathless Thing would do. It had hit the rocks, and now it was oozing through the narrow space—thin red streamer of protoplasm feeding itself through the crevice. Mack and Vivian had fled to one side, and as the jet of red pulp came through, out on the other side it rolled itself again into a ball—ghastly thing that kept on going down the slope! In a moment it was a hundred feet away. Panting, Mack clutched his companion and they stared. The bumping, rolling circular mass had reached a patch of forest. It slowed; stopped.

“Pete, look!” The girl’s terrified, awed voice murmured it. “Look at it now!”

There in the forest glade the monstrous crimson ball was sagging, flattening, spreading itself out into a thin, translucent layer on the rocky ground. Then it was motionless, quiescent, waiting.

“Well!” Mack breathed. “At least we know now what to avoid! We—”

But again Vivian gripped him. “What’s that over there?” Her shaking hand gestured to one side. It was an upright blob moving in a patch of trees. A tree hid it; then it showed again. It stopped, seemed to turn upon itself. Still upright. Then again it moved.

Suddenly Mack gasped, “A man! Look—see it now—a man—why—why it’s Blaine!”

Startled relief was in his voice. The figure came to another open space, where the crimson glow in the air showed it plainly. It was Blaine. He was moving along, gazing around as though searching.

“Blaine! Blaine!” Mack called.

The banker turned at the voice; saw Mack and Vivian who now were running toward him. “You Mack—Vivian—you’re safe—”

“Yes, sure!” It was a blessed relief to Mack.

“I’ve been looking for you,” Blaine called. He was running to meet them. “And I’ve got something—something important! A weapon—”

The three reached each other. Blaine and Mack gripped hands. Then suddenly Vivian gasped: “Another! Another of those Things—”

Out among the trees beyond where Blaine had been a moment before, a slithering red shape was visible. Another of the Deathless Things which soundlessly had been stalking Blaine. Like a huge thirty-foot crimson python it was sliding through the vegetation. Its neck and head came up, reared up as for a second it stopped, peering with red-green eyes seeking its prey. Then it lowered its head and came slithering rapidly forward!

I must go back now for just a moment to recount what had happened to Blaine, from that moment when the Radak guards hustled him away from their shriveled ancient ruler. Ignoring his protests, he was shoved along a corridor, thrown into a cave-cell and its door-slide closed upon him. But he wasn't alone there for long. Presently the slide opened again and a figure came in. It was obviously a Radak, but of somewhat a different type. The same square, powerful look. But this one was taller, almost as tall as Blaine. Grey-skinned, lean and muscular. He seemed fairly young, thirty Earth-years perhaps.

"I have come for to talk to you," the visitor announced. He sat stiffly on a rock by a wall of the cave. His grey-black woven garment swished as he motioned Blaine to sit on the ground before him. "You are very interesting to me. Sit down."

"Thanks. I'll stand," Blaine said. "You speak my language very well."

"That I should." The Radak's smile made his strange face wrinkle into a grimace. "I am Ratan. Our Great Mind sent me to your Earth. I picked you Earthmen, and ordered you seized. I will tell you about that. You can be very helpful to us, I am thinking. Perhaps especially so. I am commanded to tell you our plans."

Carefully Blaine listened to the strange things this Ratan quite calmly was telling him. With their weird mechanisms, the Radaks now were directing their tiny world through Space, toward our Earth. Already they were bathing Earth with a radiance which was disturbing the Earth's axial and orbital rotations—that vague, dim purple haze which Dr. Johns had described to Shorty and me. Then when Zelos was closer to Earth, the vibratory beam would be intensified.

The Earth would be drawn from its orbit. Engulfed in this weird gravitational force, it would follow Zelos back from the Sun—out into Interplanetary Space. . . . The abduction of the Earth! Blaine knew little of science, but enough to realize what soon would happen on Earth. . . .

"Storms—the disturbance of all your atmospheric pressures—" Ratan was saying with his ironic smile, "that will very soon kill many of your people. And then will come the congealing cold. Certain it is that human life on your Earth will not withstand it."

Our atmosphere, not adapted to insulate the cold of Space—

There was no need for this Ratan to picture for Blaine the wild devastation of Earth. “Perhaps even before we have drawn you out to the orbit of Saturn,” Ratan was saying, “then there will be no Earthman still living.”

The end of human Earth-life. It might take another Earth-year, or many. But it was coming. Inevitable. A thing that the Radak Great-Mind had long planned, and that already was being successfully accomplished. . . . There are on Earth now as I write this brief narrative, many scientists working to understand the theories of the strange, diabolic mechanisms of the bandit Crimson Comet. The projection of some new application of gravitational force. The purple ray was something of that nature, of course. A link between Zelos and Earth, like a chain binding them together—a powerful little tug pulling a great ocean liner. And the same force unquestionably was what made Zelos itself mobile in Space. That much we know definitely because in miniature, but doubtless of the same approximate nature, the purple gravitational ray is the motive power for the Radak Space-ship which we now have intact.

“So you are planning to kill everyone on Earth,” Blaine said. His heart was pounding, but he tried to hold his voice calm. He stood with folded arms, gazing at Ratan. “And what will that gain you?”

“Our little planet here we do not like,” Ratan retorted. “Many space-ships we will build, and when your Earth-people are gone, then we will migrate to your much better world. The Lei, and the Radaks to rule them. The Great Mind has planned it all. We have been secretly to your Earth, we have studied life there. It will be much better for us than this. The Great Mind will rule your whole world for a while—until he dies. And then—do you not see something unusual in me?”

“What?” Blaine demanded.

“I am the appointed one to be the next Great Mind. When I was born it was decided. I have been trained for that. Just for that, nothing else.”

Blaine could see it in him now. That air of quiet, confident dominance. “I see what you mean,” Blaine agreed. “I am like that, on Earth. You realize it?”

“It is why I chose to bring you here,” Ratan said.

“I can be very helpful to you,” Blaine added. “My companions—they are just captives. But I would like to be more than that.” The banker shrugged. “I bow to the inevitable. If you are to seize my world, then I would like to do the best for myself. That’s good sense, isn’t it?”

Was he gaining this fellow’s confidence? The big Radak smiled also. “What do you mean?”

“On Earth I am very powerful. I have money, property.”

“Of what good could that be to me?” Ratan smiled. “And when I get there—I have it all anyway.”

“What I mean,” Blaine persisted, “I am an organizer. I know the resources of Earth—”

“And to that I agree,” Ratan interrupted. “You mean, you would join us, as a friend.”

“For a position of power among you Radaks, yes. You will find I can handle the Lei.” He smiled cannily. “On Earth they called me ruthless. I could bend men to my will—and always to my own profit.”

Blaine’s keen, appraising gaze was watching the Radak. Ratan was smiling; he could understand talk like this, and it was obvious that he liked it. . . . Blaine’s heart was pounding. At Ratan’s broad grey belt a little pot-bellied metal cylinder was hanging. He gestured to it casually.

“What is that, Ratan?”

“That? It is a weapon of ours. Very important. There are only very few of us who may carry it. A Rak-gun, perhaps your language would term it.”

“Let me see it. How does it work?”

But Ratan was only fingering it lovingly. He made no move to detach it from his belt. He was smiling. “It is what brought you from Earth.”

He seemed willing enough to describe it. The projection of a vibration akin to thought-waves, but infinitely more intense. In effect it paralyzed the conscious mind, yet left the motor area intact. The victim, to all intents and purposes was a somnambulist. The subconscious mind, with will power numbed, then was open to any suggestive stimulus which it received. The victim’s muscles instinctively obeyed commands. And the memory areas recorded nothing. Shorty and I had seen it happen to Vivian and Mack. Blaine did not know of that. But it had happened to him, on Earth, as it had to all of us.

“And, then, after a time it wears off?”

“Exactly. An hour—what you would call an hour on Earth, perhaps. But another shock of it can be given. You were under its influence for about three weeks—the time it took for our Space-ship to bring us here.”

“And you fed me very badly,” Blaine commented. He was taut inside now. He took a casual step forward so that he was almost within reach of the seated Radak. “Is that thing easy to operate?”

Blaine’s heart leaped as Ratan unclipped the little cylinder from his belt. “Very simple,” the Radak said. “Just a pressure on this little lever. But it will be years

before the Great Mind or myself would let you handle one of these.”

“I was thinking,” Blaine said, “when we get to Earth you yourself will not be the Great Ruler. But if, perhaps, the Great Mind should suddenly die? Then it would be only the great Ratan, with me to help him—” Blaine had leaned forward confidentially and lowered his voice. “Did you ever think of that?”

Surely at least the idea of murdering his commander was startling to Ratan, and for that instant he was off his guard. Just a second, but it was enough for Blaine. The banker abruptly reached, snatched the cylinder and leaped backward.

“Now you damned villain—”

Blaine raised the cylinder level. With a roar, Ratan was on his feet. There was a soundless, vague little flash. Ratan, tensing his muscles for a leap abruptly relaxed, wavered.

“Quiet now! Stand still!” Blaine ordered sharply.

He stood listening, with the quiescent, blankly staring Ratan before him. Had Ratan’s roar of startled anger aroused any guards out in the corridor? It seemed not. There was only silence.

“Now we will go out of here,” Blaine said softly. “We will go out. You know where Robert Rance is now. You will lead me to him.”

With hands outstretched, the big Radak moved to the door, slid it open. At this moment Shorty and I were confined in another cave-cell not far away. Ratan knew it; he was leading Blaine there. But suddenly, at a corridor intersection, voices sounded! Radaks were coming.

“Crouch down!” Blaine commanded. “Be quiet! Not a sound from you!”

There was a wall recess. Blaine shoved his numbed captive into it. Together they crouched. And now Blaine saw that in a sheath at Ratan’s belt, there was a knife. He drew it out; held it in his other hand and kept the cylinder ready. Two Radaks were coming. They were talking together in their own language. They stopped nearby, evidently with the intention of parting here at the intersection.

Blaine listened. Then he whispered to Ratan: “Answer me softly. What are they saying? Tell me in English.”

“Those Earth-people banished—into the Realm of—Deathless—Monsters—and they will die—of course.” Ratan’s words were mumbled, queerly mouthed, like one who talks in his sleep. Blaine assumed that all of us were out there on the upper surface, not just Vivian and Mack. Swiftly he changed his plans.

“In a moment when I command you,” he whispered, “you will lead me there. You know where the Earth-people would probably be now? Out which exit they

went? Answer me—softly.”

“By the—big cliff with the—rock spires. . . . The exit is—down this left corridor.”

Tensely Blaine waited. The nearby Radaks parted and moved away. “Now, lead me,” he whispered.

Again they moved forward, down the left-hand corridor-branch now. And suddenly behind Blaine there was a shout. He whirled. One of the Radaks had changed his mind and was coming back, calling something to his fellow. Blaine had no time to get himself and Ratan out of sight. The Radak saw them—saw the stiffly walking Ratan, and Blaine with the cylinder in his hand.

With a startled shout, the little Radak leaped at Blaine. The flash met him; he stopped in his tracks, stood stiff. But from the other direction, his companion was coming. And now the commotion was bringing others. Blaine could hear several of the guttural voices and the thuds of their oncoming footsteps.

With a leap Blaine went past Ratan. The squat little shape of the other Radak came charging down the center of the narrow corridor. His greenish eye-beams were weird in the crimson gloom. Again Blaine fired his cylinder. But this time evidently he missed and in another second the Radak was on him. The shock of the impact flung them both to the ground. The cylinder was knocked from Blaine’s hand. He felt his adversary’s arms clutching him, squeezing him with machine-like strength. In another moment Blaine’s ribs would have smashed. But his left hand still gripped the knife. With despairing effort he drove it into the Radak’s side.

Ghostly knife-thrust! It went in with a crunch, a rasp as it severed the strange flesh. There was a hiss as hot fluid spurted. The Radak’s scream was horrible. His arms fell away. Blaine disentangled himself. On the ground near him he saw the cylinder, snatched it, dropped it into his pocket. A commotion was all around him now. Oncoming Radaks in several of the branching corridors. But ahead of Blaine there seemed no one.

He ran. Behind him he could dimly see the squat little figures gazing at their dead fellow, and surrounding the stricken Ratan. No one seemed to notice the fleeing Blaine as he ran the length of the winding corridor until at last he was out upon the crimson upper surface.

For a time he wandered. He did not see any of the crimson monsters, or at least did not recognize them for what they were. Then he heard Mack shouting at him; saw Mack and Vivian running toward him.

“I’ve got something important—a weapon,” he called to Mack.

Then abruptly the three of them saw that huge, python-like crimson Thing which

had been silently stalking Blaine.

“Look!” Vivian gasped. “Another of them!”

It was slithering rapidly at them now, no more than fifty feet away. Its green-swaying eye-beams clung to them. For that instant they were standing stricken with terror. To one side of them there was the brink of an abyss a few yards away, and to the other, and behind them, a ragged little cliff.

“Got to try and climb those rocks!” Mack gasped. “Can’t get past that snake thing—we’re trapped—”

But Blaine swept him aside. The cylinder was in Blaine’s hand now. “This will stop it!” he muttered. “You two—get behind me!”

The monstrous thirty-foot thing was only half its own length away from them now. Then, as its head reared over a projection of the uneven, rocky ground, Blaine carefully aimed the cylinder and fired. But the monster didn’t stop! There was no conscious, thinking brain in that ghastly, pulsating crimson head! Just motor-ganglia reacting to the impulses of instinct!

Blaine fired again. But the monster kept on coming and in another second was upon them!

IV

Back in our cave-cell, Shorty and I stared blankly after the figure of the Lei woman, Tahn, as she motioned to the Radak guards who slid our door-panel closed. Again we were alone.

“Well,” Shorty murmured. “What do you make of that? The wife of some Lei named Taro, she said.”

And that she would come back and try to get us out of here. That her husband had some plan—

Eagerly, Shorty and I waited. Would it be an hour, or a day? Both of us were thinking of Blaine, locked somewhere around here, perhaps in a cell like ours. Or had the Radaks killed him by now? And Vivian and Mack, wandering out there in the Realm of the Things you couldn't kill.

“Guess they're done for,” Shorty said, when I mentioned them.

“Unless we can get out there to them—”

Shorty's smile was ironic. “That would fix everything, of course. Don't be an ass, Bob. If we were out there, we'd all be trying to get back. For what? So the Radaks would jump on us and kill us.”

It was all so utterly hopeless. But it was queer, that instinct all five of us had, to try and keep together.

The young Lei woman had brought us food and drink. Shorty and I slumped on the earthen floor now and sampled the food. Nauseous stuff, indescribable.

“If it's been weeks since we left the Earth,” Shorty said, “no wonder we're nearly starved to death.”

But we managed to eat and drink some of it, and then exhausted by the nerve tension of what we had been through, we drifted off into an uneasy slumber.

The rasp of the sliding door-panel jerked us into alertness. I had the feeling that only a little time had passed. The panel slid open just a foot or two, and a figure came in. It was Tahn.

Both Shorty and I were on our feet. “You came as you hoped,” I said softly. “We're ready. Just tell us what you want us to do.”

She barely whispered, “The Radak guards just now are changing. There is no one outside. We go, quickly.”

“Go where?” Shorty demanded.

“To my husband, Taro. He is in a corridor near here. Come now, quickly.”

The faintly red corridor outside was empty. Swiftly Tahn led us along it, around several sharp bends, past a cross-corridor intersection. I was tense, expecting every moment that Radaks would leap upon us from the shadows. But so far we had escaped notice, though obviously there were many Radaks near here. Several times we passed the dim oval openings of little grottos, and often there were guttural, chattering voices from within them.

“Won’t the guards discover we’re gone?” Shorty murmured.

“Perhaps not for maybe much time. I am in charge of you, I bring you food and drink. The guards stay outside, should you try to break out.”

Our tunnel was descending now. And suddenly from the dimness to one side, there came a murmur: “Tahn! Tahn—”

A young Lei man was crouching in a shadowed recess. It was Tahn’s husband, Taro.

“She has brought you, Earthmen. That is good.”

We crouched down with him. He was a youngish fellow, tall, slim and powerfully built. His single draped garment exposed one bronze shoulder. His grey-black hair was chopped at the base of his neck, with a narrow band of bright-colored fabric tied around his forehead. With his high-cheek bones, hawk-like nose and gleaming dark eyes he could have been a stalwart young savage of Earth.

“I want to help you,” he was saying. “Your coming here fits my plans, and believe me I have worked on them a long time. Tahn and I, making the Radaks trust us.”

“Say,” Shorty murmured, “you certainly are fluent with English.”

The young Lei’s face wrinkled into a smile. “Why should I not, my wife and I? We Lei learn things quickly. Perhaps a different mind-quality from yours, almost at once to absorb what we hear. Ratan—he is next to the Great Mind as leader of the Radaks—he chose Tahn and me to go on the expedition to Earth. We were carefully watched, or we would have escaped to warn you. It was Tahn who took care of you on the way here.”

He told us then of the weird Radak-gun, with its flash of mind-current—the weapon which probably just at this exact moment no more than half a mile away in this maze of subterranean corridors, Blaine was snatching from Ratan. . . . And Tahn told us, too, of the Radak plot to devastate Earth.

“You have some plan?” Shorty murmured.

He told us then that he knew how to get into the Cavern of Machines—a huge, guarded grotto where all the diabolic, giant mechanisms of the Radaks were housed.

The power plant of little Zelos, and the source of the purple radiance which was bathing Earth.

“If we can kill the guards and get into the Cavern—only the Great Mind himself—or Ratan—will be there. No one else but those two are allowed there. No one else knows the secrets of the mechanisms to operate them.”

“So we just get in and overcome the Great Mind himself,” Shorty commented. He gave a mock shudder with an attempt to be humorous. “All right. Figure that’s done. Then what?”

Taro’s plan was certainly desperate, but at least it promised the possibility of success. “Do you know where the Earthman Blaine is?” I demanded.

Tahn said, “He is in a cave-cell. I am ordered to take him food and drink very soon.”

“What weapons have you got?” Shorty asked. “Say, if you could get one of those brain-paralyzing guns—”

Taro shook his head. “Never could I even get near one. The Great Mind always carries one—and so does Ratan. But there is no chance—”

“We must get to Blaine,” I said. “And then try and find Vivian and Mack. We’ve all got to be together—”

We planned it for a few moments more. Then cautiously Taro and Tahn led us to a corridor intersection. “We will hide here,” he said, gesturing to another shadowed recess where the ragged rocks of the wall jutted out in an overhang. “Tahn can go best.” The young Lei turned to his wife. “Tahn, listen. You get food and drink. You take it to Blaine’s cell. There are not always guards perhaps. You watch your chance —”

“Listen!” Shorty suddenly interjected. “Maybe I’m crazy, but there’s some kind of commotion around here.”

We could all hear it now—a distant murmur of turmoil down one of the side corridors. Taro nodded. “Something is wrong. And Blaine’s cell is down that way. You Earthmen wait here! I will go with Tahn. Then we come back to you.”

They were gone only a few moments. From a little distance they had stood unnoticed, watching and listening. Blaine had escaped! He had seized Ratan’s thought-gun; turned it upon Ratan and one of the guards; had stricken them. And had knifed another guard, and vanished.

“Well! Good for Blaine,” Shorty murmured. “He’s smarter than all the rest of us put together! And he’s got one of those guns! Where’d he go—”

“They think perhaps out to the outer surface,” Taro said. “He ran that way.”

“To find Mack and Vivian!” I exclaimed. “Well, that’s what we want to do. Show us that exit, Taro.”

“I will go with you,” the young Lei said quietly. But there was no mistaking his shudder and the grim look on his face. “Tahn, you stay here.”

“I will go with my husband,” she retorted. “Taro, please—”

We took her. It seemed that the commotion at Blaine’s cell must have drawn all the Radaks from these other passages. We were not discovered as we threaded our way back, until presently we were ascending a winding tunnel which ended at the crimson upper surface. How long it took us to sight Mack, Vivian and Blaine I do not know. It seemed an eternity of apprehension, as Taro and Tahn cautiously led us along winding rocky defiles and past patches of that weird, fantastic forest. Shorty and I saw none of the monsters. But there were many times when suddenly, without explanation, Taro turned us from where we would have wandered.

Then we were far enough from the tunnel entrances so that we dared talk without possibility that the Radaks would hear us.

“Blaine! Blaine—where are you?”

“Mack! Vivian—are you here?”

It was Tahn who first saw them. We were in a cluster of rocks with a brink ahead of us. I could see lower ground perhaps fifty feet down—a precipitous descent close ahead of us. It chanced that Tahn was leading, and suddenly she turned, gave a cry, and then pointed over the brink.

“There they are! Down there! Look—look at them—”

We crowded to the brink. Fifty feet down this ragged wall, Blaine, Vivian and Mack stood backed against it. An abyss was near them. And in front of them a great crimson, python-like thing was slithering, almost upon them now, with Blaine futilely firing his gun at it!

There was nothing we could do; and for those seconds all four of us stood staring, mute, numbed with horror. The scene on the ledge below us was clear as though on a little stage. The monster in another second would be upon its victims. I saw Blaine throw down his gun in despair. His voice floated up to us.

“Damn thing won’t work! Got to—try to run—”

Then, suddenly we saw Mack leap forward, not toward where he might have a wild chance of climbing up our ragged little cliff-wall, but the other way—toward the brink that dropped down to another terrace, between the brink and the monster’s slithering length. His intention was obvious—to lead the monster over that other brink after him. . . . To sacrifice himself so that his companions might escape.

In the chaos of that second we saw Mack get past the monster’s head and neck.

Its head turned. And then, before Mack could hurl himself down the hundred-foot drop, a loop of the great crimson body lashed out. It seemed that a tentacle whipped separate from the undulating snake-like body—a tentacle that seized Mack, looped around him and flung him into the air.

Just a ghastly second or two as Mack's whirling body came up diagonally toward us in the air, and then fell back, into a ragged cluster of rocks beyond the monster's tail. Horribly we could hear the thud as it struck. For another second the great crimson head of the monster seemed to rear, with swaying eye-beams searching. But Mack's body was hidden by the rock-cluster.

Then, suddenly the gruesome python shape, head down, began oozing over the brink beside it. Flowing mass of protoplasm. It thinned out as it sagged down the hundred-foot drop—thinned until it was a narrow ribbon—a blood-red rivulet of waterfall. Then it was all on the lower level, gathering itself together until in a moment it was a great congealed, quivering crimson ball with the head in the center. For another instant it pulsed; then it bumped and rolled down a ragged slope, reached a little patch of distant vegetation where we could dimly see it spreading itself thinly out. . . . Spread like a blood-red pool, quiescent, waiting.

With Taro and Tahn, Shorty and I climbed down the ragged little descent, joined Vivian and Blaine.

"He tried to save us," the white-faced Vivian murmured.

"Yes," I agreed. "We saw it."

We found his broken body in the cluster of rocks fifty feet away. He was still conscious but we thought he was dying. One of his arms hung limp. Blood was coming from a head wound. But his pallid face was trying to smile.

"My leg and arm," he mumbled. "Can't move them."

One of his legs undoubtedly was broken. As we told him that the monster had gone his gaze seemed only on Vivian.

"Thought it would kill you, Viv," he muttered. "Didn't want that." Then he fainted. He had been trying to get up on one elbow as Vivian knelt with an arm under his head. Then his eyes closed, and he sagged, went limp.

"We must stop that blood from his head," Tahn murmured. "And then try and get him into one of the tunnels."

Vivian jumped up. "Here's what we need—bandages." She flashed us a little twisted smile as she tore off her waist and skirt and ripped them into strips. "Here—bandages." She handed the strips of fabric to Tahn. Then she grinned at me. "This underdress—not too becoming, is it?" She gestured at the brief undergarment that

now partly covered her, and her whimsical smile broadened. “Well this time, anyway, I had a good motive, didn’t I?”

Shorty and I carried the still unconscious Mack back to one of the tunnel entrances. And Taro led us to a shadowed, cave-like little place where we laid him down. Good luck seemed with us. We had encountered, so far, no Radaks.

“You and Tahn will stay with him,” I told Vivian. And Shorty and I had decided that Blaine had best stay also. For once Blaine had to do something against his will.

“Think I’m too old to help you young fellows now?” he said. “All right, maybe I am.”

Certainly he was in no physical condition to be much help in the desperate venture we were planning. He handed me the Radak-gun, showed me how to use it. I dropped it in my pocket.

“Good luck to you,” Blaine said.

“Thanks. We’ll need it,” I acknowledged.

Then Shorty, Taro and I left them. Taro had hidden the only weapons he could get, near here. We found them—sheathed knives that the Lei used in the underground fields. They were odd-shaped knives; they seemed made of a highly polished, metallic stone. I thumbed one. It was sharp.

“Very handy,” Shorty commented. “Come on, Taro, let’s go. Where is this Cavern of Machines?”

It was perhaps half an Earth-mile, low down in the maze of underground passages. Shorty clutched his knife; I held the Radak-gun as we followed Taro down the dim, descending crimson tunnel.

There's one of the guards!" Shorty whispered. "See him?"

I pushed Shorty back. "No, two of them! The other one's sitting down. You and Taro keep behind me. I'll tackle them with the Radak-gun."

We could see the square grey figures of two Radaks down the little length of tunnel ahead of us. They were by an opening that seemed to lead sharply downward, with a glow of radiance streaming up. And now in the heavy underground silence we could hear the faint muffled thrum and whine of mechanisms.

My hand silently gripped Taro. All three of us crouched. "That's the entrance to the Cavern of Machines?" I whispered.

"Yes."

"Two guards. Are there liable to be more of them around?"

Taro shook his head. "I think not. Though I cannot surely say."

"The machines are operating," Shorty said. "Hear them? That means only the Great Mind, or Ratan will be down there in the Cavern?"

"Yes," the young Lei agreed.

"It's most likely not Ratan," I said. "Blaine got him—struck him insensible. Or would he be recovered by now?"

Taro had no way of guessing. With an ordinary Radak the shock would have lasted longer than this. "But Ratan's mind is trained—developed—more powerful as you would say. He could recover more quickly."

"Are there other entrances?" Shorty asked. "They'd have guards at them. If we make any commotion down there, and a bunch of Radaks come rushing us—"

"This is the only entrance."

"Right," Shorty chuckled. "Come on then, let's finish off these fellows." He fingered his knife. "You tackle 'em with that gun, Bob. But if you miss, trust me—I'll slip this knife into them—"

With Taro and Shorty behind me I crept soundlessly forward. In my hand the pot bellied little Radak gun, so unfamiliar, gave me an uneasy feeling. Suppose I should miss. An uproar from these guards might bring dozens of others.

"How close do I have to get?" I whispered to Taro.

"This now—close enough."

One of the Radaks was standing up, lounging with his back to the wall. The other was lying down. To send my flash clinging to the heads of both of them, I

would have to shift my aim, and fire twice. My hand trembled a little. Then I pressed the lever.

There was that vaguely visible flash. The gun-hilt in my grip vibrated, and at the muzzle of it there was a faint little hiss. A hit! The Radak on the ground seemed to stiffen. He raised his head, staring blankly. The Radak who was standing noticed it. He started, whirled around toward us. It took all my will power to withhold my second flash for that instant. But I did; and then as the standing figure steadied, I fired again.

“Got him!” Shorty murmured. “Good work, Bob! Come on!”

We ran forward. The standing Radak was motionless, gazing with vacant stare. Shorty dashed up to him. “Lie down, you’re asleep! If you’re not, you ought to be.”

But the Radak did not move, just turned his empty gaze toward the sound of Shorty’s voice. I got it. “They don’t speak English! Tell them, Taro.”

The Lei murmured commandingly in his own language, and in a moment the two guards were lying inert with closed eyes.

“Mighty neat,” Shorty whispered. “Come on—here we go.”

Beyond the guards an earthen ramp led sleepily downward, winding to a circular spiral. Then presently we emerged upon a little ledge with the great Cavern of Machines spread out before us.

“Crouch down! We will see who is here,” Taro whispered. There was awe in his voice. “We must not be seen until we attack.”

It was a huge, vault-like cavern, with glowing roof high over our heads, and we were about twenty feet above its lower level, with a narrow, steep ramp leading down from near us. I saw that it was a weird, dim grotto, lurid with swaying, prismatic glows of colored radiance, and throbbing, humming with a myriad mechanical voices. Distant railed terraces held frameworks of metal, where opalescent tubes were glowing. Beams of light-radiance seemed to carry the power from one strange mechanism to the next, like wires connecting them in series. No Lei, no ordinary Radak, and certainly least of all us Earthmen, could by any chance have understood the scientific details of what we were seeing.

I recall there was a convergence of beams, high up in mid-air at the center of the cavern, where a shower of tiny electrolyte sparks glittered like a fountain of pyrotechnics. And out of it a narrow concentrated beam of violet-purple glow shot upward to a grid in the ceiling—the gravitational force, doubtless, which from there was conducted to some point above where it was hurled into Space.

How long I stared, awed, I have no idea. Then I was aware of Taro beside me, whispering, “It is the Great Mind who is down there. He has just come into sight—

down by that yellow glow.”

The floor of the cavern held a dozen or more of the huge mechanisms, and in the center of them there was a throbbing space that seemed to hold the controls of all these intricate machines. Down there in the weird glow we could now see the lone figure of the ancient Radak leader—shriveled and bent, he moved around, occasionally reaching to shift some lever or make some adjustment.

“He must not see us coming!” Taro whispered. His voice was tense. And on his face now as the multi-colored glow bathed it, there was unmistakable terror. This young Lei, like all his people, born and bred to fear the dominance of the Great Mind—to attack that little figure, to Taro was almost unthinkable. Taro had planned this; dreamed of it. But faced with it now, there was only terror sweeping him, so that had he been here alone, easily he could have turned and fled.

Shorty and I had no such inhibitions.

“What in the devil,” Shorty murmured. “He’s got a Radak-gun—sure, I’ve no doubt of it. We’ve got to duck that. But once I get close to him—” Shorty’s gesture with his knife was significant.

For minutes more we tensely waited. Then we got down the ramp without being seen, and on the lower floor we crouched between two of the giant whining machines.

“Easy now!” I whispered. “You two—keep behind me—”

I held the Radak-gun in my hand. We waited another moment; then ducked forward and crouched again, behind a great glowing mechanism through which two beams of colored light were passing. We were only some twenty feet from the leader now. Close enough for my shot, or for us to rush him. He was bending down over a glowing dial. Green light from it streamed upward, bathed his weird mummy-like countenance so that suddenly he seemed like some horrible ghoul intent upon a task diabolic, gruesome.

“Let him have it!” Shorty whispered. “Now’s your chance!”

I must confess my heart was racing, with a sudden nameless premonition of terror. Thoughts are instant things. I tried to tell myself that this was just a weazened old man. Helpless, with three of us about to leap on him. Of course he was helpless! With sudden relief I saw that he had discarded his belt. It hung on the peg of a rack, several feet away from him—his belt, with his Radak-gun! Shorty saw it at the same instant.

“There’s his gun, Bob! He can’t reach it! We’ve got him!”

Of course . . . I leveled my weapon. I was sighting it . . . I shall always wonder if my racing thoughts were projected then to warn the Radak leader. Or did he sense

us in some other way? I was standing a little out into an aisle between two big mechanisms when suddenly he lifted his head, turned and saw me. The movement, and my own startled reaction, spoiled my aim . . . Mustn't fire until I was sure. . . .

I recall that in that split-second I was aware that the old Radak had not moved. He was just staring at me with glittering eyes and his shrunken grey face horrible with the intensity of his menace. He knew of course that he couldn't reach his weapon. He didn't try. . . .

Just a helpless, weazened old man. But as I sighted my gun I was aware of the power radiating from him. The power of his mind, pitted now against mine; his will commanding me to drop my weapon and my own brain demanding my muscles to sight it, to fire it. Conflict most horrible. It was as though every fibre of me was being outraged, seared and torn. My nerves screaming. . . . And my mind was screaming—kill him! Got to kill him now! . . . Don't drop the gun! Hold your fingers tight!

But I could feel my fingers loosening their grip. The muzzle was swaying. Everything seemed blurring before me, swimming into a phantasmagoria of horror. . . . It was all in a second or two. I heard Shorty mutter a startled oath beside me. But it was Taro, despite that he must have been unutterably frightened, who kept his wits. He uttered a grim shout, jumped to his feet, sidewise away from me.

It did what Taro had hoped. For just an instant that baleful gaze left me, fastened on Taro. Then it swung back—but in that instant I had recovered myself, leveled the gun and fired.

New horror! The Radak leader's gaze, again on me, seemed to meet the flash of my gun in mid-air between us. I could imagine there must have been a conflict there—a little almost soundless, almost invisible puff of deranged vibrations. And the derangement must have been forced backward to me. All in the flash of a thought. To my conscious mind there was only my pressing the gun-lever, and then a bursting explosion at my hand as the Radak-gun flew into fragments! One of them struck my forehead; I staggered back, went down. But I was aware that Shorty, with Taro close after him, had leaped—Shorty, with knife upraised, his catapulting body hitting the crouching, ghoul-like figure.

Shorty thinks now his knife never reached its mark. There was just the impact of his body, knocking the weazened figure backward. The Radak screamed a shrill, weirdly horrible cry. But it ended in a gurgle—just for an instant, a gruesome, liquid gurgle. Then there was only Shorty's gasp of horror.

I was scrambling to my feet. I crouched, stricken, staring. Shorty had drawn back, standing staring. And Taro too had checked his rush. All three of us, frozen

with revulsion. On the floor, weird in a green-red glow from a nearby machine, the weazened, mummy body of the Radak lay huddled. A thing which had been nearly all of mental quality. And now it had encountered a physical blow, to which every atom of its weird make-up was foreign.

And what a second before had been living, solid substance now was dissolving! The clothes sagged, deflated. A bubbling ooze was where the face had been. Just a brief moment, and then before us the Radak's garments lay crumpled and flat in a little pool of stenching putrescence!

I turned away, sickened. Then Shorty recovered himself. "It—that damned thing screamed! Others will come—"

"Hurry now! Smash the machines! It is what we came for—" Taro gasped.

I made a leap for the control panels; then stopped, whirled around. There was a cry from behind and above me. On a narrow, railed little balcony which connected with the ramp down which we had come, the figure of a Radak was standing! A tall grey shape! It was Ratan, though I did not know who it was then. He had a knife in his hand, and he was in the act of leaping over the rail to land upon me! I had no time to avoid him. His body came sprawling, landed on my shoulders, bore me down.

Simultaneously I was aware that Shorty and Taro were smashing at the control apparatus. It crackled, tinkled like breaking glass, with a huge flash of colored light and sparks that sent Shorty and Taro reeling backward, dazed so that they did not see what was happening to me. Then they were up, at it again, hurling broken fragments of the controls at the nearby grids, tubes and prisms. And in that same second, the multi-colored flash spread—deranged—weird current. Like burning powder-trains it leaped everywhere around the grotto. Puffs, sparks of fountain-glare, the hissing, whining, screeching of breaking machines. . . .

On the floor I struggled with Ratan on top of me. He had no gun—just a long, thin knife with polished blade that glittered as he tried to thrust it into my throat. My own knife was gone. I reached, clutched at the grey wrist, turning the knife so that it went past my throat. Then I heaved upward. In the struggle Ratan dropped his knife and neither of us could reach it. Locked together we rolled, pummeling, scrambling. Then I knew that I had him. My fist landed on his hawk-nosed grey face—a solid blow that made him scream with revulsion and pain.

Then I had heaved him off, staggered to my feet. I seemed to be in a cloud of yellow-green, choking, acrid vapour through which only dimly I could see Ratan struggling erect. And there was Shorty's voice:

“Bob! Bob, where are you? Got to get out of here! Taro—Taro—”

It seemed that somewhere near me, Taro was coughing, choking. Then I realized that the shape of Ratan was plunging at me through the heavy chemical smoke. I was swaying, but I squared off, hit him solidly in the face again. He went down, and I leaped on him, lifting his head and shoulders, then banging his head back against the corner of a mechanism-frame—pounding it again and again until suddenly I was aware that it had smashed and was dripping upon me.

With a shudder I cast the inert body away and leaped to my feet.

“Bob! Got to get out of here! Taro—” Shorty was still shouting.

Green-yellow vapour was swirling around me. Electrolyte flashes seemed everywhere—the whole grotto, an inferno of pyrotechnics. Then I saw the figure of Shorty staggering to help Taro from where he had fallen. I swayed and joined them.

“That ramp,” I gasped. “Behind us! Come on—”

We tried to hold our breath as we staggered up the ramp. Then there seemed a little puff of breathable air. As we plunged into the exit tunnel, for an instant I turned. The big grotto was alive with swirling turgid smoke and flames and leaping, bursting light-fire. And a bedlam of weird bursting sounds. The death of the monstrous Radak science, screaming with its agony of dissolution.

Coughing and choking, we ran up the tunnel, with the sounds and the glare fading behind us; and the pure air reviving us.

“All the Radaks will be after us,” Shorty panted. “Faster, Taro!”

Distant cries were all around us in the maze of tunnels. The alarm was spreading everywhere. We saw a few plunging Radak shapes, but were able to avoid them.

Taro was leading us; I gripped him as we ran. “You say you know where they keep their space-flyer?”

“Yes. Not far from Blaine and the others.”

Then we reached the girls and Blaine, who were crouching in that tunnel recess with the still unconscious Mack. Vivian and Tahn just stared at us white-faced, with little cries of relief.

Blaine gasped, “You did it!”

“We sure did,” Shorty agreed. “Come on—the space-ship—”

“You and I—we’ll carry Mack—” I said. Shorty nodded, and we lifted him.

Carrying Mack slowed us. But his emaciated body was light. In a moment I slung him over my shoulders, and with Shorty steadying him, we made better speed. It wasn’t far, but there were Radak figures everywhere now. Weirdly, only one of them came near us. Shorty and Taro were ready to attack him. The squat little shape came plunging along a side tunnel, apparently heading for us. He seemed to be

gibbering, mouthing, then screaming. But he ignored us, running, knife in hand, until he bashed himself into a rock. . . .

We ran on, and then suddenly I realized that we had emerged into that huge underground space where first we had met the Great Mind. Taro ran toward a wall, found some hidden mechanism. I saw, in the crimson radiance, that by the wall a hundred yards or so away, a big slide had opened. A small, gleaming, pot-bellied cylinder was standing there. It came automatically out on rollers, and stopped in the open—a little thirty foot Space-flyer. And over it, high up, the ceiling of the vast cavern seemed to have opened; the murky purple-red of the sky was up there.

All this I saw in those few seconds. But there was far more here. A turmoil of sounds and moving, milling figures. A scene of weird, ghastly horror so that for a moment I stood swaying with the limp body of Mack slung over my shoulders and my companions clustered around me. Down the slope where the little Lei village stood under the trees in the red gloom, a crowd of Lei were struggling. And everywhere among them, squat grey shapes of Radaks were plunging. . . . Radaks with knives and scimitar-like swords, and some with rock-chunks and bludgeons . . . Radaks screaming, running amok. I saw one lunge with a knife at a Lei woman. The knife went into her and she fell; and the Radak kept on going until he crashed into a tree.

The Great Mind was dead. Ratan, who might have taken his place, was dead. The Mental Force of all this little Radak world was gone. The Lei themselves had not been under its control. For generations they had been cowed, terrified into sullen obedience, but that was all. With the Radaks it was different. They were born, bred and trained to be automatons. To think what they were told to think. Mentally dominated, controlled so that the very essence of their mind was shaped and held together by their leader.

And now they had no leader! For them, there was nothing left but mental chaos, so that gibbering with the insanity of minds unhinged, they were plunging here in wild, unreasoning chaos, obeying their instinct to kill.

“My people—I must help them!” Taro’s unutterable horror at last found voice. He would have plunged down the slope with his young wife after him. But Vivian seized Tahn, clung to her. I shouted at Shorty,

“Hold him! Don’t let him go!”

Shorty hung on to him. “No, you don’t!”

“You can’t help them!” I protested. “And we can’t operate the spaceship! You want Earth-people to help your world—got to get back there, we—”

The words died in my throat. We all saw that none of us could get to the Lei now, even if we had tried. A group of a hundred or more of the screaming, gibbering Radaks had swept between us and the Lei village. But the way to the spaceship still seemed open. We ran for it. One of the Radaks, by chance perhaps, turned toward us; and all the ones near him, like sheep followed him. A horde of grey, maniac Things charging us. . . .

We got to the gleaming little cylinder with only an instant to spare—reached it, tumbled through its doorway. I laid Mack on the white grid of its floor. Shorty banged the door-slide, hanged it as the bodies of the Radaks thudded against it. Taro ran for the controls and in another instant the little ship quivered and lifted.

There was a transparent bulls-eye window panel near me. For a second I had a glimpse of horrible, snarling, maniac faces pressed against it. Then they fell away; and in a moment we were out through the upper opening, slanting upward with the crimson surface of little Zelos dropping down. Then we were in space, with the brilliant, beautiful miracle of the Universe glittering around us. . . .

I think there is little more I need add. You have all heard and read, of course, of the events of this past year. The secret of space-flying! We have it now. Earth-scientists, studying the Radak ship, had no difficulty in constructing others far larger. Fortunately our Earth-materials proved adaptable; there was nothing vital that we lacked. Many large ships were swiftly built, and an armed force went to Zelos. Haste was necessary, as you will recall, for when the mechanisms of the Radaks were smashed, it was soon found that the Crimson Comet was plunging directly toward our Sun.

J. Walter Blaine wanted no publicity when he freely gave the millions necessary for the scientific research and the myriad activities which went into the building of the space-ships. You all offered your own donations, and they were refused only because Blaine felt he had earned the privilege of financing the enterprise. He wants me now to extend his thanks to you.

Our first expedition to Zelos was when, in its Sunward plunge, it had crossed our Earth-orbit and was at its closest point to us. And the expedition found that no more than a thousand of the Lei had been killed by the maniac Radaks, who in those terrible hours after our departure, plunged around, screaming until they bashed themselves to destruction, or were killed by the Lei.

Taro and Tahn were with our first expedition to the doomed little world, and they stayed there throughout all the several trips of the many big ships which evacuated the Lei.

I am glad that it was finally decided not to bring the Lei here to Earth. They would have been just curiosities here; and then lost, whirled away into the maelstrom of our huge world. Surely it was the best of good fortune for them when our exploring ships found that Venus was uninhabited, and with conditions for life so propitious.

And now the Lei, with Taro and Tahn to lead them, are masters of a great world of their own. With the friendly world of Earth nearest to them. Surely we will prove a helpful, friendly, neighboring world, with no greedy thought of anything more than that.

Zelos is gone now. I was one of those who saw it go—that night about a month ago. It was a little dot in the sky, with a great flaming streamer of the Sun licking upward as though eager to meet it. And then it was gone.

I recall the earnest solicitations of so many of you who prayed that Mack would get well. He wants me to thank you all again. I saw him only last week, in the little mountain home where he and Vivian went after their wedding trip. That astoundingly pretentious wedding they had—well, that was because Blaine insisted on doing it. He may insist again, if and when a layette is needed. I don't know about that. But Mack, who now has an executive position in one of Blaine's many industries, got their little house himself. He and Vivian remained firm on that.

And as I said at the beginning, you must see now that none of us are glamorous heroes. We're all at our regular jobs, with the Crimson Comet just a gruesome memory.

So now, kind friends—please forget us. Except me. I'm certainly no hero, but, well, I won't mind if you'll remember that I broadcast twice a week on subjects of Popular Astronomy—Station WANA—NYC.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

Inconsistency in hyphenation has been retained.

[The end of *Juggernaut of Space* by Ray Cummings]