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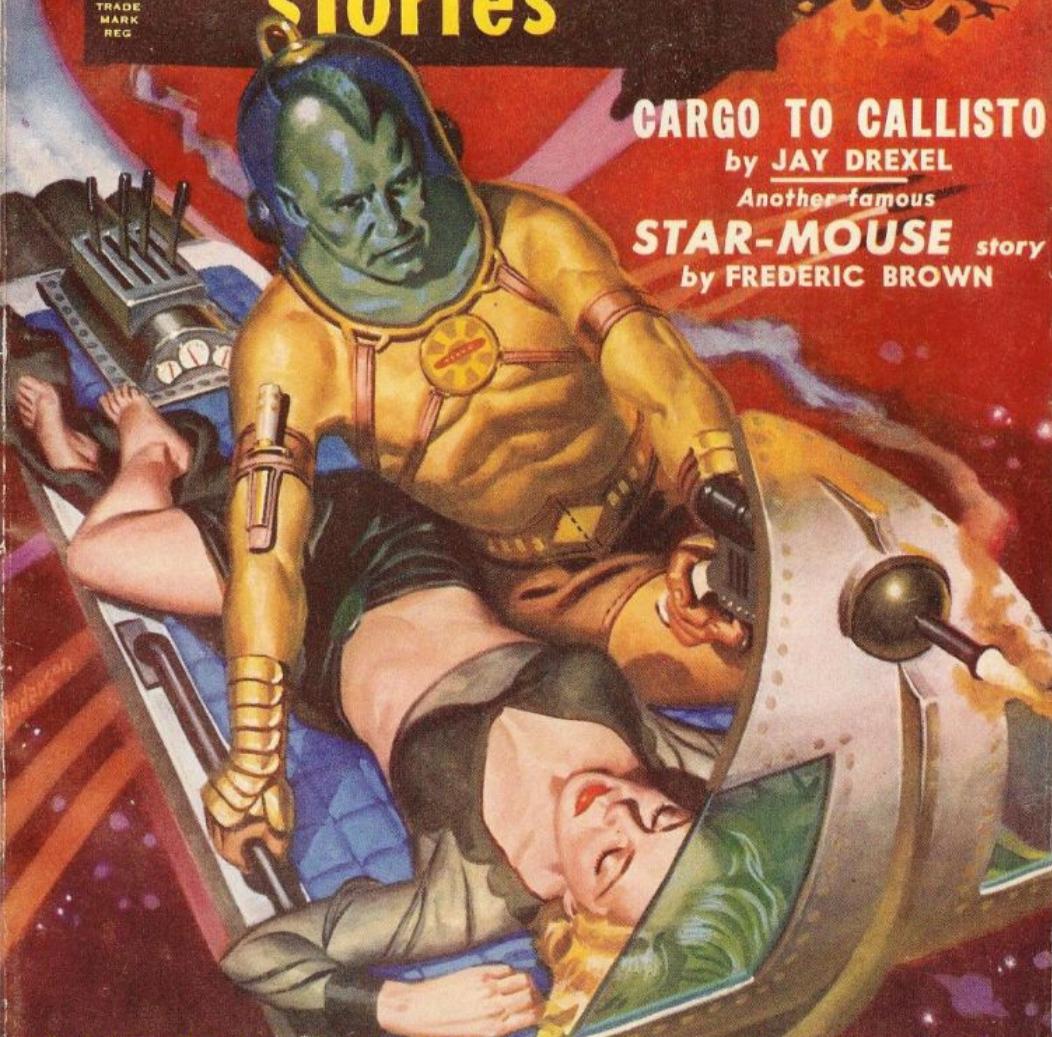
CARGO TO CALLISTO

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THE LAST TWO ALIVE!
Space-Adventure Novel by ALFRED COPPEL
PLANET STORIES
CARGO TO CALLISTO
by JAY DREXEL

NOVEMBER
1940

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Carry Me Home

By

Henry Kuttner

Writing under the pseudonym C. H. Liddell.

First published *Planet Stories*, November 1950.

On that fog-shrouded Venusian mountaintop lay an eternal Pool, where icy diamonds and blood-red rubies, emerald idols and rich yellow gold sparkled seductively in darkling depths . . . and striding confidently up the strange path toward that island in the sky came Red Rohan, thief of Venus. But the treasure, of course, had a Guardian: a Monster . . . or possibly a god . . .

You could see the Mountain sometimes, on the clearer days, from as far away as the town called Foggy Morning. The unearthly lands between swam in jungle, stirring endlessly with the pale, restless foliage of Venus, garrulous jungle full of a continual murmur that had all the notes of human speech imperfectly heard.

The Quai told fabulous tales about the Mountain, drawing up the third eyelid dreamily over their yellow gaze and humming gently through their noses between words, in the disconcerting way of Quai. They said there was a pool up there, and something in the pool. They said the pool was blue—under a sky of unbroken, eternal cloud, the pool was blue.

They said there was a monster in it. Possibly a god. No Terrestrial understands Quai speech very clearly yet, so they may have said both monster and god. It sounded intriguing, but too remote to interest anyone in the frontier towns along the Terrestrial Highway. Terrestrial holdings on Venus are precarious yet, strung along a chain as narrow and perilous as Bifrost, and infringements against Venus and Quai have proved too dangerous for any man to commit more than once.

Three men slipped out of Foggy Morning just ahead of the vigilantes one day, getting the jungle equipment they needed by direct and deadly means. Frontier justice being what it always is, the vigilantes pursued them only far enough to make sure they would not return. The men were robbers. If the vigilantes had caught them they would have hanged them. But when they had chased them past the turn-off that leads southwest toward Flattery and north toward Adam and Eve, and on along a little winding, diminishing path due west, they paused and looked at each other and began to laugh. The path went straight into forbidden Quai lands, and its far end was the Mountain. The vigilantes shrugged and went back to Foggy Morning.

There were *d'vahnyan* in the jungle. *D'vahnyan* is a complex term, but its basic import is death-dealer. The Quai were quite competent to look after their own lands. Hanging *might* have been preferable.

The cavern was reasonably dry, considering. It was reasonably safe, or as safe as any refuge could be in Quai territory. A small, soft fire burned in a hollow of sand near one wall, pale lavender flames licking up and whimpering in the annoying way all fire does on Venus. Something in the wet air damps its color and the flames never feel really hot even when they burn you.

A man named Rohan lay drowsily with his back to the cavern wall and his eyes shut, singing to himself.

“*Swing low,*” he sang, “*sweet chari-ot, comin’ for to carry me home.*”

Condensing fog gathered in big drops along the outer brow of the cave and dripped continually as an obbligato to the song and the whimper of the fire. One of the other men was sitting on his heels just inside the fringe of dripping water, gun across his knee, peering into the misty jungle. The third man threw down an emptied ration-tin with violence and said, “Red!”

Rohan did not open his eyes.

“Yes, my little friend?” he said.

“Red, I’m sick of it. I’m going back! You hear? There’s no use waiting any longer. Barber isn’t coming. Why should we sit here waiting for the police to come and get us? I tell you there’s been a *d’vahnyan* on our trail since yesterday morning, and I don’t like it. I’m going back. I’ll take my chances—”

Rohan grinned sleepily.

“*If you get there before I do,*” he sang, “*tell all my friends I’m comin’ too—*”

“It’s crazy,” the other man said. “It isn’t safe to wait around here any longer. *I’m* afraid of the *d’vahnyan*, if you’re not. I’m going.”

He made no further move. Rohan listened to the quiet complaint of the flames and thought of the *d’vahnyan* of Venus.

The *d’vahnyan’s* place in Quai society is not comparable to any Terrestrial equivalent. He approximates police, judge, jury and executioner all in one, though his powers are not limited to the enforcing of justice; he also—for no reason Terrestrials have yet grasped—destroys trees or whole forests, burns occasional villages, dams or diverts rivers, and at times sterilizes the soil of agricultural areas. His decree is never questioned. He is debarred from the fields of science, using the weapons the blue-clad *ll’ghirae* give him, without understanding the principles of the devices he wields. The *ll’ghirae* correspond to scientists or priests of science, and are forbidden knowledge of the Realities. Exactly what the Quai mean by Realities is not yet known.

But a few of the more concrete realities of life on Venus the Terrestrials have learned fast, often the hard way. Foremost among them is the absolute power of the *d’vahnyan*. To wield it they seem to have surrendered much—perhaps the whole ego as we think of it. They rule by a sort of divine right, and no one dreams of questioning or disobeying them or lifting a hand against them. Their lives are sacred and their decrees irrevocable.

“I don’t trust them,” Forsythe said again. “I’m going back.”

“The Quai are a funny people,” Rohan said cheerfully, opening his eyes a little to peer out past the watcher on the threshold and into the drifting mist. “They work in a mysterious way their wonders to perform. An amazing race, the Quai. All right, Forsythe. Goodbye. Jellaby and I are going to climb the Mountain.”

Forsythe jerked around heavily, his dark face flushing with anger and incredulity. Even Jellaby, at the door, looked back over his shoulder and his freckled jaw dropped.

“*What?*” Forsythe demanded.

“You heard me.”

“I won’t do it,” Forsythe said excitedly. “You’re crazy. That wasn’t what you told me. You said Barber Jones would pick us up at the clearing and fly us out with the loot. The road

toward the Mountain was just to fool the vigilantes. Oh no, Red! Oh no!”

Rohan rolled over lazily to face his companions.

“Did you really think,” he inquired, “that Barber would bother with us if we didn’t get away with the bank hold-up? We’re in an interesting spot, Forsythe, my friend.”

“I don’t like it.” Forsythe’s voice was heavy. “We should have left the bank alone. There was pretty near as much money in the saloon safe. But no, we had to bust into the bank and set off the alarm in Police Headquarters clear over the bay at Swanport. How long do you figure before the police come for us, Red?”

Rohan closed his fist on a handful of moist, sandy soil and let it trickle slowly through his fingers. His look was gently marveling. Terrestrials were still so new on Venus that sometimes a man found himself struck with astonishment at the simple discovery that this world was made of soil. Plain dirt, rock, sand, prosaic as Earth itself. You expected something more glamorous of the Morning Star.

“A band of angels,” Rohan sang, *“comin’ after me, comin’ for to—”*

“You can’t go up the Mountain,” Forsythe pursued doggedly. “What’s the good of it? What’s up there but some kind of devil-fish in a pool? I tell you, it’s crazy!”

“What’s up there, my friends,” Rohan said, and in the violet firelight his face took on a sudden look like fever, “what’s up there is a fortune! There’s a pool, all right. There’s a—well, some kind of a monster. And you know why it’s there? To guard a treasure. Jewels, Forsythe. Rubies and diamonds, Jellaby. For a thousand years the Quai have been throwing offerings down to their monster-god. And nobody knows it except us. Not a soul except us three. That’s why we’re going up the mountain, Forsythe.”

Forsythe grunted.

“You been dreaming,” he said.

“I had it straight,” Rohan said, “from the horse’s mouth.” He laughed. “I got it from Crazy Joe.”

Forsythe’s head snapped around sharply and he caught his breath to hoot with angry derision. But Rohan saw the derision pause and heard the breath run out in an uncertain, half-reluctant sigh.

“Uh-huh,” Rohan said. “Think it over. I did. I got him drunk, you see. First time I ever saw Crazy Joe drunk, but I happened to be the lucky guy who drank with him. And he talked . . .”

Rohan half shut his eyes and looked through his lids at the dim, complaining fire. Crazy Joe, he thought. How crazy? Babbling over his liquor about a treasure he’d seen and walked away from, not wanting it, not really caring. That was crazy. Only a crazy man would do it. But wise in his craziness, with strange threads of sanity twining through the warps of his mind. The Quai paid him a curious respect and abided by his owlish council. They told him things he was not too crazy to turn to account sometimes. It was probable that he knew much more than he ever admitted to. He wandered freely in Quai territory, and he knew what lay at the top of the Mountain . . .

“I saw him next day,” Rohan said. “I thought it might have been just drunken talk. But he claimed the whole thing was true. He told me all about it. I believed him.” Rohan grinned. “Would I be here now, if I hadn’t? Why, if even a part of it’s true, half the jewels on Venus are lying right up there on top of the Mountain, just waiting for three guys like us to come and get ’em.”

Then he shut his lips together on a tight, secret smile and thought of the other thing Crazy Joe had said was up there. Forsythe and Jellaby were dubious enough about the jewels. What would they say if he told them about the *d'vahnyan*?

“You needn’t be afraid of the *d'vahnyan*,” Crazy Joe had said, combing his beard through his fingers thoughtfully, drawing down his thick, bleached brows. “I’m not. I know too much about ’em. I found out. Up there.” He had chuckled, looking shrewdly at Rohan. “They’re not so mysterious, once you know the secret. It’s all up there. The treasure, the pool, the monster—and the secret of the *d'vahnyan*.”

Rohan had regarded him dubiously, with rising excitement imperfectly tempered by reason. The strangest part of the whole strange business was that he believed Crazy Joe. You had to know Crazy Joe to understand why. Nobody knew what his real name was, or where he came from. Oddly, there were times when the part of his face that showed between ragged beard and ragged bangs had a distracting familiarity to Rohan, but he could not identify it. The man was unquestionably mad, but there was dignity in his madness, and he was not known to distort the truth.

Moreover, he could talk to the Quai. He had even been known to hold conversations with the *d'vahnyan*, at a distance, looking up into those cold, inhuman faces and stroking his beard as he spoke. They never exchanged an unnecessary word with sane humans, but to Crazy Joe they spoke with respect.

“What do you know about them?” Rohan had asked eagerly, all his own hatred and distrust of the *d'vahnyan* boiling up in him behind the question. The inhuman, the unspeaking, the terrible *d'vahnyan*, because of whom his one real success on Venus had been thwarted. “What do you know?”

“The secret of the *d'vahnyan*,” Crazy Joe had said mildly. “I can’t tell you. I couldn’t if I would. It isn’t a thing you can tell. You have to see it.”

“A weapon?” Rohan had asked urgently. “A machine? A book? Come on, Crazy Joe, give me an idea! What is it?”

“It’s up there on the Mountain,” was all Crazy Joe would say. “Go up and see for yourself. I did. I’m not afraid of ’em now. They talk to me. If you want to know about it, you’ll have to go up the Mountain and find out. It won’t be easy, but what is? Go ahead. Find out for yourself.”

So Rohan was going.

His curiosity about the *d'vahnyan* was devouring. The death-dealers were such a terrifying class of people, if you could call them people at all. They weren’t *people*. They weren’t alive. They weren’t dead. They were more like beings from another star than creatures of human stock.

What their powers were nobody knew, though Terrestrials made guesses. They could destroy at a distance in many changing ways, all of them explicable by analogy, though the analogies might be quite wrong. Ultrasonic waves can focus invisibly to a point and destroy with heat and vibration. Did they kill with a power like that? Perhaps.

The intricate wrappings of gleaming black stuff they wore, interwoven with shining curled threads, might in themselves be some unearthly sort of weapon; as the winding of the armature on an electromagnet controls its efficiency, so these elaborately wound patterns woven with strange threads no Terrestrial had ever seen at close range might control the enormously efficient powers the *d'vahnyan* wielded.

The sciences of the Quai both paralleled and diverged from Terrestrial sciences. No Venusian has ever seen the stars, but from the structure of the atom the Quai evolved a very pretty picture of their own sun and sister planets. It was known that they drew upon the very shortwave radiations that filter through the clouds of Venus from the sun and stars, for example converting (in controlling the balance of food supply) starch to sugar with the aid of polarized infra-red, as Terrestrials learned to do long ago. There can be biological converters as well as technological ones. So a converted energy drawn from without or from within, and probably controlled by the gleaming black wrappings of the *d'vahnyan*, was the weapon they wielded. But where they came from, what they were, nobody knew. Perhaps not even the Quai.

Perhaps Crazy Joe knew. Perhaps, if Rohan reached the Mountain, he too might know. He only knew now that his hatred of the *d'vahnyan* was an uncontrollable and an irrational thing, resembling more a man's deep, instinctive aversion to an alien life-form than his dislike of a fellow creature, however unpleasant. They did not suffer from the drives that made Rohan what he was, and he hated them for that. They were passionless, and he felt bewildered scorn for them. They were curiously selfless, and he felt contempt because of that. But his reasoning mind told him they were simply men, after all, men who followed orders in what they did, as most men do. He did not mean to let them thwart him this time. He was afraid of them, but he feared failure more than the *d'vahnyan*. He would not, this time, turn back for anything.

"I don't know," Forsythe grumbled. "I don't like it, Rohan. It isn't safe. That Mountain's a long way off."

"You like it here?" Rohan inquired, smiling. He rose limberly. He was a tall man, good-looking, pleasantly smiling. You had to look twice to see, underneath, the kind of a man he was and had been.

"You wait here," he said, "and the *d'vahnyan* will come and get you. You go back and the vigilantes will string you up, unless the police get there first. You come with me, and the chances are good that a genuine, authentic monster-god will eat you. But you'll see such a treasure before you die, Forsythe, I promise you'll die happy."

The man in the doorway had been watching the jungle all this while, but his large ears were alert. Now, without turning his head, he said hoarsely,

"Red, how much of this did you plan?"

Rohan's pleasant face went blank with guilelessness.

"Plan, Jellaby?"

"You wouldn't have told us about the treasure—if there is one—unless you'd needed us. Right? You knew we wouldn't run the risk on your say-so unless we had to. Right? So I'll ask it again—how much did you really plan?"

Forsythe was slower on the uptake, but he got the idea after a moment.

"Yeah!" he said, and then, with gathering heat, "Yeah, Red—what about that? You figured the bank hold-up, didn't you? It couldn't be the saloon—it had to be the bank, so the Police would chase us if we muffed it. You *wanted* the Police after us, Red! So we couldn't turn back. So we'd have to come along on your crack-pot scheme into Quai territory. Well, here we are! We can't go back or forward. And all because you're as crazy as Crazy Joe when it comes to money! Red, I—"

"Shut up, Forsythe," Rohan said in a sudden whisper. "Look out there—Jellaby! Is that something—something black?"

There was instant silence in the cave. The breathing of the three men seemed loud in the close confines of these rock walls which made up an alien planet. The dripping fog sang plangently on the sill and the fire whimpered thinly to itself.

Jellaby shifted the blaster in his hands and his whole position changed so that he seemed to become part of the weapon, lifting it toward the jungle path.

“No,” Rohan breathed. “Careful, Jellaby. You don’t know the Quai. Don’t shoot. Just wait.”

“Red, *can* you kill a *d’vahnyan*?” Forsythe asked in a faint voice.

“I don’t know. I’d like to find out.” Rohan’s voice seemed to come through his teeth. His face had a touch of the fever tint again in the violet firelight, and his eyes looked bright and hard. “I’d like to know,” he said. “Someday I’ll find out. Maybe today. Maybe now. If there’s any thing I hate—”

The mists parted dramatically and out of the unveiled jungle aisle a tall, black figure with a white face came stalking straight toward them. Jellaby’s finger crooked convulsively on the trigger. Forsythe swore under his breath. Rohan did not make a sound. He stared, eyes a little glazed, at the approaching figure.

A part of his mind reminded him that the *d’vahnyan* must be following orders in what they did. There had been nothing personal in the ruthlessness of the *d’vahnyan* who three weeks ago had stalked into Rohan’s flourishing mine camp on the outskirts of Careless Love and with one gesture brought Rohan’s whole investment crashing.

But he felt the heavy beat of anger throbbing above his ears as he thought of it. The rich lands of Venus invited exploitation. No frontier was ever a place for the scrupulous, and Rohan had come because his talents flourished best where the law was weakest. He had the seed of greatness in him and he knew it unerringly. The knowledge had driven him all his life. But he needed a raw frontier to flourish in, and Venus had seemed so perfectly the place for him—until that *d’vahnyan* stepped out of the pale jungle and with one gesture dismissed all the toiling Quai . . .

“They’re mine!” he had protested to the passionless, unseeing figure in black. “They owe me more than they can pay! They’ve got to work it out!”

The *d’vahnyan* may not have heard at all. Barter is something the Quai society does not recognize. And so Rohan’s budding empire crashed and he found himself empty-handed again, with empty pockets, with nothing but the driving knowledge of his own potential power and a corrosive hatred for the *d’vahnyan* who had come between him and all that Venus promised.

He smiled pleasantly into the face of the black-wrapped being before him. Of course it hadn’t been this particular *d’vahnyan*, back in Careless Love—or had it been? How could you tell? You tend to think not of “them” but of “him” in every separate case when you think of the *d’vahnyan*. Perhaps because you never see more than one at a time, and there is no way whatever to tell them apart. Inevitably you come to feel that there is but one omnipresent, omnipotent *d’vahnyan* in all Venus, miraculously appearing in hundreds of places at once. Empty-eyed, remote, passionless, he stalks about his duties. His very name means one who is beyond life and death.

The *d’vahnyan* paused almost on the threshold of the cave, looking at them out of remote, indifferent yellow eyes. Behind him there was a soft flurry of motion among the pale trees and

a little group of Quai in single file came out one by one into the clearing behind the *d'vahnyan* and paused too, looking into the cave.

The Quai were tallish men, supple in intricate, tightly wrapped, white waterproof bindings that fitted them like a second skin. They looked like spectral mummies with triangular faces and seal-sleek fur for hair. A Quai is strikingly reminiscent of the little Venusian tree-chuck that slips quietly through the trembling foliage, looking down at you with a wondering gaze. While you are still an Earthlubber you may be reminded of a lemur or an owl, but after you know Venus the Quai will remind you of the tree-chuck and nothing else.

These four stood still and regarded the Terrestrials with an air of deprecating curiosity. The *d'vahnyan*, in glistening black, his remote gaze unfocused, stood facing the cavern, watching some vacancy in the air about six feet beyond the three Terrestrials. He laid his right hand under his left forearm, letting his left palm fall forward toward the cave. The black wrappings gloved him, and their glistening blinded the observer a little. You could never be sure if he really held a weapon or not.

In a totally expressionless voice the *d'vahnyan* said:

“The Mountain is forbidden. Go back.”

Rohan smiled cheerfully. The four Quai blinked their mild yellow eyes.

“Good afternoon, gentlemen,” Rohan said. “We seem to have lost our way. Hope we aren’t trespassing.” His smile was ingratiating.

All four Quai exposed their teeth in a sudden, unexpected snap at empty air. One of them said something that had the overtones of a Gregorian chant. He added a few words in ill-accented Spanish, all of them profane. Then the four looked at Rohan in grave, astonished inquiry and put their hands on top of their seal-sleek heads.

The *d'vahnyan* might not have heard. He stood silent, unmoving, waiting, Rohan was aware of a little chill down his back, and he swallowed hard, choking down anger.

“The Mountain is forbidden,” the *d'vahnyan* said again. “Go—now.”

Rohan grinned deliberately. “Certainly,” he said. “Glad to.”

You don’t argue with the *d'vahnyan*. It was probably a great concession that this one had repeated himself even once. Rohan wondered if the thing—the man—felt anything at all. If he did, he was probably a little concerned about this rather delicate situation of trespass. Relations between Terrestrials and the Quai were not very easy.

It is extraordinarily hard for Terrestrials, reared in the severely practical, commercialized thinking of ancient Rome, to understand a society rooted in a world that never knew Rome. Thinking contacts might have proved literally impossible, if it had not been for the *d'vahnyan*.

It seems commentary enough on the problems of cooperation to point out that eccentrics like Crazy Joe appeared to find the Quai and the *d'vahnyan* far easier to understand than normal Terrestrials could. Wandering subnormals like Crazy Joe are inevitable in any frontier society, which attracts misfits by its lawlessness and wrecks them by its ruthless inflexibility. But it was in great measure thanks to the Crazy Joes of the Terrestrial Highway towns that a rough sort of working harmony had been achieved between the peoples of the neighboring worlds. They were cousin races at least, children of sister planets and sprung from human stock. But oh, the differences in their thinking!

Behind Rohan, Forsythe spoke in a low voice.

“We’d better go back, Red. He means business. You know you can’t kill a *d'vahnyan*. It’s been tried. I don’t want any part of this. I’m going back.” His boots grated on the cavern floor as he took a step forward. Rohan swept him back with an outstretched arm.

“We’re going,” he said aloud, in his pleasantest voice. “Hand me my pack, Forsythe. We’re going.” But in his mind, above the seething of controlled anger, he was saying, “Oh no, not this time! I gave in once, but not again. This time the risk’s worth anything I have to do. Oh no, we won’t go back!”

He shouldered his pack and stepped through the veil of dripping water, out of the cave. The *d’vahnyan* uttered a sudden sharp hiss, and the four Quai unexpectedly shivered and drew back. Some heavy burden of awareness seemed to come over them and the four slumped inside their wrappings. It occurred to Rohan suddenly that they must be prisoners—the *d’vahnyan’s* prisoners for some obscure Quai crime. The *d’vahnyan* hissed again, without seeming to move a feature. The Quai bent their heads and filed on across the clearing. A billow of mist rolled out to meet them and they plodded into it and vanished. The last to pass turned one bright, anguished, hopeless glance toward the Terrestrials, then let his third eyelids film across the look, and the mist swallowed him up like death itself.

Rohan felt a sudden burning contempt for them. How spinelessly they gave in to the *d’vahnyan*, four against one, and never dreaming of resistance. It was the way on Venus, but it was not Rohan’s way.

Forsythe, shrugging his pack into place, stepped out past Rohan.

“You were a fool,” he said disagreeably, “to think you could get away with this. If Barber’s ship came down right now, I wouldn’t get aboard. I don’t trust you, Rohan. You’re crazier than Crazy Joe.” He scowled and turned to the *d’vahnyan*. “Will you guide us back?” he asked. “We were fools to come. I’d have left long ago if I’d known the way.”

The *d’vahnyan’s* slanting forearm with the enigmatic threat of the half open palm moved in the direction the Quai had vanished. Forsythe grunted and stepped down onto the path. Jellaby, awkwardly cradling his blaster in one arm, lumbered after. Rohan did not move.

The *d’vahnyan’s* cool, implacable gaze rested upon him lightly. He lifted the threatening hand higher. There was no way to know what weapons he had—a flick of the finger might annihilate them all.

Rohan, looking into that expressionless face, deliberately let his banked anger rise. This was the turning point in his life on Venus, he thought. Give in now, and wind up like Crazy Joe. Face the *d’vahnyan* down, and the treasure on the Mountain would buy an empire. It might even buy the power to crush the *d’vahnyan* forever, and he knew that an empire would be valueless if he failed to crush them. He knew suddenly that it was neither the empire nor the treasure he yearned for now—it was the ruin of the whole *d’vahnyan* clan. The thousands of dead-faced replicas of the single *d’vahnyan* before whom a planet humbled itself. Confidence and power surged up in Rohan’s mind. He could do it. He knew he could do it—if in this single showdown he could outface the *d’vahnyan*.

He saw Forsythe striding down the path toward the oncoming billows of mist which had already swallowed the submissive Quai. Jellaby paused uncertainly, looked after Forsythe, looked back at Rohan.

Rohan drew a deep breath. There was only one way to conquer, now. Had anyone ever really killed a *d’vahnyan*? Had anyone, before now, dared try? “Why not?” he thought. “What have I got to lose?”

He dropped his hand to the blaster at his side, tipped the holster up and fired very quickly, not drawing the gun, not giving the *d’vahnyan* any warning or himself time to think.

This was a nightmare, Rohan thought. They were running, running, running, the three of them, through mist and pale trees wreathed in vines and fog, and the leaves talked continuously around them, trembling like a jangle in terror.

Rohan could scarcely see the pale foliage before his eyes. That flash, back there, had been so nearly blinding . . .

What flash?

“Oh yes,” he thought casually. “The flash when I shot the *d’vahnyan*.”

Reason suddenly took over in his spinning mind, and he seemed to be screaming a shocked and incredulous question at himself: *Shot the d’vahnyan? I shot the d’vahnyan?*

He stumbled and fell forward, claspng a tree-trunk to break the fall, and leaned there for a long moment, his cheek against the wet bark, water dripping down his neck from the trembling foliage above, while he wrestled with his own stunned and awakening memory.

“I shot the *d’vahnyan*,” he told himself carefully. “Oh yes, I did it. I, Red Rohan, shot a *d’vahnyan*, and here I am, alive. So it *can* be done. I did it. But what happened then? Why am I here?”

His memory did not want to retrace its path, and he set his teeth and forced his mind back to the moment before the cave, when the gun jolted in his hand, and—

The flash. The blinding sun-flash, yellow white, the brightest light that had ever burned on Venus. No Venusian ever saw the sun. Even the fires burned lavender. Even gun-fire flashed pale violet. But this flash had been the color of the sun. Blinding. Stunning the eye and the mind.

It engulfed the *d’vahnyan*. And the mist rolled forward to cloud the sun-color. Rainbows, he remembered, had shimmered for an instant in the mist, surely the first rainbows that had ever shone on Venus.

But had the *d’vahnyan* fallen? No man could stand against the discharge of a blaster fired into him from three feet away. But was the *d’vahnyan* a man? He asked himself the question, and the garrulous leaves whispered all around him, giving no answer. There was no answer. There was only the blinding flash, the mist, the rainbows, and—

And then they had run.

“Forsythe,” Rohan called, his voice unsteady above the conversations of the leaves. “Forsythe. Jellaby!”

Dark figures looming up out of the trees behind him gasped and slowed in their forward plunge.

“Red?” Forsythe’s uncertain voice inquired. “Red?”

“All right,” Rohan said, forcing his tone toward normality. “All right, calm down now. We’re okay. Everything’s under control.”

“Control!” Forsythe said bitterly, leaning against a tree and gasping for breath. “Oh, sure, everything’s fine! You shot a *d’vahnyan*. I saw you do it! You know what the penalty is for that?”

“Do you?” Rohan managed a wry grin.

“Nobody knows. Maybe nobody ever tried it before. Maybe it’s a brand new crime. But they’ll work out some punishment to fit it. And *we*—”

“Shut up,” Rohan said. He was striving hard to regain his lost composure. He said again, “Shut up, Forsythe,” and his voice was almost pleasant. “What’s done is done. Now you’ll have to come along with me. If we reach the Mountain we won’t have a thing to worry about. I promise you that.”

“I won’t do it,” Forsythe said, still breathing hard. “I’m going back and wait for Barber. You got the message to him and I think he’ll come. We didn’t give him time enough, that’s all. He—”

Rohan said wearily, “Barber’s dead, Forsythe. He died two years ago.”

There was a dreadful silence among the three men for a very long moment. Then Jellaby slowly unslung his rifle, his big hands moving almost unguided, his eyes beginning to burn upon Rohan.

“Don’t you do it,” Rohan said. “I’m your only chance.”

“Barber—dead?” Forsythe echoed blankly. “I don’t believe it. You’re lying. You—”

“I lied before, yes. I had to. I needed you two.” Rohan’s voice was assured, gently urgent. “No message ever went through to Barber because it couldn’t. I haven’t got any pipeline to hell. Barber lived a long, nasty life and he died in a crack-up in the jungle two years ago. I heard about it from Crazy Joe. I was afraid you might have, too, but I took the chance. I had to. I tell you, if we get to the Mountain you’ll never regret what I’ve done. We’ll be so rich no government can stop us. We’ll carve an empire out of the Venusian jungle and we’ll be three emperors who rule half a world. There’s enough for all of us. This whole planet is just lying here waiting for men like us to take over. I know the way to do it. I’m going on. I need your help and I’ve made sure you’d have to give it. You can’t go back now. The whole planet’s against us. All we can do is push on toward the Mountain, and if we get there, we can buy and sell the world.” He elbowed himself away from the tree. “I’m going on. You can follow if you want to.”

The two in the path looked at him wordlessly, rage and terror stopping up their mouths. Forsythe choked a little and tried to speak, but the words died and his eyes went suddenly round, showing a circle of white around each iris. He was looking back the way they had come.

Rohan swung about and looked too. Distinctly in the murmuring silence they all heard the crunch of soft feet moving over pebbles. Rohan thought violently back along the way he had come, searching for a memory of crossing pebbles. He looked down. His feet were dark with moisture. Yes, a broad shoal of pebbles and then a rushing brook that wound through the trees. A long way back? He couldn’t remember.

They heard pebbles roll and crunch, far off, hidden among the leaves. Then there was the sound of rapid water gurgling around an obstruction—such an obstruction as wading legs. Pebbles crunched again on the nearer bank. After that, silence.

It might be farther than it seemed. Sound carried strangely sometimes among these deflecting leaves.

Rohan sucked in breath, settled his pack with firm, decisive hands, checked his blaster.

“Come along,” he said, and his voice was almost cheerful again. The pressure of danger was like a strong drink to him now. There could be no hesitating, no uncertainty. The only course was forward. “Come on—quick! We can make it if we keep ahead.”

“Ahead of what?” Forsythe whispered, rolling his white-ringed eyes back toward the mist-hung jungle they had passed. “It’s *him*, you know. I—I’ve been seeing flashes of black through the leaves. He’s after us. He’ll get us, Red. We killed him and he’ll follow us till he gets us. Red, I—”

Rohan’s big hand cracked sharply across the swarthy, sweating face.

“Shut up and get going. Ahead of me. Jellaby, you too. I don’t trust you behind me. Go on—march!” He laughed on a note of exhilaration. “I’ll come last, so if *he* catches us I’ll be the first to go.”

Uncertainly, on hurried, stumbling feet, the two plunged ahead of him. Rohan drew another long breath, grinned, let it out in a melodious whistle. The trembling, pale leaves conversing all around them shivered to the notes of defiance in his voice as he began to sing.

“*Swing low,*” he sang to the mist and the vine-wreathed trees, “*sweet chariot, comin’ for to carry me home . . .*”

The Mountain’s tremendous shoulders loomed above the mists, monstrous, streaming with veils of cloud, naked above the clinging jungle. It was gray scoriac stone, smudged all up and down its sides with great soft blurs of color where lichens grew pink and amber, pale green, dusky blue. The peak was hidden. The pool, the treasure, the secret, drew cloud about themselves and pretended not to exist at all.

Rohan looked up at the peak warmly and lovingly, hardly believing he stood here, so close to the goal that would make all his dreams come true. He saw the steep road winding upward and half shut his eyes, picturing himself coming down it laden with treasure. With rubies and diamonds. And wiser than the Rohan who stood here at the edge of the jungle: He would be stronger than the *d’vahnyan* when he came down that road. A Rohan would come down who knew the secret of the *d’vahnyan* who held a whole planet in submission. It would be Rohan who gave the orders, then.

He glanced back. The following feet still came on. They had seen nothing through the whispering leaves all the way, but the follower had not faltered. Nor had he tried, Rohan thought, to overtake them. It had been enough to follow. Rohan knew he ought to feel frightened. Forsythe and Jellaby were cold and shaking with long-sustained superstitious dread as they looked back. But Rohan felt so sure of the secret which was almost in his grasp that fear did not touch him. By the time that unhurrying follower caught up with him, he would know more than the *d’vahnyan* knew. He would be stronger than the *d’vahnyan*. If he hurried, now.

“All right,” he said. “Get along. Up the Mountain, boys. I promise you, once we—”

“Listen!” Forsythe said. They stood frozen. The jungle babbled with mindless, lispings voices. A wind sighed down from the heights above. Somewhere far off, thunder rolled. And then the sound came again, hollow and thin, distorted by the leaves between.

“Ro-han,” the voice was calling. “Ro-han. Red Ro-han!”

This time a cold shiver went sharply down Rohan’s back.

“Go on!” he said. “Up the Mountain, quick!”

The voice called again, miraculously nearer. The follower seemed to be coming after them now in seven-league boots.

“Ro-han, Rohan . . .”

Rohan broke into a leaden run, the pack bumping on his shoulders. The Mountain was so near. If he could get even a little way ahead, perhaps—

“Rohan?” the voice said from the edge of the trees. “Rohan, wait for me.”

He turned in spite of himself. Then he let his breath out in a long, foolish gasp and said, “Crazy Joe!”

The old man grinned at him above the ragged beard. “Sure it’s me. What did you think? Wait a minute.”

He came striding confidently across the moss, swinging his arms. He was a stalwart old creature. No one knew how old, or how young. The bleached beard and hair might be white with age, or from some more obscure reason. Nobody knew much about Crazy Joe except that he came and went when he felt like it and answered no questions. His face was extraordinarily bland and peaceful. He did a great many very odd things at odd times, and it was probably quite true that he was mad.

He looked immaculate, which was an unexpected part of his eccentricity. His blue jeans were spotted with dew and rain, but he wore them tucked neatly into the tops of wrapped Quai sandals, and his denim shirt was Government Issue designed at Swanport for Terrestrial wear on Venus. He had stuck a pink flower in its pocket-flap and he was probably not aware that several spotted blossoms and a pale butterfly rested on his tousled hair.

“Thought I’d get here first,” he said, grinning his rather foolish grin. “You must have come fast.” He tilted his head back and peered up the steep road that wound about the Mountain. “Well, well,” he said softly. “Hasn’t changed at bit. Which one of you plans to go up first?”

Forsythe said unsteadily, ignoring the question, “Was that you behind us all the time? There wasn’t—anybody else?”

“I dunno just what you mean, son,” Crazy Joe said, blinking.

“Was there a—did you see any—” Forsythe could not quite get the word out.

“A *d’vahnyan*,” Rohan said it for him. “We think one of them’s after us, Joe. See anything?”

Crazy Joe turned and looked thoughtfully at the jungle, running his fingers through his beard. The pale butterfly struggled furiously and freed itself, blew away on a soft gust of wind.

“He followed down the labyrinthine ways,” Crazy Joe murmured, “of my own mind.”

“What?” Forsythe asked impatiently.

Crazy Joe shook his head and his grin was vacant. “Which one of you plans to go up first?” he asked again.

“We’ll all go, of course,” Rohan said. “What about that *d’vahnyan*, Joe?”

“If he wants you, he’ll catch you,” Joe said. “I wouldn’t worry if I were you. There was a band of angels comin’ after *me*.” He smiled at Rohan. “I heard a lot of singing about ’em. You going up first, Rohan? You can’t all go together, you know. That’s against the rules.”

Rohan made an impatient gesture. “I make the rules from now on. Who’s going to stop me? There’s nobody up there, is there?”

“Oh yes. One Quai, always. Waiting.”

“What for?”

“Waiting to be devoured,” Crazy Joe said casually. “By the thing in the pool. You knew the treasure was guarded, didn’t you?”

Forsythe looked at Rohan expectantly. Rohan looked away, and met Jellaby’s tense gaze on the other side. The two men spoke simultaneously.

“So that’s it!” Forsythe and Jellaby said with a single voice.

Rohan laughed. “Not what you’re thinking, no. I’ll dive for it if you’re afraid to. I never said it would be easy. But you’ll have to help. If somebody’s standing by with a gun, I’ll feel a lot—”

“No, Rohan,” Crazy Joe said earnestly. “You can’t do that, you know. Only one at a time. Think it over, Rohan. Remember what’s up there.” The eyes under the faded bushes of brows

were keen. “*That* you won’t discover unless you’re alone.”

“What’s all this?” Forsythe demanded.

“It’s a secret,” Crazy Joe said childishly. “Rohan knows.” He glanced back at the shivering jungle and his voice blended with its dreamlike sighing. “*Behind, the vats of judgment brewing,*” he said, “*Thundered, and thick the brimstone snowed.*” He looked at Rohan and smiled. “*He to the hill of his undoing . . . Pursued his road . . .*”

“Ah, you’re two crackpots together,” Forsythe said, turning abruptly away. His face was thoughtful. He seemed to be evolving some new idea, and that Rohan could not—dared not—allow. There was again, as always, only one solution.

Rohan stepped back from the little group, laying a hand on his holstered gun, tipping it up ominously. He would not have to draw it. He could shoot well enough at this range from the holster. It was a trick he liked.

“All right, Forsythe,” he said, not troubling any more to make his voice cheerful or pleasant. “Jellaby, over here. Both of you. We’ll go up together, you two first. Crazy Joe—”

He looked speculatively at Crazy Joe. He was thinking that he would have to kill the old man, sooner or later. He was dangerous on too many counts. He could lead the two others back to the Terrestrial Highway, and only fear of the jungle kept them submissive to Rohan now. With Crazy Joe for a guide, they would be free of him. Also, Crazy Joe knew too much about the Mountain. What he had babbled once he might babble again, and Rohan did not intend for anyone else to stand where he stood now. He fingered the trigger meditatively, hesitated, decided the moment was not yet. “Crazy Joe,” he said, “get back and don’t bother me. I make the rules from now on.”

Forsythe’s heavy face wrinkled up in a thoughtful grimace. Rohan didn’t like it. He jerked the holstered gun threateningly.

“Forsythe—” he said.

Forsythe squinted at him, lifted his upper lip and laughed harshly.

“Crazy Joe,” he said, without taking his eyes from Rohan’s, “is there another path down this mountain?”

“Only this one,” Crazy Joe said tranquilly.

“No other way to get down?”

“No. It’s all precipices except this side, where the road is.”

Forsythe, still holding Rohan’s gaze, stepped back deliberately, found a convenient rock and sat down, laughing his annoying harsh laugh, his eyes small and full of malice on Rohan’s.

“Go on,” he said, goadingly. “Why don’t you shoot?”

Jellaby barked out a sudden, understanding burst of amusement.

“He won’t,” he declared. “Not him.”

“Why won’t I?” Rohan demanded, struggling hard to keep his anger in check.

“Because you need us, that’s why,” Forsythe said flatly. “And we don’t need you. You wouldn’t have let us in on this at all if one man could have made that trip through the jungle alone. You needed us. When you come down the Mountain loaded with jewels you’ll need us worse than ever. All right, you tricked us into coming. But it was your idea, not ours. You go right ahead and wrestle with your devil-fish up there. If you get the treasure, fine, we’ll share it with you. If you don’t come down, that’s fine too. Crazy Joe will guide us back. Suit yourself, Red. You asked for it.”

“We didn’t shoot any *d’vahnyan*,” Jellaby added. “We’re clear. We’ll help you carry your rubies and diamonds back, but we won’t get ’em for you.”

Rohan looked at Crazy Joe. The old man smiled impersonally.

“One at a time, Rohan,” he murmured. “That’s what I said. It isn’t allowed any other way. Even if you shot me, it wouldn’t make any difference. You’ll have to go up alone.”

The steep stone road curved around a leaning monolith and wind poured downward along it like a stream of cool, invisible water. Below, through gaps in the mist, the trembling jungle showed. Stormclouds hung purple and laced with distant lightning. Rohan’s feet as he climbed left stains of pale green and pink and violet on the road, the colors of crushed lichens.

He could not see the men below any longer. He knew what they were thinking, though. He knew what they were planning, for he would plan identically if the situation were reversed. Forsythe and Jellaby did not mean to risk the ascent, but when he came down loaded with jewels, they would shoot him as he came. Or try to.

He thought of Crazy Joe’s mild, witless gaze, watching him up the road until mist blotted the lifted faces out. He thought of Crazy Joe’s voice, babbling old poetry.

*“Oh youth that would attain,
On, for thine hour is short,
It may be thou shalt gain
The hell-defended fort . . .”*

He laughed a little. He felt very sure of himself. Continents of cloud rolled beneath him like the planet he was going to conquer when he had conquered the Mountain. It was odd, how sure he was of the treasure and the secret that would make the *d’vahnyan* vulnerable to him. He had only a madman’s word for it, and yet he was very sure indeed. The breath burned in his chest, not wholly from the climb. He was brimmed with excitement, dread, a fierce anticipation. Crazy Joe had been right, after all—he had to be alone at this climax of his life. He must stand or fall by his own efforts. But he would not fall.

The road turned sharply. He had reached the top.

He stood quite still, looking about him with narrowed eyes, whistling through his teeth without being wholly aware of it. “*Sweet chariot*,” he whistled, “*comin’ for to carry me home*.”

There was an island in the sky. A walled island with a wide, wide gate like no gate he had ever seen before. Through the strange, lacelike meshes of it he could see the flat summit of the mountain in a gray light that cast no shadows. A windy whispering sighed across the plateau. The scene was as still and colorless as a steel engraving except for the startling blue of the pool. Crazy Joe had not lied. It was sky-blue, on a world that had never seen the sky. Thirty feet across, lapping level with the smooth rim around it, colored like eternity, the pool lay waiting him.

He stood on the lip of a wide stone semicircle with the wall beyond it. Against the wall facing him was a rickety structure like something you might see in a bazaar near the Mediterranean, back home on Earth. A roof of tree-fronds on unsteady poles leaned against the wall, sheltering a fantastic clutter of objects beneath its dripping eaves. The hut was a jackdaw’s nest of junk. Lying motionless in a huddle of fringed blankets on the ground, a Quai slept placidly.

Waiting to be devoured, Crazy Joe had said.

Rohan looked curiously over the bazaar-booth's contents, taking an inventory of the trivia in a Quai's life that had seemed important enough to bring with him to the hour of his death. Surrounded by the detritus of his incomprehensible Venusian life, the man slept on. He lay on his face and only the pink soles of his bare feet were visible beneath the tumble of blankets. His hands were clasped together on top of his seal-sleek head.

Above him fringes and braided ribbons fluttered from pins on the wall. There was a wire cage with a captive insect like a moth crawling about inside, chirping softly. A chain of bells hung from a carved globe of deep red wood. There were three totally incoherent paintings in irregular frames. A whistle hung by a long tassel. A pot of water held three colorless flowers, each with two petals creased down by a careful hand.

Rohan's feet did not make a sound on the rock, but he was aware after a moment that a round yellow eye had opened in the shadow of the Quai's uplifted arm and was regarding him without expression. The Quai did not move.

Rohan shrugged a little and went on toward the gate.

The wall was high and very thick, so thick that the gate aperture was really a passage about twenty feet long. The gate itself was a web which entirely filled the passage from end to end. Some spider who spun glittering, curled metal thread had been at work here. It reminded Rohan of something. What? Curled threads—yes, like the threads woven into the wrappings the *d'vahnyan* wore. His heart beat a little faster in triumph at this implied confirmation of Crazy Joe's promise.

How you passed the Gate was another matter. He squinted up at the wall. Far too high to scale. He glanced back at the Quai, and saw that the man was now sitting up, cross-legged, clasping his ankles and watching Rohan without expression. He was a little struck by the Quai's face. Arrogance was on it. This was a man who had wielded much power over a long period of time. The set of the mouth showed it, and the imperious gaze. How strange that such a man would forsake life among his people and climb the Mountain with his few small valued things to bear him company until the summons came . . .

Rohan looked back at the gate. This time it seemed to him that there was an opening which led a little way into the web, like the entry into a maze. He put out a cautious hand, tested the firm, curled lace of the metal, found a vacant space the size and shape of a man, stepped forward into it.

He stood there, peering intently before him, searching for the next open space. He was certain that it existed, but he had to keep his mind firmly fixed on the patterns to find it. Wind blowing through the gate sang faintly among the webbings. After a moment Rohan saw the next opening, squirmed to the left, squeezed between vibrating trceries of bright wire, and stood in another open space several paces inside the gate.

It was certainly, he thought, a machine. Some intricate Venusian mind had built it for some purpose no Terrestrial was likely to understand, but it was definitely a functioning mechanism. It took the most intent concentration to find one's way through, and, the moment the mind relaxed, the gate began to press the intruder back toward his starting point, gently, resiliently, almost imperceptibly.

Rohan pushed ahead, paused for long minutes, searching the dazzling confusion before him until suddenly the right perspective took shape and he saw the next passage opening, clear and unbarred, leading another three feet or so into the tangle. When he stepped into it, the way he had just come blended instantly into the labyrinth. Suddenly frightened, he searched for the

way back, found it after a few minutes, and discovered he had lost the forward way. While he hunted again for it, he was aware of the pressure of the web, of bright curled wires moving past his face. The gate was pressing him toward its outer surface.

Resolutely he fixed his mind on the immediate problem, found the way forward, pushed into it, paused, searched again. Very slowly he made his way toward the plateau on the far side of the wall. The pool lay placid, waiting.

“Is this all?” he thought, looking around the empty mountaintop. Only the wet, sighing wind hissed in his ear for answer. It was all. The encircling wall hid nothing. Bare stone overgrown with blurs of colored lichens and the pool itself, an unlidged eye staring up at infinity.

Rohan strolled toward it, paused on the brink, looking down.

His heart turned over.

This much at least of Crazy Joe’s tale was true. There were stars down there in the deep sky-blue of the water, stars that winked up green and red, blue and amber. Great drifts of jewels set and unset, thicker than the sands of the pool’s floor.

Then a shadow stirred, deep down. A vast, thick coil moved upon itself, turned over slowly, settled back to rest. It was only a part of a vaster shadow. He leaned to peer closer. But the water was milky. He could not see . . .

Not very much is really known about the fauna of Venus. Terrestrial exploration has been confined to narrow corridors, and if there are dangerous beasts in the jungles they generally shun the highways and the towns. What may dwell in the seas of Venus is as unknown as the deepest secrets of our own seas. This thing was vast and sluggish, dimly gleaming where light struck it strongest. Rohan measured its bulk as well as he could, considered it with a sort of reckless caution. It was slow. It was probably not hungry, or the Quai outside the gate would not be waiting there. Presumably some kind of summons would come when the Quai was wanted. Or did they operate on some private schedule of their own? At any rate Rohan was a strong swimmer. Also, he had a knife.

He thought, unfastening his shirt, “If I can get up only a load or two of what’s down there, it’ll be a start. I can hire a ship and come back here with enough artillery to kill the thing and clean out the pool. Maybe I won’t even wake it up, if I’m careful.”

Then he thought of the *d’vahnyan*, and glanced again, rapidly and with uneasiness, around the plateau. Had Crazy Joe told three truths and one lie about this place? The pool was blue, as he had said. It held treasure and a monster of some kind. But the greatest treasure, the secret behind the *d’vahnyan*—where was it? What was it? No, Crazy Joe did not tell lies. Unless it was unwittingly. Could that be it? Some vague fantasy he had dreamed up here, staring into the hypnotic eye of the pool? No, for he *did* know the secret. He *did* talk with the *d’vahnyan*, easily, with strong influence sometimes. Well, never mind. At least, the jewels were here. After that there would be time enough to explore further.

A curious sureness drove him on. The secret was here. He could see no tangible evidence but something deeper than reason told him Crazy Joe had not misled him. In its own time the secret would come to him, as it had come to Crazy Joe.

He stepped out of his trousers, settled the long knife on its thong around his wrist, poised on the pool’s brink.

How soft and smooth the water was. Not like real water. Stroking strongly downward, Rohan marveled at the texture of the blue infinity he sank through. He kept his eyes open, enjoying the deepening blueness, watching for the flashes of color that struck upward like some sunken autumn from the bottom of the well. It was like swimming through blue air toward stars. He felt happy and light. It was strange to think how intimately he shared this water with a monster whose shape and nature he did not know. The water was full of death, but he did not fear it. It was full of life and light too, if a man had the courage to reach for them.

The jewels lay heaped in thick, bright hillocks, unevenly on the sand. It seemed to Rohan that they lay smoothest in a broad path across the pool's center, as if—something—had dragged a wide track across the treasure many times. But the deep waters hid all sign of the dweller here. Perhaps it slept. Perhaps it had withdrawn.

Rohan shook out the strong, light sack he had brought for the treasure. It wrapped itself around his arm, clinging like seaweed. He reached for a heavy, half-submerged outcropping in the sand to hold himself down and found he was gripping a carved figure studded with slippery gems. It served the purpose.

What a lot of the treasure there was, he thought warmly, riffling it over with his free hand. Big rubies like blood-drops, strings of half dissolving pearls, linked diamonds set in imperishable yellow gold, corroded boxes spilling out colored drifts of stones. Little idols with enormous emerald eyes. Ivory furred with the swaying green hair of water-growths. Steel mirrors pitted with corruption that had once given back the yellow-eyed glances of pretty Quai girls, corruption now themselves. Steel daggers dissolving off studded gold hilts. So much of it, too much, richness pressed down and running over.

Happily Rohan brushed the surface, uncovering yet more treasure underneath. Working fast, he sorted out the largest and the best and thrust them into his sack. Great pale-eyed diamonds, globes of preciousness as live as stars, strings of lustrous rainbow color, faceted drops of congealed brightness. It was wonderful. It was Christmas morning. It was Easter, with all the dazzling eggs nested here awaiting him.

His lungs began to burn. He turned over and shot up through paling blueness toward the air, this heavy sack trailing. He began to laugh exultantly just before he broke the surface, and hung sputtering and choking for a while before he emptied his jewels on the bank and dived again.

The treasure flashed brighter than before. He dug into it, tossing it over and over, filling the sack anew with the power and the glory of a planet. A second time he rose to the surface, emptied his bulging sack, dived.

This time he uncovered a drift of pure crimson drops, like a man unearthing a vein of clear gold in a mountain of crystals and silver. He dug with both hands into the rich heaps, blinking in the clouds of sand his digging had dislodged, reaching for the bigger and brighter jewels which always lay just an arm's length out of his grasp.

A long, slow coil of disturbed sand rose out of the milky distance past his face. The water stirred, deeply and slowly.

Then with great deliberation a grasp like marble closed around his ankle.

Rohan writhed over in the water convulsively, letting the rubies fly. They sank in a sluggish red rain about him through the blue water, turning over slowly, as he tugged in a

moment's almost fatal panic at that relentless coil. It was heavy and hard and cold, like stone. And it was drawing him in . . .

It did not seem possible to him that a slow sun was beginning to burn through the clouds of blinding sand which he was raising in his struggles. He thought wildly that the light burned in his own mind, a symbol of shock and fear. But the tentacle drew him downward and inward toward the light, and as it grew and broadened with nearness it was the color of the sun itself, clear, bright white gold, shimmering in the waters that were colored like the blue skies of Earth. Blue skies and sunlight—two things no eye upon Venus had ever seen, except perhaps here.

His lungs burned. His vision blurred with sand and water and terror. He was not aware of himself as a reasoning creature at all in this moment. He was only a wild, struggling thing frantic to escape.

The thong-hung dagger, following his flailing motions faithfully, struck his palm finally and brought reason back. His fingers closed and with his last conscious strength he drove the dagger down hard, into the murk where the sunlight burned, into the heavy coil that was creeping higher around his ankle.

He felt the whole coil flinch. He slashed again. The water churned and the marble grasp slackened a little. Writhing double, blind with light and darkness, he stabbed once more into solid flesh which he could not see, and this time the heavy coil relaxed and slid slowly, slowly away.

Rohan shot up through foaming water, luminous water that boiled with sand and sparkled with broken reflections from that strange sunlight which burned at the bottom of the well. He broke the surface with what seemed his last despairing effort, and hung there clutching the stone rim, his body swinging helplessly in the churning water, wondering how soon the coil would rise again and lay its marble weight around his legs.

A hand seized his wrist. Two hands. Without looking up he made feeble climbing motions against the side of the pool, but it was the strength of the two pulling hands that saved him. He stumbled, gasping and choking, over the edge at last, onto dry pavement, and lay there spent for an unmeasured space of time.

When breath and volition came back to him he opened his eyes and saw a pair of white sandal-wrapped feet on a level with his face, a tumbled heap of jewels kicked this way and that between them. Slowly, as exhaustion ebbed a little out of him, he pushed himself up until he was sitting beside the flashing heap of his treasure, looking into the face of the standing man. Imperceptibly he was working the dagger forward around his wrist so that his fingers could close on it.

The Quai was not looking down at him. He knew the arrogant face, but its arrogance was not for him. The Quai's third eyelids were drawn across the round eyes and their gaze was focused remotely beyond Rohan and downward, into the pool. Automatically Rohan turned to follow that veiled gaze.

He had not imagined the light in the pool. It burned stronger now, very bright, very clear. And the water was troubled from deep underneath. A sudden turbulence rushed up, subsided, rushed higher, spilling blue trickles over the rim. Then a great bubble rose and burst, and just under it the shining light came floating, up, up from the bottom of the well and the center of the world. A cold, still brilliance that dazed the eye.

The Quai spoke in a hushed voice.

“Were you summoned?” he asked Rohan.

“Summoned?” Rohan echoed the question blankly. Then a little of his old confidence came back, and even in the face of this uprising mystery from the pool he found himself laughing. “Summoned? Oh no—I came!”

The two men looked at each other for a measuring moment. Even through the veiling lids Rohan saw the cold arrogance in the Quai’s eyes and knew it for a remote echo of his own. But there was a difference . . .the Quai had come humbly, acolyte and sacrifice in one. Rohan laughed again and scrambled to his feet. Exhaustion still weighted him, but he could not rest—yet.

What was going to happen next he had no idea. He only knew that he could deal with whatever came.

His discarded clothing lay beside the pool. Shivering a little in the soft, wet wind that breathed across the Mountain, he got quickly into his shirt, pressing the seal-tapes with one rapidly moving hand while with the other he groped for his trousers. The cloth felt clammy against his wet skin.

He was buckling the reassuring weight of the gumbelt around him when the next great bubble burst. Another rose after it. And another. Rohan turned, settling the holster against his thigh. The Quai stood motionless, with the jewels in a glittering tumble around his feet. He too stared down into the pool. The water boiled. The light like the sun rose higher, higher . . .

Out of the seething blue waters lifted the monstrous head of the dweller in the well. Slowly, slowly it rose, water streaming from its shoulders, and over its head the flat, unwavering sun burned cold white gold, shimmering, shivering, sending out slow rings of light that eddied and faded, spread and paled to an embracing potency that was felt but not seen. They touched the mind. Delicately they touched the mind . . .

What did it look like? Rohan could not be sure, even while he stared. The light dazed him. He only knew the thing was monstrous. Mailed and shining, it drew its magnificent length over the verge of the pool, coil by coil. Before it, stealthy, slow, tentative as the first light of dawn, moved the rings of expanding radiation. The thoughts of Rohan and the Quai moved out from their skulls in measurable waves from each thinking brain, and the radiations from the flat white light met them and moved inward as if on concentric stepping-stones, inexorably toward the center and the source of all thought.

Gently, gently. But the storm was rising.

Rohan shut his mind tight, violently rejecting that touch. It drew back slightly, puzzled. Then it came on again and there were no doors of the mind he could close against it.

A great many lightning thoughts rippled one after another through his head. The jewels. First and last and always, the jewels. And how he could hope to get to them, with that monstrous light-crowned thing rising so slowly from the pool. And how, even if he did get them, he could escape. For he felt very sure that the rings of expanding light were quiescent now, barely stirring. There was no way of guessing their full power if the creature were aroused, or how far down the mountain they could spread, burning and sinking, paralyzing the mind.

It was not immortal. He had struck it with his knife and it had let him go. Certainly it was not a normal creature by any Terrestrial judgment, but it was not supernatural, either. He had struck it, and—

The slow, upsurging coils hesitated. Out of the water a slash in the mailed side rose gingerly. The creature paused, swung its magnificently crowned head back to consider this twinge. And Rohan knew his chance . . .

The Quai never even heard him coming. Rohan's long knife flashed twice in the quiet air, hard, accurate blows to hasten the sacrifice which this man of Venus had come to offer his god. Rohan knew what he was doing. He knew how to guide the blows.

It takes perhaps three seconds for oblivion to come, when you strike deep at the right spots. In those three seconds the Quai had time for one quick look of blank amazement over his shoulder, and then no more.

Rohan was braced to catch the sagging body before it began to give at the knees. He caught it neatly and strongly over his bent shoulder, letting its weight double across him, and surging forward in the same quick instant that he stooped.

His timing was perfect. When the sun-crowned head of the monster swung round again, the hurled body of the Quai sprawled limply against its gigantic face, hung there for unmoving seconds, and then slid very gently downward to lie flat upon the pavement in the pools of spilled blue water. The pools turned red.

Rohan wasted no glance at what was happening between the sacrifice and the god. He was moving with the rapid, accurate gestures of an automaton, scooping up gems with both hands, dropping them blindly into his pockets. He had hoped to go down from this pool laden heavily, pack and pockets, with treasure. But now he told himself rigidly that he could make these scooping gestures twice more—once more—no more—

Resolutely he poured the last double handful into his pockets and scrambled backward on his knees, ignoring the bruise and scrape of the stones, trying not to look at the monster and its victim as he went.

But when he stood panting before the gate he glanced back once, for just one quick, curious look, before he flung himself forward into the slow, intricate web that lay between him and freedom. It was for this, chiefly, that the Quai had had to die. The treasure was only part of it. Even if Rohan had had time to load himself with jewels, still a man must die to give him time to negotiate this gate.

He had one backward look only. The monster had halted half in the pool and half out of it. The great crowned head was bent, and light floated very lazily outward in slow, slow rings. The creature seemed to be inspecting the sprawled Quai leisurely. And Rohan saw one thing about it that struck his mind with stunning impact. He could not understand this. It was impossible. He had assumed all this while that sacrifices between Quai and monster would be consummated in the time-honored way—that the god would devour its victim.

But he saw now that the god had no mouth.

The threads of the gateway shimmered like the intricate armature-wrapping of the *d'vahnyan*. Outside, in the leaf-thatched hut where the Quai had slept his last sleep in life, the caged moth chirped with plaintive sweetness. There was no other sound on the Mountain but the sigh of the grey wind and the soft chinking of the jewels in their pockets around Rohan's waist.

He went fast, down the steep road. He did not know how soon the rings of light might begin to pulse out and drop down after him, delicately touching the secret chambers of the mind, touching and pulling him back . . .

Part of him wanted to be pulled back. For he had accomplished only half his purpose. Or had Crazy Joe lied, after all? He had thought that when he came down this road he would carry a double treasure—jewels and knowledge. Something had gone wrong, somehow, somewhere. Tantalizingly, at the very edge of his mind, wisdom knocked for entry.

The curled threads of the gateway—the curled threads of the *d'vahnyan's* ominous wrappings. The gate, and the wrappings—each was certainly a sort of unearthly machine. The latter controlled by the waves flowing from the strange, inhuman brain of the *d'vahnyan*, the former activated and shaped by Rohan's desire to enter, to pass through. Or by the monster.

Twice on Venus Rohan had seen the sun—once in the crowned monster's brilliance, once when he shot the *d'vahnyan*. Surely the link between the Mountain and the *d'vahnyan* was a strong one. But it was not clear. He had missed its significance, somehow, somehow . . .

There was not time yet to worry about it. He had the jewels. Later, he could come back with weapons and reinforcements and take what he wanted from the pool. If the secret knowledge that could make all *d'vahnyan* vulnerable was there, and he thought it was, he would take that too, at his leisure. He could manage everything, with what he carried in his pockets.

There was only one last obstacle now. He touched his gun reflectively and watched the road below. Forsythe and Jellaby. They would be waiting for him . . . no, for what he carried. To their minds he knew he himself was only a vehicle now, for the delivery of treasure.

Somewhere on the path below they would meet him to dispute the treasure. He grinned, wondering which of them he would shoot first. That it would be Rohan who shot first seemed self-evident to him. And with Jellaby—or Forsythe—out of the way, the balance would shift once more and the survivor's return to civilization would depend solely on Rohan in the long jungle trek ahead. One man alone could not make the trip in safety. It took two at least.

"Forsythe," Rohan thought. "If there's any choice, I'll kill Forsythe."

It was curious in a way how totally he discounted Crazy Joe.

White fog swam lazily up to meet him as he descended. Looking out over the immeasurable miles of dissolving jungle, he thought he saw a glitter of light wink once and vanish, very far away. Foggy Morning, Flattery, Swanport, civilization. A long way off.

The fog closed around him. He walked half blinded, in white cloud. Rocks loomed like waiting figures at every bend. After a while he drew his gun and carried it ready, the safety off, knowing that he was coming nearer and nearer to the danger area where almost certain ambush waited him. He went very cautiously now, searching each crevice he passed, all his senses tuned to a singing alertness. And presently, with no surprise, he heard a gentle click of metal on rock a little way ahead in the blankness, and knew that the moment was upon him.

Feet shifted on rock. A voice whispered a fierce warning. Rohan smiled. "Forsythe first," he thought. It was bravado and nothing more. He knew he would simply fire at the first moving shadow and hope for the best. He stood perfectly still, hugging the rock wall, his senses straining into this blank grey world where death waited him on the downward path.

Behind him, above him, quite clearly in the fog, footsteps sounded.

Rohan pressed flat against the rocks, turning his head sharply. That was impossible.

He told himself that acoustics must be confused in this heavy, blind dimness. He told himself he had imagined the sound. For there could not possibly be footsteps behind him. No one had passed him going up. There was no other way to the top. And he had left nothing alive on the Mountain. Only the moth in the cage and the monster in the pool.

But now the sound of footsteps rang clear again on the rock above, coming nearer. It was no trick of the echoes or the mind. Someone was following him down the steep road. Someone striding firmly on shod feet that struck loud on stone and muffled on lichens.

Suddenly the mist felt cold around him.

The Quai was dead. Surely, surely the Quai was dead. But there had been no other human up there. For a disorienting moment he thought that the man who strode the path so confidently was himself, and he who pressed shivering against the rocks a stranger without a name.

He made himself lean out, peering urgently along the way he had come, cursing the mist and yet grateful to it, for he was not sure he really wanted to see the face of this follower at his heels. How confidently the footsteps rang upon the road. How fast they came.

The mists blew thicker still.

The men below him on the road heard the footfalls now. Metal clinked on stone as someone raised a rifle with awkward haste. A voice hissed angrily. Feet shifted on pebbles. The ambush was ready.

For whom? For what?

Rohan laid a hand on his heavy-laden pocket, lifted his gun tentatively, the beginnings of panic stirring uncontrollably in his mind. In seven-league boots the following footsteps strode down upon him.

At the last moment some quick instinct warned him to clear the path, to get out of the way. He flung himself flat against the high rock wall which was the road's inner edge.

Out of the mists and past him the *d'vahnyan* stalked. His black wrappings gleamed. His empty, remote, passionless eyes touched Rohan indifferently and moved away. From very far off the impersonal eyes saw and dismissed him, eyes which held no ego and no consciousness of self.

But Rohan knew the face.

There had been arrogance and pride upon it like his own, the last time he had looked into it. But the man was dead now. He knew that. The man had to be dead, with Rohan's knife-thrusts in him, at the edge of the pool, and the monster nuzzling its sacrifice. The monster with no mouth . . .

It had received its sacrifice, then. And now a *d'vahnyan* came striding strongly down from the Mountain, his face stamped into the same imperishable matrix of selfless, dispassionate calm which every *d'vahnyan* bore.

Stamped—by what?

Rohan leaned, sick and shaking, against the rock, waves of cold revulsion pouring over him, knowing the secret at last. So *that* was the source of the *d'vahnyan*. So *that* was what the monster fed upon. Staring into the lost, ghostly, erased face of the *d'vahnyan*, he knew why the death-dealers of the Quai are beings beyond life and death.

But the two in ambush just below him did not know. Rohan held his breath, shivering, powerless to intervene in what came next, although he knew to the last spinning whirl of the brain in his skull exactly what would come. He had been through this before.

Below him he heard the whisper of an indrawn breath as the *d'vahnyan* strode by and was swallowed in cloud. It was the inhalation a man takes when he braces a blaster stock to his hip and holds until the finger finishes tightening on the trigger.

It finished. The sharp, echoing crack of gun-fire exploded stunningly in the fog as Jellaby fired at the half-seen, stalking figure which he disastrously mistook for Rohan—

The fog split and took fire and burned like the blaze of a white-hot sun. The eye and the mind went blind before it.

When Rohan could see again, the road was clear before him. Jellaby's blaster lay abandoned ten feet below. The fog had burned itself away for a broad half-mile around the sun-hot flash of expending energy. And time had burned away, too. How long a time he did not know.

Then scuttling motion, far below him at the foot of the road, told him the answer. Ten minutes? Fifteen? Thirty? Long enough for Jellaby and Forsythe to run blindly almost to the edge of the pale, garrulous forest at the Mountain's foot. Mindless panic still controlled them, and they ran like little mannikin figures jerking on strings, seen from far away. They ran, from no pursuer, driven by their own blind terror.

For the new-made *d'vahnyan*, unharmed, another mannikin far off, stalked away into the jungle at an angle divergent from their flight, moving steadily upon his own inhuman, business, answering some soundless call which no human ears could hear. Who could guess what summons a *d'vahnyan*?

"You ought to know, Red," a voice said from very near by.

Rohan jumped convulsively, glaring. How could he possibly have missed seeing Crazy Joe?

The familiar figure leaned against a rock in full sight, six steps away on the downward path, arms folded, eyes on Rohan. He was smiling in his bush of beard.

"You were thinking out loud, Red," he said.

Rohan laughed shakily. His head was still buzzing and there was a misty, dreamlike quality over everything he thought or did. He moved, and his laden pockets jingled faintly. Thought of the jewels brought him back to something nearer sanity, and sudden cunning moved in his mind.

The jewels in the pool were his. He had suffered much for them. He would go on down the Mountain, catch up with Forsythe and Jellaby, kill one of them and travel with the other to safety. After that—time enough to decide. But one thing he must do first. Crazy Joe had talked too much once already about this Mountain and this treasure . . . now it was Rohan's and nobody else's. Forsythe and Jellaby knew. They must be silenced, eventually. Crazy Joe had better be silenced, too. Now.

Rohan felt for his gun. The holster was empty. He looked down in sudden panic. Far down the slope pale light glinted on steel. He must have dropped the blaster when the flash of sun-glare stunned them all.

He sighed, met Crazy Joe's eyes, thought of his knife. Yes, that would do. Crazy Joe never carried a weapon. The knife would do very well.

There was no use talking about this. Crazy Joe was smiling at him, and he smiled back, automatically, and with one smooth motion drew the knife from his belt and stepped forward, his lips still curved in the meaningless smile as he tipped the blade for that fatal spot just inside the collarbone, where life beats so near the surface that one thrust quenches it forever in the briefest count of seconds.

Moving like a man in a dream, he drove the knife straight home.

How strange, he thought remotely, that Crazy Joe made no move to defend himself. How irritating that calm smile was.

A streak of jagged lightning sprang up at the knife-point as it slid across Crazy Joe's chest. Not biting in, but sliding, and trailing cold fire after it . . .

Stupidly Rohan blinked at the slit shirt-front. And at what he saw beneath the shirt. The tight black wrappings, glittering with curled metallic thread.

From a long way off Crazy Joe said quietly, "This wasn't my idea, Red. On Venus, when the summons comes, you go."

"Was I—summoned?" Rohan whispered, and hardly heard the answer because of the ringing in his ears.

"I told you about the Mountain, didn't I? That was the summons, Red. Only the strong men answer. Only the men *it* can use. Look up, Red."

Rohan looked up. A slow ring of light was dropping gently downward around the Mountain. Light like the sun, white gold, shivering in the dim air. It flickered by Rohan's face and faded. But another ring came after it, stronger and broader, touching the brain as it passed.

Crazy Joe, still smiling calmly and compassionately, nodded toward the upward road.

"Go on, Red," he said. "Get it over. There's work to be done on Venus. I know. I do it too. You were summoned. Go on."

The third ring of light floated down past Rohan's face, and his mind reeled in his skull. The fourth ring touched . . .

Suddenly Rohan's hands rose and clasped tight on top of his head. But under his defending fingers, under the cuirass of his skull, he felt movement. No, not movement—light. Brilliant and clear, white gold like the sun and the short, strong microwaves which the sun and stars send out even through clouds, even to a world that never sees the sun.

Rohan thought quite lucidly for an instant of the sun in a clear blue heaven, warm, shining. Quick nostalgia stirred in him at the memory of a world called Earth, a long way distant, dissolving in space and memory. A world called Earth, where a man named Rohan used to live, a long, long time ago.

A man called—what?

He stamped once on the path, feeling rock solid under him, searching for reassurance in an eclipsed universe. There was a bearded face before him. He knew that face. It had always been hauntingly familiar, under the disguising beard, and something more concealing than the beard—a calm and passionless peace. The peace that comes when a strong ego drains out and—something else—flows in. Something else, like light, like blazing gold, like the white flame that was stirring in his brain. This time he knew the erased identity that had dwelt once behind that face.

He said, "You were Barber. You were Barber Jones."

Crazy Joe smiled and nodded.

Rohan's hands clasped tighter on his head. He said painfully, "And I—I'm—"

But he could not finish. He was no one. He had no name at all.

"Go on back," Crazy Joe said from infinite distances. "There's nothing else left for you now. Nothing at all."

A ring of clear bright light sank about him, widening and expanding, and the name of Rohan faded, the name of Earth dissolved. Jewels clinked as he turned obediently to face the rising path. Last of all the bright thought of power faded, and the use of treasure.

In the emptiness of his mind he searched remotely for a name that had dissolved irretrievably in the burning of the light of his brain. And after a moment or two he seemed to

find it. D—it began with *d*—

D'vahnyan.

He leaned motionless against a rock for a long time, doing nothing. Once his lip drew back in a fading snarl of defiance. But then he moved, took an unsteady forward step, and then another, back along the way he had come. It was the way he had come all his life, toward this Mountain and this upward path.

Burning with light and color, the jewels dropped from his pockets one by one as he climbed, marking the stumbling stations of his return to the Mountain and the pool and the thing that waited for him.

[The end of *Carry Me Home* by Henry Kuttner (as C. H. Liddell)]