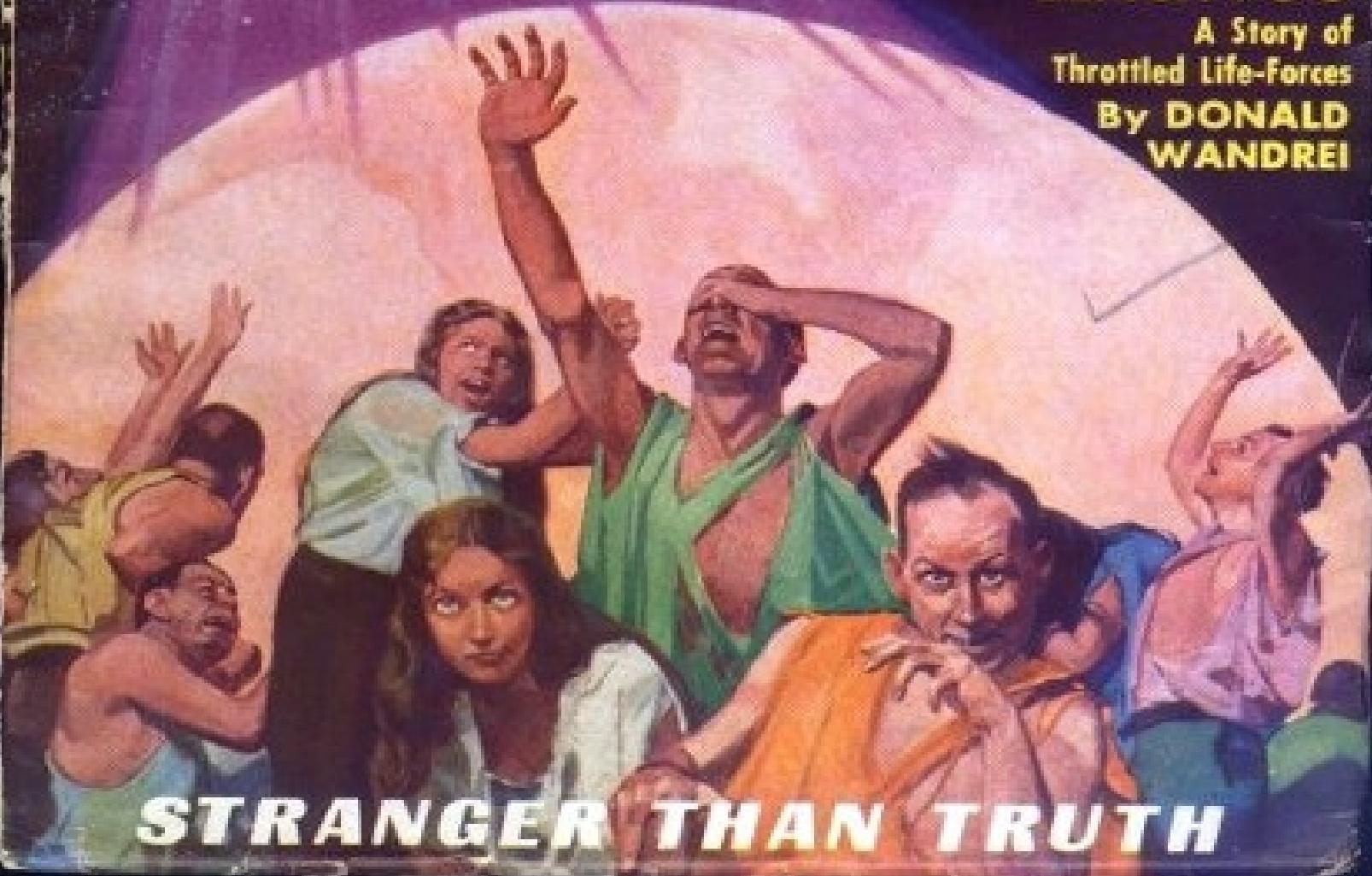


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FEATURING

INVADERS FROM THE OUTER SUNS

A Novelette of Cosmic Exploration

By FRANK BELKNAP LONG, JR.

BRAIN OF VENUS

A Novelette of Universal Destruction

By JOHN RUSSELL FEARN

BLACK FOG

A Story of
Throttled Life-Forces

By DONALD WANDREI

STRANGER THAN TRUTH

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BRAIN OF VENUS

A Novelette of Universal Destruction

Spurred On by His Thirst for Vengeance, the Mighty
Lu Sang Unleashes Invulnerable Forces of the Universe
in a Daring Attempt to Annihilate Civilization

By JOHN RUSSELL FEARN

Author of "The Man Who Stopped the Dust," "Mathematics," etc.

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CHAPTER I

Mutiny In Space

Captain Brant, pilot of Liner 762 of the Earth-Mars Transit Service, stood quietly at attention before the desk of his superior. In silence he watched Commandant Bradley add the final official seals to a bulky package, scribble the details on a check-sheet, and finally hand them both across.

"Brant," the commandant said quietly, looking up, "you are undertaking an unusual delivery on this trip."

"Yes, sir," Brant nodded.

"In this package, sealed in preserving solution, is the brain of Lu Sang. At the order of the Imperial Surgical Council it was removed from that notorious Chinese criminal's body when he was under the anaesthetic preceding his death for his countless crimes. The object in removing it while he still lived was so that his brain would still be alive when transferred to the preserving solution. You will take it to Mars and there deliver it to Kron, the head surgeon, who will send a special messenger to the space grounds to meet you. It is his wish to study the brain of a criminal from Earth so that he may learn to eliminate similar traits in Martian brains. You understand?"

"Perfectly, sir," Brant answered crisply. He took the package gingerly, stuffing the check-sheet in his pocket.

"Very well, then, that is all. Have a good trip."

Brandt departed with agile strides, but once out in the long exterior corridor he permitted a frown to come to his

face. It was not the assignment that worried him; that was mere routine—but the thought of the difficulties he was likely to encounter on this particular voyage to Mars.

For months now, ever since the new Earth-Mars Corporation had been installed, there had been a slowly growing trouble among the men—the grimy, embittered wretches who toiled in the depths of the space monsters, tending the rocket-tube equipment, grinding out their beings in torrid heat and yellow-lit gloom with scarcely any remuneration for their services.

The old system had been better, controlled by the original discoverer of space conquest. But upon his death and the accession of the corporation into control, all sentiment and mass unity had been flung overboard. Everywhere wages dropped, from those of the lowliest rocket-tube charge-hand to the cleverest space navigator. And now mutiny hovered. Black hate was in the cause that had formerly been one of good natured, ambitious progress.

By no means was Brant blind to the danger signals. He secretly sympathized with the men but an uneasy premonition that danger was ahead had persisted in his mind ever since his landing from Mars two days before.

Once aboard the ship Brant went direct to his own cabin and there, with a sigh of relief, deposited the living brain of Lu Sang within the safe. He felt better with the infernal thing out of his hands. Hardly had he put the check-sheet in the file before the door quietly opened and Sub-pilot Anderson entered, concern on his lean, swarthy face.

"The men are grumbling again, sir," he announced. "I thought I had better tell you. I've heard rumors—about mutiny, about turning the passengers and masters adrift at the halfway line in a safety ship, taking over control of this vessel themselves. All sorts of things."

Brant stood with tightened lips for a moment, then he shrugged.

"At the best, just rumors, Anderson," he said grimly. "We'll meet trouble when it comes. Get to your post—give the starting order. Time's up."

"Yes, sir."

Anderson departed swiftly to the control cabin. After a moment's thought Brant followed suit.

He gave his orders for the departure mechanically, watched everything mechanically through the massive windows at the black rotunda of the void as the liner, gathering momentum, cleaved through the last vestiges of Earth's atmosphere into the infinity beyond. At once the outlook changed; the silvery translucence of the stratosphere heights had gone.

Space was studded with brilliantly glittering points of light. To Brant it all had no meaning; he was completely familiar with the stars. Mutiny! That was what dinned across his brain and frayed his nerves.

And while he wondered, that which he feared was maturing below in the bowels of the ship. Blackie Grednow, perhaps the oldest rocket charge-hand on the spaceways, stood beside his own particular fueling unit, massive hand on the metalwork. His little bloodshot eyes peered at his eleven almost naked comrades with the smoldering fire of excitement.

"Everything's all set," he announced eagerly. "We've got to strike on this trip; we've waited long enough. You know the plans—we take over the ship just as we near the halfway line, drive her back to Earth, then hold her there and refuse to land until new conditions are agreed to. That understood?"

The men nodded silently.

"We're facing Brant, Blackie," commented one of them. "Had you reckoned with that?"

"Brant?" The dirt- and sweat-streaked ex-criminal spat eloquently. "He'll crumple up like steel before a ray-tube

when we get on to him. But remember! There's to be no bloodshed—there are passengers aboard, valuable passengers. We can't afford to defeat our own ends. You know your places when I give the signal. Now—back to work."

Silently the men returned to their tasks, but in the mind of one of them at least were personal plans. Newton reflected that it was one thing to achieve amenable conditions aboard a space ship by force—but it was distinctly another to make use of the wealth the ship contained. There must be gold and valuables aboard—there always were on an Earth-Mars voyage. Captain Brant's safe usually held cargo of tremendous value. It was of this that Newton thought, and plotted for individual action when the time came to strike.

Captain Brant began to feel more at ease as the days passed on and everything worked with perfect clocklike order. His vigilance began to relax. It was the one move for which Blackie Grednow had been waiting.

Suddenly, without the least warning, the repulsor rocket-tubes came into being. The ship began to slow down rapidly in its tremendous headlong rush toward the red planet. Far away in the infinite blackness of the void the planet hung, a roseate globe no larger than a tennis ball.

Immediately the alarm bell rang. Passengers raced to and fro, heading for the safety space ships. Brant, tight-lipped, swung round from his controls, Anderson by his side—then both of them stopped in their movement as they beheld Blackie himself standing just inside the doorway, a levelled ray-tube in his grimy fist.

"Better not," he advised grimly. "Nothing will happen if you do as I say. Just remember the passengers."

"Well, what do you want?" Brant snapped, glancing helplessly at his own ray-tube in its rack.

"Complete control of the ship. You are to obey my orders. Everybody is covered; I'm warning you. You're going down below where we've been. You know the work down there. I'm giving orders from now on—"

Blackie broke off with a sudden start at the sound of the scream from the corridor outside. He took a step back, glanced in amazement, then looked back into the cabin.

"Brant, forget my demands for the moment," he said curtly. "You know I'm only aiming at getting justice. Some dirty skunk among that rabble of mine has betrayed me. Come on!"

Instantly Brant and Anderson seized their weapons and followed the cursing Blackie from the control chamber. They came upon a scene that caused Blackie mercilessly to level his weapon for action. The rocket crew, seizing upon their mistaken idea of liberty, was completely out of hand, forcing the shouting, furious passengers back into the main stateroom. Those who were protesting were not asked twice; ray-tubes mercilessly mowed them down.

"Stop, damn you!" Blackie thundered. "Stop, you blasted space rats, or by—"

"Justice!" roared a voice, that of Arnold Benson, perhaps one of the most fractious members of the rocket crew. "Justice! You were going to give us that, Blackie! Betray us more likely! We're taking what we can get and no questions—"

"Not while I'm in charge!" Blackie bellowed back, striding forward. Then he stopped, uttered the faintest of sounds, and fell prone to the floor, killed on the spot by the deadly force of Benson's ray-tube.

For perhaps three seconds there was horrified silence. Passengers and men alike looked on in blank stupefaction—then Brant leaped into action and charged forward. Anderson came behind him like a whirlwind.

In the space of a minute the main stateroom was a tumbled mass of fighting, battling figures. Ray-tubes flashed dangerously, men and women fell. When at last it was over the figures of Benson, Newton, and another man named Mason rose up from the carnage, blood-streaked and victorious figures, gazing down on the dead bodies of Captain Brant and Anderson, and the others who had been mowed down in their efforts at escape.

"So that's how it is," Benson muttered thickly. "All right—so be it. You men"—he glared savagely at a half dozen first-class passengers—"can get your coats off and find out what it's like controlling the rocket-tubes. You others will stay here for the time being, and don't attempt any moves if you want to live to get back to Earth. Come on, you two!" He made a motion to his two surviving comrades and they strode off to the control cabin.

Once within they looked at each other dubiously.

"Clever enough," commented Newton presently. "But how do you figure on living it down? Nine rocket hands, the captain and sub-pilot, and some two dozen passengers—all killed. We dare not return to Earth with all those dead."

"We're not going to," Benson growled. "We're going on to Mars and there we'll become heroes. There was a mutiny—Blackie Grednow started it. We got things under control after a hard fight. The passengers won't talk, they're too scared. Leave it to me."

"Say, do you realize that we're nearly five thousand miles off our course?" demanded Mason, turning from the route-checkers. "While that fight lasted we drifted—"

"Then don't waste time talking. Give orders to those idiots down below to fire the off-tubes. We're drifting—and quickly." Benson glared through the observation window. Far away to the left hung the argent ball of Venus, blazing silently through space. Through an immense arc lay Mars, miles out of the charted deadline.

"Sure you know how to chart the course?" Newton asked.

"Of course I do."

"All right then—I'll go and get the passengers and crew to work. You and Mason can look after things here. Join you later."

Newton departed, but not toward the passengers locked in the stateroom. Instead he stole softly down the deserted promenade deck until he arrived at the dead Brant's cabin. Softly he opened the door and went inside. Within a moment he had slid aside the partition that concealed the regulation safe; with a grim smile on his face he levelled his ray-tube.

"First come, first served," he commented thoughtfully, as he watched the heavy door drip to molten metal beneath the ray's impact. Then at last he was satisfied. Taking care to avoid the hot metal edges he reached inside and drew forth the contents.

The brain of Lu Sang he laid on the table after a casual glance at it. To him it was worthless. There were other things of greater import. A cargo of precious stones from New York's most lucrative coffers; a medicinal shrub of immense value for planting on Mars; money to the value of fifty thousand dollars in notes.

Newton chuckled and rubbed his hands as he took stock. Then the broad smile on his face faded as a shadow fell across the treasure.

He looked up sharply. Benson was immediately behind him, grim, rugged, cruel.

"So, you blasted rat, this is how you fix the passengers, eh?" Benson asked slowly, grinning viciously. "I come here to look for Brant's charting directions, and I find you've cleaned out the safe! All right—you're finished!"

"Wait!" Newton implored hoarsely, as Benson whirled him toward the emergency space chamber. "Wait! I'll do anything you want! Anything—"

"You'll do nothing!" Benson retorted, and with a tremendous shove sent the luckless Newton sprawling into the space chamber. A second afterward the heavy sealing door closed, accomplishing two things. The closing of the

door dropped the screaming Newton into the infinite void of space, reduced him instantly to a tiny, frozen satellite of the space ship itself. Used only for emergency explorations in a space suit, or for repairs, the space chamber was a death trap to anyone unprotected.

For a moment Benson stood gazing at the hoard on the table, then he swung round as Mason came rushing in. The man took no notice of the treasure; his expression was one of utter terror.

"Benson, unless we can chart the course we're sunk!" he shouted desperately. "Those damned fools down below don't understand rocketry. We're being pulled aside—we're within the gravitational field of Venus. Haven't you found Brant's charting sheets anywhere?"

"No." Benson set his jaw. "I can't chart a course, Mason; I thought I could. I'm only a rocket man, not a navigator. Hell, if only Brant had not been killed!"

"Newton! What about him? He knows more than most."

"He won't be able to help us," Benson answered slowly, and cast an unnoticed glance out of the window at the frozen grey spot that denoted the late rocket man.

"Well, anyhow, something's got to be done. We must fire all tubes away from Venus—"

Desperation caused Mason to leave his sentence unfinished. He floundered from the cabin, pursued by the alarmed Benson. Together they entered the control cabin and tried fiercely to calculate intricacies that it had taken trained men many years to master. It simply couldn't be done.

Benson stared with a blanched face at the growing face of Venus, world of mystery, far ahead. Venus, the world unknown. A strange icy terror crept the length of his spine. Venus—so lovely, so radiant, yet hiding beneath her dense, watery atmosphere with its high light reflective capacity, the first forms of squirming, terrible life. Those who had dared to descend on Venus' surface had never returned.

And with the seconds Venus was growing. Mars was far away now, retreating with every second. The space ship, uncontrolled, unmanageable, raced with ever growing speed through infinity, chained by the planet's gravitation.

In the stateroom the passengers milled to and fro, battling to obtain a view through the windows at the inevitable death speeding through space toward them.

Faster—faster, through the growing minutes, while two rocket men tried vainly to figure the right way.

Faster....

Until at last the space liner hit the outermost edges of the Venusian atmosphere, screamed with unholy speed through it, and crashed at last with terrific, buckling force into an immense mountain.

CHAPTER II

The Brain of Lu Sang

The mysterious disappearance of Liner 762 was the one topic of conversation on both Mars and Earth for many a long day afterward. The mystery vied in popularity with that of the old time sea vessel, *Mary Celeste*. No thought of mutiny seemed to enter anybody's head; there had been no suspicion of it upon departure. Communications of sympathy were sent through the void from every tenanted planet, even from the strange denizens of distant Pluto,

who sent, in their own queer fashion, their deepest condolences.

Scout machines tirelessly searched the spaceways for some sign of the missing liner, but no traces did they find. Venus was thought of as the possible solution—but only thought of. There had yet to be a man with nerve enough to risk again the mysteries of that awful world. So the mystery of 762 remained a mystery.

Perhaps the most interested of all in the disappearance was the lean, saturnine Roy Jefferson, chief scientist and radio head of the New York space depot. Mysteries in space were his hobby, tempting danger his only delight in life. For a long time after the general hue and cry had died down the mystery of 762 continued to absorb his mind, though even he could make no move toward solving it. Nevertheless, he was alive for the faintest possible clue, and in a good position to receive any, for through him came all interstellar messages.

And while he pondered through the passing months, something strange was occurring on Venus, within half a mile of the wreckage of 762. At first sight the view was but that already familiar to the hapless explorers who had come from Earth—and never returned.

Gigantic trees, overburdened with dense, over-ripe foliage of a bilious green hue towered upward from the steamy and impassable undergrowth that rioted on the spongy ground. Everywhere there was steam—the dank and insufferable heat of a very young and deadly world, twenty-six million miles nearer the sun than Earth, filled with gases mainly poisonous in their sheer, undiluted potency. Occasionally clouds drifted in the brilliantly blue sky, but in the main the sun blazed eternally on this, the day side, of Venus. Long since had Earthlings disproved clouds as the cause of Venus' brilliance in the sky; water-vapor in enormous quantities was the explanation.

And, near the ruins of 762, there was undoubtedly a change. Something grey and indeterminable lay in the undergrowth, something veined and throbbing, nauseous in appearance—the brain of Lu Sang. Flung from the table where it had been placed by Newton, in the space ship's crash it had rolled through a rent in the wall and dropped, practically unharmed, into the midst of the loam and nutrition rife in the Venusian forest land. Life stalked every corner of that weird vastness—life in its first mysterious stages, chemical change.

The very ground was saturated with the elements of protoplasm—carbon, hydrogen, phosphorus, calcium—all along the scale of chemicals. And into the midst of this, into the midst of an atmosphere plentifully supplied with carbon dioxide, had fallen a brain that still lived, a brain independent of a body that would otherwise have killed it—a brain absorbing unto itself all the young and healthy life that teemed about it, gathering strength, living, arising from the gulfs of mental suspension into which an earthly anaesthetic had originally plunged it.

Venus, the hell planet, receptive to life, in its early evolutionary stages. Its heavy atmosphere, permeated with a rich gaseous content, and the raw chemicals abundant in the protoplasmic soil all helped the alien brain to grow, expand and live. Cell tissue growth accelerated; and Nature, highly adaptive on embryonic Venus, quickly created a protective healing shell for the brain that would guard it against harmful bacteria and unfavorable climatic conditions. Mental life had come to Venus, mental life destined to go on, unhindered.

For two years after the disappearance of 762 events came and went uneventfully upon all the populated planets—Earth, Mars, Saturn and Pluto. Then on the memorable night of January 10th, 1999, there came the first hint of something amiss—a desperate cry from the denizens of Pluto, dashed to Earth by ultra-radio, and Jefferson, in charge, was the first to receive it.

"Mental changes affecting Pluto's inhabitants. Please investigate. Very urgent."

That was all, like a cry in a storm, and all efforts to recommunicate with Pluto failed completely. Jefferson dutifully submitted the message to Headquarters. Scout machines went out to investigate, and found nothing. Jefferson, however, the mystery of 762 still hovering in his keen brain, pondered the cry deeply, and as the days went on it became evident that the Plutonians had not sent their warning without cause. Something was amiss—a strange and incredible thing, affecting now the inhabitants of both Mars and Earth, and in a lesser degree on account of their slow receptive powers, the Saturnians.

Men underwent inexplicable transformations. They varied between supreme genius and profound idiocy, able to understand the entire cosmos in one moment, and yet baffled by a simple addition sum the next. Man lost touch with himself; he began to feel the influence of an immense and overpowering mentality exerting its effect upon him. From somewhere in space a gigantic brain force was in action.

At the very first sign of the mental disturbances Jefferson went direct to the commandant of the spaceways.

"There seems to be danger about, sir. A menace is threatening us and we've got to find out where it is coming from. Where there is danger, that is where I can be found. What are my orders, sir?"

Commandant Bradley pondered.

"I hardly know, Jefferson. The whole thing is so sudden; we don't know where to look. I have a report here from Grafol of Mars. His etheric detectors place the disturbance as coming from or near Venus. The periods of mental perturbation are varied. They continue for so long, stop suddenly, then go on again. The reason for the momentary stoppages remains a mystery at the moment. But we do know that the mental oppression is getting worse. All of us have felt it. But the idea of Venus being behind it is absurd! Venus is a young world, a world from which no man has ever come back alive."

"Early pioneers without modern equipment, sir," Jefferson replied promptly. Then, more seriously, "From my own observations it seems that this mentality is no ordinary one. It is gifted with finesse and polish, able to exact its requirements no matter what is incurred. A brain of high training, on Venus! But—*how?*"

"Wait!" the commandant interrupted suddenly, his expression changing. "A brain of high training—Good God, I wonder if it is possible!"

"What, sir?"

"Do you remember the mysterious disappearance of Liner 762?"

Jefferson smiled whimsically.

"I've never ceased to think of it, sir."

"Aboard that liner was a criminal brain, alive; it belonged to Lu Sang, the Chinese criminal. I wonder if 762 landed on Venus and the brain rooted itself there? Is it entirely beyond possibility?"

Jefferson stared at his superior blankly. "I think your guess is dead correct, sir. Venus must be visited right away. I'd like that opportunity, sir; it is the kind of thing I've been longing for for years."

The commandant nodded wearily. "I have no time to haggle; the danger is very real and imminent. You have my permission to leave the moment you are able. I'll assign Andrews to take over. But for the love of heaven, man, watch your step! Venus is no child's playground."

The lean radio chief nodded composedly.

"If it were I wouldn't be going!"

With the sunset Jefferson departed from Earth in a small express space flier, accompanied only by two of his closest comrades who, like himself, were never happy unless endangering their lives in some way or other. Stanhope and Bragg were their names, the one small and heavy, the other tall and sinewy, and both of them loyal to the cause in which they had spent their lives.

With terrific speed the space machine shot from Earth into space. Out here in the void, the three adventurers felt the mental forces in all their intensity. Beating waves of mental compulsion that brought the sweat to their faces in

the effort of concentrating against them.

"Whatever it is it's sure got a hell of a kick," breathed Stanhope, turning a strained face. "How do you figure on beating it, Jeff?"

"I don't," Jefferson answered grimly. "I just want to locate it on this trip. How to beat it will come later. You've got to show me the thing—even if it is a brain—that can defeat the science of nineteen ninety-nine. Now hang on—we're going places!" So saying he increased the acceleration. Never for an instant did the unknown power of Venus relax. With the shortening distance its intensity grew, until when at last the hurtling flier was within a few thousand miles of the white planet, it was almost more than the men could do to concentrate on their tasks. The mentality waves were forcing them to turn back, to leave Venus to its own devices and, little by little, they began to submit. The ship gradually came to a near standstill over the glittering atmosphere of the planet.

Jefferson turned a rigid, ashen face to his comrades.

"We've—we've got to obey," he muttered mechanically. "Turn back."

He moved to the controls, then suddenly—staggeringly so—the mental compulsion ceased. Something large and dark, moving with considerable speed, blotted out the vision of Venus' glaring surface. The space ship swung around violently, snatched by a sudden strong gravitational field. Instantly the three were hurled off their feet, crashed helplessly into the wall, and lapsed into insensibility.

Jefferson returned to his senses aware that the space ship was in the midst of the blackest shadow, relieved only inside the cabin by the faint light of the stars. Puzzled, aching, he revived his two comrades and they moved in bewilderment to the window. Instantly their eyes became fixed to a small and desolate landscape, shining grey and metallic in the starlight. As the moments passed they did not, as they expected, move across the terrain; it kept steady pace with them.

Jefferson, screwed his head around the angle of the deeply sunk window and peered above. Then and then only did he behold the edge of a blinding crescent—the edge of Venus itself.

"A Venusian moon—amazingly tiny!" he gasped. "A small planetoid of some kind of metal. But still a moon. Too small almost for observation from Earth."

"And we're caught in its tiny attractive field," commented Stanhope.

"Well, it's interesting anyhow. What's next?"

"Have you noticed," Jefferson said slowly, "that the mental compulsion has now ceased?"

"Odd," was Bragg's comment.

"Odd nothing; it can mean only one thing. The metal of this satellite is of such an order as to block mental waves. It probably blocks all sorts of other electrical waves as well. Mental waves are electrical basically, must be. It's obvious now why mental compulsion on Earth stops periodically and then resumes. It must coincide with the time when this moon comes between the Venusian brain and Earth. All the other planets report the same occurrence," Jefferson informed him.

"And Venus itself?" Stanhope questioned. "What do we do? Explore?"

Jefferson shook his head.

"Too dangerous. We'd never stand it. We can take it for granted that Lu Sang's brain somehow took root in the chemicals of Venus, which has given it overpowering and increasing mental force. No, the best course is to anchor a section of this satellite's surface and take it back to Earth as a protection against mental attack. Thus shielded we can work out a plan to defeat this trouble—if it's humanly possible."

Jefferson paused and looked around as the radio contact to earth suddenly buzzed urgently. In an instant he had the receivers to his ears. The voice of Commandant Bradley came to him over the infinite distance.

"That you, Jefferson? What have you found?" Then before Jefferson could reply the urgent voice continued, "Something terrible is happening! We've received news from the Saturnians that space itself is changing. Distant nebulæ and galaxies are disappearing, being swallowed up in void. The trouble is also affecting our own solar system. Pluto has gone; Neptune reveals signs of also vanishing. We've had to use a couple of power ray machines to keep Earth steady because of the shifting of the balance. We've got one trained on the sun and the other on Alpha Centauri. That'll keep us safe for the time being. But that isn't all. Some sort of protoplasm has appeared on Earth, and it radiates mentality. It's overcoming the world—"

The voice trailed down into, silence and ceased. Frantically Jefferson buzzed the contactor, without success. Bitter-faced, he flung down the receivers and made a brief explanation to his wondering companions.

"Things are getting tough!" whistled Stanhope. "Vanishing planets, protoplasm! What the devil next? What's it all for, I wonder?"

"This is no time to ask questions," Jefferson snorted. "We've got to act—fast. Give me a hand with the blast-tubes; we're taking some of this moon back to Earth. Quickly!"

Without another word the three set to work, each performing his part of the task with absolute assurance. Disintegrator blast-tubes, operated from the base of the ship, set to work and cut a full square mile of the apparently solid satellite below. For a time that iron grey surface was ripped and torn with shafts of energy, then, as they ceased their activity the magnetizers came into action.

Immediately, the mile-square sheet, jagged-edged, was torn from its native bed and floated into space. In response the space ship adjusted her position to the new balance and a blinding segment of Venus appeared beyond the satellite's edge.

"Full speed ahead," Jefferson snapped.

The rocket-tubes roared and under their influence the ship began to pull away from the tiny satellite's weak gravitation, drew slowly but into the void away from Venus, the section of severed moon trailing at an unvarying distance in the rear, weightless, chained only by the space ship's own small gravity and powerful magnetizers.

Little by little the immense bulk of Venus began to appear as the distance increased and the satellite's width correspondingly lessened. And as it did so the mental compulsions returned.

Again the trio wrestled desperately with the mental waves, but this time they felt more than compulsion. There was a message, a distinct message, an impression of thought waves, as though a voice were speaking. Silent and rigid they listened.

"Be warned, before you go too far. You are grappling with the brain of Lu Sang, a brain that formerly lay in a pitifully inadequate earthly body. The time has come when I have learned all that matter has to tell; that being so I seek the region of pure thought, the thought that exists where matter is not. Originally in the dim beginning there was naught but space; the accident of certain crystallizing radiations produced matter—a cancer in the midst of an otherwise uniform sea of thought-impressions. With my knowledge it is an easy matter to produce a radiation capable of causing atomic collapse through the medium of heat, the destruction of matter and its resolution into apparently empty space.

"Not until space is empty and all life destroyed can I obtain the real concept of thought. My mental radiations now are disturbing matter life, reducing it to the final stage when it will be a simple matter to destroy the living bodies without impairing the minds. These perturbations are caused entirely by the efforts of the human mentalities to escape from their Earthbound bodies. In the end they will all escape—that is my aim. So, puny humans, do not attempt to stand in my way. You may struggle as you wish, invent all you desire, but your end is inevitable."

With that the communication ceased, but the mental perturbations continued. The three men said nothing, and in a manner purely mechanical drove the flier steadily back toward Earth.

When ultimately they gained the landing grounds mechanical devices came into operation to take control of the colossal sheet of metal they had brought with them. Gently and carefully it was lowered to the ground, then, opening the door, Jefferson found himself facing Commandant Bradley.

"Thank God you're back, Jefferson," were his first words. "You got my radio report, of course? I was overcome at the end by a mental attack. Things have gone much worse while you've been away. The protoplasm is everywhere, slowly covering Earth. The same stuff has also appeared on Mars and smothered that planet completely. The same thing will happen to Earth. Worst of all are the disappearing planets. Thank God we have four force-ray projectors. Two of them help to keep Earth steady during the shiftings of the balance. What did you find? Anything?"

Briefly Jefferson related everything.

"So the only bright spot is our bringing the metal back with us," he concluded. "It protects us against the Brain's thought waves. We can build a shelter of it and work inside with peace. It's our only chance. There must be something that can destroy this infernal Brain—we've got to find something. If we don't all matter will be eliminated and all mind released to its primordial level before matter came. How many men can you let me have, sir?"

"You can have the entire space unit. We're running no space ships now."

Jefferson nodded.

"Send them to me, sir, and at the earliest moment we'll figure ways and means. Now, let's get busy."

CHAPTER III *The Brain Speaks*

In the days that followed men labored to build a small shed from the material of the Venusian moon. It was hard work—cruelly hard—but the need for urgency accomplished wonders.

And while the men struggled to erect the building on the space grounds, death was stalking in every corner of Earth. From every city came news of the steady death of populations, of people of weak mental resistance overcome by the onslaughts of the Venusian brain. The now vast seas of protoplasmic matter that also smeared Earth's surface were impossible things to fight.

"The stuff isn't brain matter, sir," Jefferson explained to his worried superior. "It's really unintelligent chemical, but somehow, probably through the medium of electricity, the distant Brain has managed to excite the atoms of lowly chemicals existing in the very ground into a formation of protoplasm. The stuff has a cellular reflective power which enables it to reflect the mental outpourings of the Brain with tremendous amplification, just as a mirror reflects the sunlight. The Brain is using it, I imagine, purely to increase the potency of his thought-range. Since the same thing happened on Mars it seems a logical conclusion. By this means the Brain has doubled his power, can reach everywhere."

"And now?" Bradley asked drearily. "How do we fight it?"

"We still have time," Jefferson answered grimly. "The shelter is finished. Inside the hut we are perfectly safe. And the only way to defeat the Brain is by electricity. One electric wave can always upset another if you go about it

properly. Brain-radiations, or thought-waves, are electrical in nature. These incoming mental waves are in the vicinity of one hundred and ninety thousand frequency, working on the new Crookes-Matthew Table. Frequencies of that order are far and away in advance of anything yet produced on Earth, and the only way we can get it is by the electric and almost inexhaustible discharge of smashing atoms. You see, if we can once achieve a similar number of frequencies and direct them at Venus, it seems obvious that like will repulse like.

"In other words, the power of the Brain will be so heterodyned, or turned aside, as to cease to have effect. Then, while the effect is maintained and the Brain is helpless we will venture near enough to Venus' surface to smash it out of existence with large-sized ray-tubes. That cannot be done without the Brain being temporarily incapacitated. Normally it can turn aside any ray-tube in existence. It is virtually indestructible, unless under the anaesthesia of frequencies of a like power to its own."

"Go to it," the commandant encouraged. "I hope it works. And remember, the protoplasm stuff has reached West Virginia and is rapidly moving eastward. It'll be here any time."

Jefferson nodded. "If we're quick we can beat it. I'm going right now to make the final details."

The equipping and hook-up of the directional instruments with the main power lines proved a longer job than Jefferson had anticipated. Throughout two days and nights men milled and flocked about the job, battling with both the elements of time and mental trouble. With every passing hour the force of the Brain was becoming stronger. Jefferson fumed and cursed, listened to desperate radio reports that told of the protoplasm's advance into Pennsylvania.

At six p.m. on the following evening, when the cabling and machine connections were at last completed, Mars vanished from the cosmic map. Instantly the two bracing power-rays, automatically controlled, changed their power, adjusting themselves to equal pressure and negating what would otherwise have been world-shattering earthquakes. Stanhope, who had been present at the observatory when the Martian disaster had happened, issued an immediate report.

There was nothing particularly unusual about the matter, it seemed. The Brain was obviously capable of utilizing radiations able to cause atomic excitation. Hence the atoms of Mar's had been agitated through continuously rising temperature. Mars, it appeared, had passed through all the stages of atomic destruction. It had glowed red, then white, then violet as the 6000° C. temperature was reached. Higher and higher, until tremendous X-rays had poured forth into space; to be replaced by gamma rays as the temperature soared to millions of degrees. The nuclei of Mars' atoms had begun to tremble, and finally at 2,000,000° had collapsed altogether.

Mars had passed out in a grand splash of cosmic rays and ceased to be. Why the furious heat of the collapsing planet had not blistered Earth to cinders was a mystery. The only explanation, apparently, was that the Brain had its own ways of working, was saving Earth for its own particular experiments.

Jefferson's jaw squared when he heard the news. With hardly a word he entered the protective building not an hour afterward, accompanied by Stanhope, Bragg, and the commandant himself. No sooner was the door shut than activity began—the main power house of the United Powerlines being constantly in television contact.

Jefferson moved steadily and resolutely in the midst of the apparatus, gazed at the distance-gauge. From his calculations, he knew that the main immense transmitter, four miles away, was pointed so that its outflowing radiations would impinge directly on Venus. The remainder of his instruments told him exactly the load being carried, the number of frequencies, and countless other electrical details, while way back in the laboratories of the Powerline Company the atom-smashing apparatus was at work. Atom-smashing was not a new art to the scientists, but the amount of energy called for on this occasion most certainly was. One hundred and ninety-five thousand frequencies! That was what it was now.

It needed at least twelve atom-smashing machines, directed upon three one-ton blocks of copper to produce the desired load. Desperate scientists worked in the midst of terrific heat and light, protected by heavy suits and goggles.

helmets, watching an awe-inspiring display of disruption and annihilation, the result of which was transmitted direct to the protective shelter at the space grounds, and then to the transmitter itself.

For two hours, and more, Jefferson labored with the switches and resistances until he finally achieved a steady output of one hundred and ninety-five thousand frequencies.

"That's the first part, sir," he announced quietly to the commandant. "If I'm correct, the Brain can't operate with that force being hurled at it. Naturally the force will be blocked as that tiny satellite passes between, but that's hardly worth reckoning in. The power will remain on until Stanhope, Bragg and I have been to Venus and blown the Brain to atoms with the ray-tubes we've had fixed aboard our ship. We've got to go right away. You'd better stay here, sir. There'll be no hitch; the power is automatically controlled. Come on, you two."

The three moved to the door and opened it—but instead of an absence of mental compulsion, such as they had expected, there swept in on them a tremendous communication, so intense that they staggered before it.

"So, you imagine by the use of electricity that you can defeat me? You pitiful fools! When will you realize that the electricity you have hurled into space is far from a detriment? Rather it is an advantage! I discovered that when the satellite passed me and reflected my own radiations. I absorb it into myself, increase my mental range to double because you have doubled the frequencies. You notice how strong my power is? Realize that there is no power that can stop my plans. I shall now destroy you in the same way I destroyed Mars, by a radiation that will annihilate matter. There remains, of the entire spatial universe, reckoning, that is, to Alpha Centauri, only Earth and Mercury to destroy, together with a few odd planetoids and moons. Tomorrow at eight in the morning, by Earth time, Earth shall pass. Remember that. And at that time those who have not succumbed to mental power will die in the ordinary way."

The three men heard no more. They stepped back into the protective shelter, dazed, alarmed. Almost mechanically Jefferson gave the stopping order to the power houses, then he turned a bleak face to the others.

"It's impregnable!" he muttered. "Instead of electricity stopping it, it's just used it! Yet there must be a way. And we've only got twelve hours!"

He stopped and sat down to think, head buried in his hands.

CHAPTER IV

The Last Chance

At length Jefferson looked up, his eyes bright.

"There's only one chance," he said grimly: "It might just work. At eight tomorrow the new disruptive radiation will be hurled at Earth. But what is to happen if we deflect the radiation and turn it back on Venus?"

"Presumably it would wreck Venus," Stanhope returned obviously.

"Or the Brain might absorb it. First find your deflector."

"That's simple. This satellite metal, of which this shelter is built, evidently reflects all known vibrations and does not absorb any of them—not even thought-waves. The Brain has proved that. That being so it is a certainty that the Venusian satellite itself will be able to deflect the disruptive radiations hurled from Venus back onto Venus herself."

"But why won't the Brain itself absorb the reflected radiations?"

"For two reasons. In the first place, this new radiation will be inconceivably more powerful—too tremendously potent for the Brain to nullify or absorb. It will annihilate him almost instantly. Secondly, in the past the Brain drew

his energy from outer space. Now he's using his own, built-up thought power. It's a fundamental law of Nature that no organism can survive in its own waste. Just as the carbon dioxide we exhale proves fatal to other organisms—the same carbon dioxide absorbed by the exhaler would have a lethal affect on him. Similarly, the Brain will be unable to cope with his own emanations which will be, in a sense, his waste."

"Agreed," nodded Bragg. "The slight difficulty in the way is holding the said satellite still enough to accomplish the deflection. You can bet your life the Brain has got it all worked out to send the disruptive, vibrations intermittently as the satellite whirls past."

"Naturally, but I'm thinking of our power rays which are holding Earth steady. We have two other power rays, standing by in case of emergency. Doesn't it seem possible that we can utilize them? Direct one at our moon, which is infinitely heavier than the Venusian satellite, and the other at the Venusian satellite itself, the power being just sufficient to hold that small body steady and stationary at the exact moment the Brain fires forth the disruptive power. That will cause the power to recoil and destroy all Venus at exactly eight o'clock. So far as the calculation goes, I shall go into space and give radio directions to Earth. My instruments will check it."

Bragg smiled cynically.

"And the Brain? How do you expect to stand that mentality?"

"Simple. We have Venus satellite metal left over. We can soon fashion helmets both for myself and the men who will be working the power rays on Earth here. We have the apparatus to fashion as many helmets as we want. With those we will be safe."

At midnight Jefferson left a world that was slowly disappearing under the steady advance of reflective protoplasm. He left satisfied, rough-hewn helmet on his head, content that Stanhope would see through the final details, content too that Bragg would expertly handle all the radio messages that came to him. He felt confident that the Brain would not intercept the radio messages, mainly because of the helmets.

Two hours after Jefferson's departure Bragg began to receive the necessary instructions—the rate of the satellite, its position—every detail, checked by Jefferson's own instruments, was given, to be immediately relayed by Bragg to the waiting Stanhope. He in turn gave the helmeted engineers the instructions and they set to work on the details of the two spare projectors.

Helmeted as they were the men received no mental distractions, but they were forced to struggle constantly with ever-expanding protoplasm. New York was already a smothered city. The only advantage about the stuff was that it did not kill or digest human beings, merely rendered them unconscious.

So, watched by the helmeted commandant, the last conscious men of Earth made their last stand, waiting for the dawn, listening to the radio instructions that came through the silent night, uttered originally by a lone man situated almost stationary one thousand miles from the surface of the Venusian moon.

Jefferson himself spent the last hours with his eyes glued to the chronometer, timed exactly to Earth time. Then he gave the firing signal to Earth, allowing for the time interval of nearly eight minutes, and a corresponding eight minutes for the projected force to strike the Venusian moon. Back on Earth response was exact to the second. Lunar and Venusian force rays were projected to the pre-calculated second, allowing for the differences in distance. Helmeted men in the major power house fed the immense projector engines, engines now working to support four instead of two machines.

Jefferson waited tensely, eyes glued to the Venusian satellite. He watched breathlessly as it appeared on its usual fast journey round the parent world—but now there was something different. Its onrush was slowing down. Slower. The hands of the chronometer pointed exactly to eight, and exactly at the identical second the satellite halted, dead in a line between Earth and Venus.

Jefferson never knew what happened after that. Too long he had lingered, too close to the danger zone, drawn

by the uncanny fascination of it all.

He had one glimpse of a world crumbling and smashing into blinding flame, of a stationary satellite etched out against the glare. Vast and tremendous electrical repercussions beat through infinity, seized the infinitesimally small space ship and hurled it into the uttermost reaches of space. Jefferson never knew what happened. Death claimed him instantly. His ship slowly returned, wrecked, to the position of the shattered Venus and gravitated finally as a tiny moon around the largest remaining piece.

Back on Earth, the danger averted, men waited through the days and weeks for the return of Jefferson—waited long past the time when the protoplasm, deprived of the energy from Venus that had given it life, had died and rotted, long past the time when man had recovered himself and set himself to the task of rebuilding the shattered solar system. The task of recreating a balance equalling that of the old.

But Jefferson never returned. He had tempted danger once too often.

[End of *Brain of Venus*, by John Russell Fearn]