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More planes came, wounding the Beast with bombs

BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

Out of Rain-Swept Venus' Gift to Sun-Drenched Earth Comes Life—
and Death!

By HENRY KUTTNER

Author of "Hollywood on the Moon," etc.

First published in *Thrilling Wonder Stories*,
April 1940.

JARED KIRTH saw the meteor as he lay under the pines, staring up at the stars. He was on the verge of slumber, and the sleeping bag that wrapped his lean body was warm and comfortable.

Kirth was feeling well satisfied with himself, his stomach bulged with crisp, freshly-caught trout, and there was still a week left of the fortnight's vacation he had allowed himself. So he lay quietly, watching the night sky, and the meteor shrieked its death agony in that last incandescent plunge through the atmosphere.

But, before it went out of sight, the luminous body seemed to turn and arc in midair. That was queer enough. And even stranger was the shape of the thing, an elongated ovoid. Vaguely recalling that meteors sometimes contained precious ores, Kirth marked the spot where the flaming thunderbolt fell beyond a high ridge. And the next morning he shouldered his fishing tackle and hiked in that direction.

So, he found the wrecked spaceship. It lay among the pines, a broken giant, its hull fused in many places by the heat of friction.

Kirth's pinched, rather mean mouth tightened as he looked down at the vessel. He was remembering that two months before a man named Jay Arden had left the Earth on the first interplanetary voyage.

Arden had been lost in space—so the papers had said. But now, apparently, his ship had returned, and Kirth's gaunt, gray-stubbled face was eager as he hastened down the slope.

He walked around the ship, slipping on sharp rocks and cursing once or twice before he found the port. But the metal surrounding it had fused and melted, so that entry was impossible at this point. The gray, pitted, rough metal of the craft defied the tentative ax-blows Kirth gave it. Curiosity mounted within him.

He examined the ship more closely. The sun, rising above the eastern ridge, showed a factor he had previously overlooked. There were windows, circular deadlights, so fused and burned that they were as opaque as the metallic hull. Yet they were unmistakably of glass, or some similar substance.

It was not ordinary glass. It did not shatter under the ax. But a small chip flew, and Kirth battered away diligently until he had made a small hole. Vapor gushed out of this, foul, stale and mephitic, and Kirth fell back and waited.

Then he returned to his labors. The glass was easier to shatter now, for some reason, and it was not long before Kirth had chopped away a hole large enough to permit the entry of his lean body. First, however, he took a small flashlight from his belt and held it at arm's length within the ship.

There was but one room, and this was a shambles. It was a mass of wreckage. Yet the air had cleared, and there seemed to be no danger. Cautiously Kirth squirmed through the deadlight.

So this was a spaceship! Kirth recognized the chamber from newspaper pictures he had seen months before.

In 1942 the ship had been new, shining, and perfect. Now, only a few months later, it was a ruin. The controls were hopelessly wrecked. Metal kits and canisters were scattered about the floor, broken straps on the walls showing whence they had fallen. And on the floor, too, lay the body of Jay Arden.

KIRTH made a useless examination. The man was dead. His skin was blue and cyanosed, and his neck was obviously broken. Scattered about his corpse were a few cellulose-wrapped parcels that had spilled from a broken canister near by. Through the transparent envelopes Kirth detected small black objects, smaller than peas, which resembled seeds.

Protruding from one of Arden's pockets was a notebook. As Kirth drew it forth, a wrapped parcel fell to the floor. Kirth hesitated, put the notebook aside, and opened the package.

Something fell from it into his palm. The man gasped in sheer wonder.

It was a jewel. Oval, large as an egg, the gem flamed gloriously in the light of the electric torch. It had no color, and yet seemed to partake of all the hues of the spectrum. It seemed to draw into itself a thousand myriad hues—men would have died for such a jewel. Lovely it was, beyond imagination, and it

was—unearthly.

Finally Kirth tore his gaze from the thing, and opened the notebook. The light was too dim, so he carried it to the broken deadlight. Arden, seemingly, had not kept a diary, and his notes were broken and disconnected. But from the book, several photographs fluttered, and Kirth caught them as they fell.

The snapshots were blurred and discolored, but certain details showed with fair clarity. One showed a thick bar, with rounded ends, white against blackness. This was a picture of the planet Venus, taken from outer space, though Kirth did not realize it. He examined the others.

Ruins. Cyclopean, strange, and alien in contour, half-destroyed shapes of stone were blurred against a dim background. One thing, however, was clear. The spaceship was visible in the picture—and Kirth gasped.

For the great ship was dwarfed by the gigantic ruins. Taller than the vast Temple of Karnak, monstrously large were the stones that had once been cities and buildings. Vague and murky as the pictures were, Kirth managed to form some conception of the gargantuan size of the structures shown in them. Too, he noticed that the geometry seemed oddly wrong. There were no stairs visible, only inclined planes. And a certain primeval crudeness, a lack of the delicacy noticeable even in the earlier Egyptian artifacts, was significant.

Most of the other photographs showed similar scenes. One, however, was different. It depicted a field of flowers, such flowers as Kirth had never before seen. Despite the lack of color, it was evident that the blossoms were lovely with a bizarre, unearthly beauty. Kirth turned to the notebook.

HE learned something from it, though not much. He read:

“Venus seems to be a dead planet. The atmosphere is breathable, but only plant life exists. The flowers, somewhat resembling orchids, are everywhere. The ground beneath them is covered with their seeds. I have collected a great many of these. . . .

“Since I found the jewel in one of the ruined structures, I have made another discovery. An intelligent race once lived on Venus—the ruins themselves denote that fact. But any inscriptions they might have left have been long since eroded by the foggy, wet atmosphere and the eternal rains. So I thought, till this morning, when in a subterranean chamber I discovered a bas-relief almost buried in mud.

“It took me hours to clear away the muck, and even then there was not much to see. But the pictures are more significant than any inscription in the ancient Venusian language could have been. I recognized, quite clearly, the jewel I previously discovered. From what I have been able to make out, there were many of these, artificially created. And they were something more than

mere gems.

“Unbelievable as it seems, they are—to use a familiar parallel—eggs. There is life in them. Under the proper conditions of heat and sunlight—so I interpret the bas-reliefs—they will hatch. . . .”

There were a few other notes in the book, but these were technical in nature and of no interest to Kirth, save for one which mentioned the existence of a diary Arden had kept. He again searched the ship, and this time found the diary. But it was half incinerated by its proximity to the fused port, and utterly illegible.

Pondering, Kirth examined the various containers. Some were empty; others had dusty cinders in them, and emitted a burnt, unpleasant odor when opened. The spoils of Arden’s voyage were, apparently, only the seeds and the jewel.

Now, Jared Kirth, though shrewd, was not intelligent in the true sense of the word. Born on a New England farm, he had fought his way up by dint of hard, bitter persistence and a continual insistence upon his own rights. As a result, he owned a few farms and a small village store, and permitted himself one brief vacation a year. On this furlough neither his wife nor his daughter accompanied him. He was fifty, a tall, spare, gray man, with cold eyes and a tight mouth that was generally compressed as though in denial.

It is scarcely wonderful, therefore, that Kirth began to wonder how he might turn this discovery to serve his own ends. He knew that no reward had been offered for the finding of the spaceship, supposedly lost in the airless void. If there had been treasure of any sort in the vessel, he would have appropriated it, on the principle of “finder’s keepers.” There was nothing, save for the seeds and the gem, and Kirth had these in his pockets as he left the vessel.

The ship would not be found for some time, since this was wilderness country. Meanwhile, Kirth took with him Arden’s notebook, to be destroyed at a more opportune moment. Though skeptical, he thought more than once of Arden’s comparison of the jewel with an egg, and, for a man who owned several farms, the conclusion was inevitable. If this “egg” could be hatched, despite the unlikeliness of the idea, the result might be interesting. Even more—it might be profitable.

KIRTH decided to cut short his vacation, and two days later he arrived at his home. He did not stay there, however, but went to one of his farms, taking with him his wife and daughter.

Heat and sunlight. A topless, electrically warmed incubator was the logical answer. At night, Kirth used a sunlamp on the jewel. Meanwhile he waited.

Intrinsically the gem might have value. Kirth could, perhaps, have sold it for a large sum to some jeweler. But he thought better of this, and planted some of the Venusian seeds instead.

And, in the strange jewel, alien life stirred. Heat warmed it—heat that did not now exist on gloomy, rain-swept Venus. From the Sun poured energy, cosmic rays and other rays that for eons had been barred from the stone by the thick cloud-barrier that shrouded Venus. Into the heart of the gem, stole energy that set certain forces in motion. Life came, and dim realization.

There, on the straw of a filthy incubator, lay the visitant from another world. Unknown ages ago, it had been created, for a definite purpose. And now—life returned.

Kirth saw the hatching. At midday he stood beside the incubator, gnawing on a battered pipe, scratching the gray stubble on his jaw. His daughter was beside him, a lean, underfed girl of thirteen, with sallow skin and hair.

“It ain’t an egg, Pa,” she said in a high, nasal voice. “You don’t really expect that thing to hatch, do you?”

“Hush,” Kirth grunted. “Don’t keep pestering me. I—hey! Look at that thing! Something’s—”

Something was indeed happening. On the straw the jewel lay, flaming bright. It seemed to suck sunlight into itself thirstily. The dim radiance that had come to surround it of late pulsed and waned—pulsed once more. The glow waxed—

Waxed brighter! An opaque cloud formed suddenly, hiding the gem. There came a high-pitched tinkling sound, almost above the threshold of hearing. It faded and was gone.

The gray mist fled. Where the jewel had been was nothing. Nothing, that is, save for a round, grayish ball that squirmed and shuddered weakly....

“That ain’t a chick,” the girl said, her jaw hanging. “Pa—” There was fright in her eyes.

“Hush!” Kirth said again. He bent down and gingerly prodded the thing. It seemed to writhe open, with an odd motion of uncoiling, and a tiny creature like a lizard lay there, its small mouth open as it sucked in air.

“I be damned,” Kirth said slowly. “A dirty little lizard!” He felt vaguely sick. The jewel he might have sold at a good price, but this creature—what could be done with it? Who could want it?

Yet it was strange enough. It was shaped like a miniature kangaroo, almost, and like no lizard Kirth had ever seen before. Perhaps he might sell it after all.

“Go git a box,” he said to his daughter, and, when she had obeyed, he picked up the reptile gingerly and deposited it in the impromptu prison.

AS he carried it into the house, he glanced at the plot of ground where he had planted some of the seeds. A few yellowish, small spears were sprouting up. Kirth nodded approvingly and scratched his jaw.

Mrs. Kirth, a plump, slatternly woman, approached. Her face was prematurely old, sagging in fat wrinkles. Her brown eyes had a defeated look, though there was still something of beauty in them.

“What you got there, Jay?” she asked.

“Tell you later,” he said. “Git me some milk, Nora. And an eye-dropper or something.”

This was done. Kirth fed the reptile, which seemed to like the milk and sucked it down greedily. Its small, glittering eyes stared up unwinkingly.

“Pa,” the girl said. “It’s bigger. Lots bigger.”

“Couldn’t be,” Kirth said. “Things don’t grow that fast. Git out, now, and leave me be.”

And, in its prison, the tiny creature that was to become the Beast, drank thirstily of the milk, while in the dim, alien brain, clouded by the mists of centuries, thoughts began to stir. The first faint chords of memory vibrated . . . memory of a previous life, half forgotten. . . .

Kirth’s daughter had been right. The reptile grew, abnormally and alarmingly. At the end of the second day, it was six inches long from blunt muzzle to tapering tail. When the week was over it was more than twice as large. Kirth built a pen for it and was secretly elated.

“I can sell it, all right,” he exulted. “Some circus’d pay me plenty. But it might git even bigger. I’ll wait a bit.”

Meanwhile he tended his Venusian plants. They were sprouting most satisfactorily now, and the beginnings of buds were evident. They were as tall as hollyhocks, but leafless. The thick, rigid stem, pale yellow in hue, was studded with swellings that presently burst into bloom.

At the end of the second week Kirth’s garden was a riot of color, and he paid a photographer to take snapshots in color. These he sent to several horticultural gardens, which were immediately interested. A reporter got on the trail, and interviewed Kirth.

Kirth was wary and spoke of plant-grafting and experiments he had made. A new species of flower, it was, and he had grown them. Yes, he had some seeds, and would sell them. . . .

The wrecked spaceship had not yet been discovered. And in its sty the Beast ate enormously of vegetables, and of swill which Kirth refused the reluctant hogs, and drank anything it could get. A scientist would have known, by the shape of the Beast’s teeth, that it was carnivorous or at least omnivorous, but Kirth did not know, and the reptile did not appear to object to

its menu. It grew, remarkably, and its basal metabolism was so high that its scaly body emitted perceptible heat.

It was as large, now, as a stallion. But it seemed so gentle that Kirth took no warning, though he kept a revolver in his pocket whenever he approached his bizarre charge.

THE dim memories within the Beast's brain stirred into life from time to time. But one factor predominated, drowning them and lulling them to slumber. The Beast knew, somehow, that it was necessary for him to grow. Before anything else, he must attain his full growth and maturity. After that—

The Beast was intelligent, not with the aptitude of a child, but with the mind of a half-drugged adult. And he was not born of Earth. The alien chemistry of his body sent unknown secretions coursing through his veins, and, as he ate and grew, that strange mind worked. . . .

The Beast learned, though as yet he could not take advantage of his knowledge. The Kirths' conversation was clearly audible to him through the open windows of the farmhouse, and their television was very often turned on. From observing the humans, he grew to recognize their moods, and in turn came to associate, certain word-sounds with those moods.

He learned that certain grimaces accompanied a special set of emotions. He grew to understand laughter and tears.

One thing he did not understand—a look that came into the eyes of Mrs. Kirth and her daughter, and sometimes into Kirth's eyes, as they watched him. It was repugnance and horror, but the Beast did not know that.

Two months passed slowly. Kirth received many checks in his mail. The new flowers had proved tremendously popular, and florists demanded them avidly. Lovelier than orchids they were, and they did not fade for a long time after being cut.

Kirth was not shrewd enough to keep control of the plants in his own hands, and the distribution of them got beyond him. Since the flowers would flourish in any climate, they were grown from California to New York. Fields of them formed a carpet of beauty over America. The fad spread over the world, and in Buenos Aires, London, or Berlin no socialite attended a *dansant* without a corsage of the Rainbows, as the blooms came to be called.

Kirth might have been satisfied with his growing bank account, but he had already got in touch with the owners of several circuses, and told them he had a freak to sell. Kirth was becoming apprehensive. The Beast was uncomfortably huge, and people were noticing that scaled, swaying back as it moved about. Kirth, with some trepidation, led the monster into the barn, though it followed willingly enough. But the quarters were cramped. One blow

from the mighty tail would have wrecked the structure, and that was scarcely a pleasant thought.

Kirth would have been even more disturbed had he realized what was going on in the monster's brain. The fogs were dissipating as the Beast approached swift maturity. Intelligence and memory were returning. And already, the creature could understand many English words.

That was natural enough. A child does the same, over a period of years, by a process of association, experiment, and mental retention of word-sounds. The Beast was not a child. He was a highly intelligent being, and for months he had been in close contact with human beings. At times, he found it hard to concentrate, and would devote himself to feeding and sleeping, in a dull, pleasantly languorous stupor. Then, the driving, inexorable force within him would awaken him to life once more.

It was hard to remember. The metamorphosis he had undergone had altered the psychic patterns of his mind to some degree. But one day he saw, through a crack in the barn, the Venusian flowers, and by a natural process of association thought of long-forgotten things. Then a dull, gray, rainy day occurred. . . .

Rain. Chill, bleak water that splashed on his scaled hide. Thick fogs, through which structures reared. And among those stone buildings moved beings like himself. The Beast remembered. . . .

The hideous, armored head swayed in the dimness of the barn. The saucer eyes stared into vacancy. Tremendous and frightful, the Beast crouched, while its thoughts went far and far into the dusty ages of the past.

Others. There had been others like itself, the ruling race of the second planet. Something had happened. Death . . . doom. Many had died. All over the rain-swept, twilight world the mighty reptiles had perished. Nothing could save them from the plague that had come from outer space.

The vast hulk shuddered uneasily in the gloom.

NO escape? Yes, there had been one. Despite the beast form of the creatures, they had been intelligent. And they had possessed science of a kind. It was not Earthly science—but it had found an escape.

Not in their own forms. Nothing could protect the huge reptilian bodies from the plague. But in another form . . . a form in which the basic energy-patterns of their bodies would remain unaltered, though compressed by the creation of atomic stasis. . . .

Matter is not solid. Bodies are formed of incredibly tiny solar systems, electrons that swing in wide orbits about their protons. Under the influence of cold this sub-microscopic motion is slowed down, and at the point of absolute zero it ceases. But absolute zero means the cessation of all energy, and is

impossible.

Impossible? Not on Venus, ages ago. As an experiment the life-energy had been drained from one of the reptiles. As the electrons drew in toward their protons, there had been a shrinkage . . . and a change. A jewel of frozen life, an entity held in absolute stasis, lay before the Venusian scientists, waiting for the heat and solar rays that would waken it to life once more.

Space travel, to those bulky and gigantic forms, was impossible. But if, in different guise, they could flee to another, safer world. . . .

That had been the plan. All the energies of the Venusian survivors were turned toward constructing a spaceship. In this vessel the life-gems were to be stored, and, as soon as possible, automatic robot controls would guide the craft across space, to Earth. Once a safe landing had been effected, other robot apparatus would expose the jewels to sunlight and heat, and the Venusians would live again after their cataleptic voyage across the void. But the plan had not been completed. The plague was too deadly. The spaceship's unfinished ruins still lay hidden deep in a Venusian swamp, and it had been an Earthman, after all, who had brought one of the strange jewels to his own world.

All over Venus the gems were hidden. The Beast had seen the night sky, and learned that he was on the third planet. That meant he had been brought here from his own world, and revived by the energizing rays. He felt gratitude to the Earthmen who had rescued him from eternal life-in-death.

Perhaps, he was not the only one. Perhaps, others of his race existed here, on Earth. Well, he would communicate with these humans, now that the fogs were clearing from his brain. Strange creatures they were, bipeds, and hideous to the Beast's alien eyes. But he was grateful to them, nevertheless.

How could he communicate? The Earthmen were intelligent, that was evident enough. His own language would be incomprehensible to them, and though he could understand English after a fashion, his throat and tongue could not form recognizable words. Well, mathematics was a universal language, and that could be the beginning. There was something he must tell Earthmen—something vitally important. But they were the ruling race on this planet, and it would not be difficult to establish communication with them.

THE BEAST moved clumsily. His body lurched against the wall of the barn and, with a crackling crash, timbers gave way. The big structure sagged down, and as the Beast drew back in dismay he completed the job of ruin. He stood amid the wreck of something that no longer resembled a barn. Impatiently, he shook it off. Things on this world were delicate indeed. The heavy stone structures of Venus were built to withstand normal shocks.

The noise had been heard. Kirth came running out of the farmhouse,

carrying a shotgun and holding an electric torch. His wife was beside him. They started toward the barn, and then paused, apprehensive.

“It—it tore it down,” Mrs. Kirth said stupidly. “Do you think it’ll—Jay! Wait!”

But Kirth went forward, holding the gun ready. In the moonlight the gross bulk of the monster loomed hideously above him.

And the Beast thought: It is time. Time to establish communication. . . .

A huge foreleg lifted and began to trace a design in the dirt of the farmyard. A circle formed, and another. In time, a map of the Solar System was clear.

“Look at the way it’s pawing,” Mrs. Kirth said. “Like a bull getting ready to charge. Jay—watch out!”

“I’m watching,” Kirth said grimly. And he lifted the gun.

The Beast drew back, without fear, but waiting for the man to see the design. Yet Kirth’s eyes saw only a meaningless maze of concentric circles. He walked slowly forward, his boots obliterating the design.

“He did not notice it,” the Beast thought. “I must try again. Surely it will be easy to make him understand. In such a highly organized civilization, only a scientist would have been entrusted with my care.”

Remembering the gesture of greeting among Earthmen, the Beast lifted a foreleg and slowly extended it. Shaking hands was fantastically impossible, but Kirth would recognize the significance of the motion.

Instead, Kirth fired. The bullet ripped along the Beast’s skull, a painful though not dangerous wound. The Beast instantly withdrew its paw.

The man did not understand. Perhaps, it thought harm had been offered, had read menace in the friendly gesture. The Beast lowered its head in a motion of submission.

At sight of that frightful mask swooping down, Mrs. Kirth broke through her paralysis of terror. She shrieked in an agony of fear and turned to flee. Kirth, yelling hysterical oaths, pumped bullet after bullet at the reptile.

The Beast turned clumsily. It was not hurt, but there was danger here. Attempting to escape without damaging the frail structures all around, it managed to step on a pig-sty, ruin a silo, and crush in one wall of the farmhouse.

But this could not be helped. The Beast retreated and was lost in the night.

The inhuman brain was puzzled. What had gone wrong now? Earthmen were intelligent, yet they had not understood. Perhaps the fault lay with itself. Full maturity had not been reached; the thought-patterns were still not set in their former matrices. The fogs that shrouded the reptile’s mind were not yet completely dissipated. . . .

Growth! Maturity! That was necessary. Once maturity had been achieved,

the Beast could meet Earthmen on equal terms and make them understand. But food was necessary. . . .

The Beast lumbered on through the moonlit gloom. It went like a behemoth through fences and ploughed fields, leaving a swathe of destruction in its wake. At first it tried to keep to roads, but the concrete and asphalt was shattered beneath the vast weight. So it gave up that plan, and headed for the distant mountains.

A shouting grew behind it. Red light flared. Searchlights began to sweep the sky. But this tumult died as the Beast drove farther and farther into the mountains. For a time, it must avoid men. It must concentrate on—food!

The Beast liked the taste of flesh, but it also understood the rights of property. Animals were owned by men. Therefore they must not be molested. But plants—cellulose—almost anything was fuel for growth. Even the limbs of trees were digestible.

So the colossus roamed the wilderness. Deer and cougars it caught and ate, but mostly vegetation. Once, it saw an airplane droning overhead, and after that more planes came, dropping bombs. But after sundown, the Beast managed to escape.

It grew unimaginably. Some effect of the Sun's actinic rays, not filtered as on cloud-veiled Venus, made the Beast grow far beyond the size it had been on Venus eons ago. It grew larger than the vastest dinosaur that ever stalked through the swamps of Earth's dawn, a titanic, nightmare juggernaut out of the Apocalypse. It looked like a walking mountain. And, inevitably, it became clumsier.

The pull of gravity was a serious handicap. Walking was painful work. Climbing slopes, dragging its huge body, was agony. No more, could the Beast catch deer. They fleetly evaded the ponderous movements.

Inevitably, such a creature could not escape detection. More planes came, with bombs. The Beast was wounded again, and realized the necessity of communicating with Earthmen without delay. Maturity had been reached. . . .

There was something of vital importance that Earthmen must know. Life had been given to the Beast by Earthmen, and that was a debt to be repaid.

The Beast came out of the mountains. It came by night, and traveled swiftly, searching for a city. There, it knew, was the best chance of finding understanding. The giant's stride shook the earth as it thundered through the dark.

On and on it went. So swift was its progress that the bombers did not find it till dawn. Then the bombs fell, and more than one found its mark.

BUT the wounds were superficial. The Beast was a mighty, armored Juggernaut, and such a thing may not be easily slain. It felt pain, however, and moved faster. The men in the sky, riding their air-chariots, did not understand—but somewhere would be men of science. Somewhere. . . .

And so the Beast came to Washington.

Strangely, it recognized the capitol. Yet it was, perhaps, natural, for the Beast had learned English, and had listened to Kirth's televisor for months. Descriptions of Washington had been broadcast, and the Beast knew that this was the center of government in America. Here, if anywhere on Earth, there would be men who understood. Here, were the rulers, the wise men. And, despite its wounds, the Beast felt a thrill of exultation as it sped on.

The planes dived thunderously. The aerial torpedoes screamed down. Crashing they came, ripping flesh from that titanic armored body.

"It's stopped!" said a pilot, a thousand feet above the Beast. "I think we've killed it! Thank God it didn't get into the city—"

The Beast stirred into slow movement. The fires of pain bathed it. The reptilian nerves sent their unmistakable messages to the brain, and the Beast knew it had been wounded unto death. Strangely it felt no hate for the men who had slain it.

No—they could not be blamed. They had not known. And, after all, humans had taken the Beast from Venus, restored it to life, tended and fed it for months. . . .

And there was still a debt. There was a message that Earthmen must know. Before the Beast died, it must convey that message, somehow.

The saucer eyes saw the white dome of the Capitol in the distance. There could be found science, and understanding. But it was so far away!

The Beast rose. It charged forward. There was no time to consider the fragility of the man-made structures all around. The message was more important.

The bellow of thunder marked the Beast's progress. Clouds of ruin rose up from toppling buildings. Marble and granite were not the iron-hard stone of Venus, and a trail of destruction led toward the Capitol. The planes followed in uncertainty. They dared not loose bombs above Washington.

Near the Capitol was a tall derrick-like tower. It had been built for the accommodation of newscasters and photographers, but now it served a different purpose. A machine had been set up there hastily, and men frantically worked connecting power cables. A lens-shaped projector, gleaming in the sunlight, was swinging slowly to focus on the oncoming monster. It resembled a great eye, high above Washington.

It was a heat ray.

It was one of the first in existence, and if it could not stop the reptile, nothing could.

Still the Beast came on. Its vitality was going fast, but there would still be time. Time to convey its message to the men in the Capitol, the men who would understand.

FROM doomed Washington arose a cry, from ten thousand panic-strained throats. In the streets men and women fought and struggled and fled from the oncoming monster that towered against the sky, colossal and horrible.

On the tower soldiers worked at the projector, connecting, tightening, barking sharp orders.

The Beast halted. It paused before the Capitol. From the structure, men were fleeing. . . .

The fogs were creeping up to shroud the reptile brain. The Beast fought against increasing lassitude. The message—the message!

A mighty forepaw reached out. The Beast had forgotten Earth's gravity, and the clumsiness of its own gross bulk.

The massive paw crashed through the Capitol's dome!

Simultaneously the heat ray flashed out blindingly. It swept up and bathed the Beast in flaming brilliance.

For a heartbeat the tableau held, the colossus towering above the nation's Capitol. Then the Beast fell. . . .

In death, it was terrible beyond imagination. The heat ray crumpled it amid twisted iron girders. The Capitol itself was shattered into utter ruin. For blocks buildings collapsed, and clouds of dust billowed up in a thick, shrouding veil.

The clouds were blinding, like the mists that darkened the sight and the mind of the Beast. For the reptile was not yet dead. Unable to move, the life ebbing swiftly from it, the Beast yet strove to stretch out one monstrous paw. . . .

Darkly it thought: I must give them the message. I must tell them of the plague that destroyed all life on Venus. I must tell them of the virus, borne on the winds, against which there is no protection. Out of space, it came to Venus, spores that grew to flowers. And now, the flowers grow on Earth. In a month, the petals will fall, and from the blossoms the virus will develop. And then, all life on Earth will be destroyed, as it was on Venus, and nothing will exist on all the planet but bright flowers and the ruins of cities. I must warn them to destroy the blooms now, before they pollinate. . . .

The mists were very thick now. The Beast shuddered convulsively, and lay still. It was dead.

On a rooftop, a man and a woman watched from the distance. The man

said: “God, what a horrible thing! Look at it lying there, like the devil himself.” He shuddered and glanced away.

The white-faced woman nodded. “It’s hard to believe the world can hold so much horror, and yet can give us anything as beautiful as this . . .” Her slim fingers stroked the velvety petals of the blossom that was pinned to her dress. Radiant, lovely, the flower from Venus glowed in the sunlight.

Already, pollen was forming within its cup.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

MIS-SPELLED words and printer errors have been fixed.
[The end of *Beauty and the Beast* by Henry Kuttner]