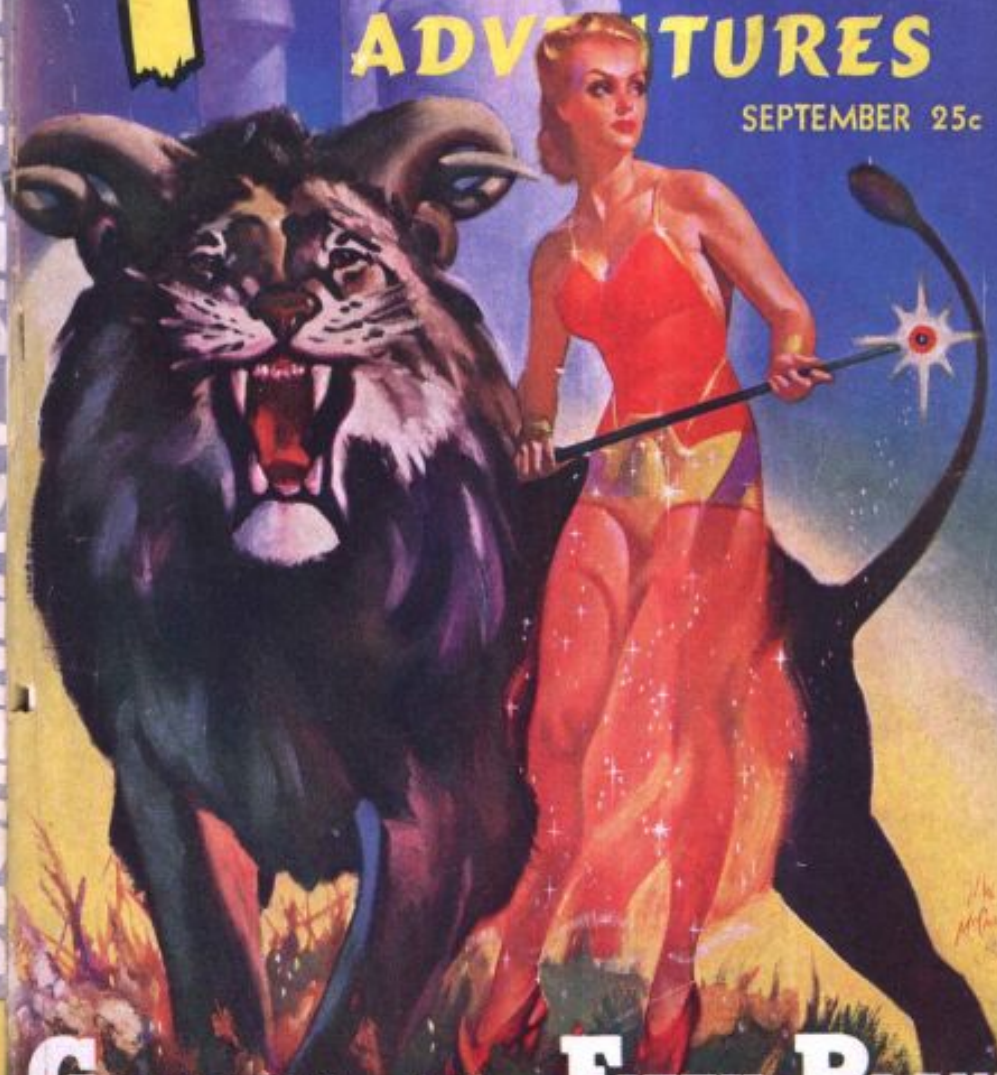


THE BOTTLE IMP *by* Dwight V. SWAIN

fantastic

ADVENTURES

SEPTEMBER 25c



GODDESS of the FIFTH PLANE

by WILLIAM P. MCGIVERN

FANTASTIC ADVENTURES

SEPTEMBER

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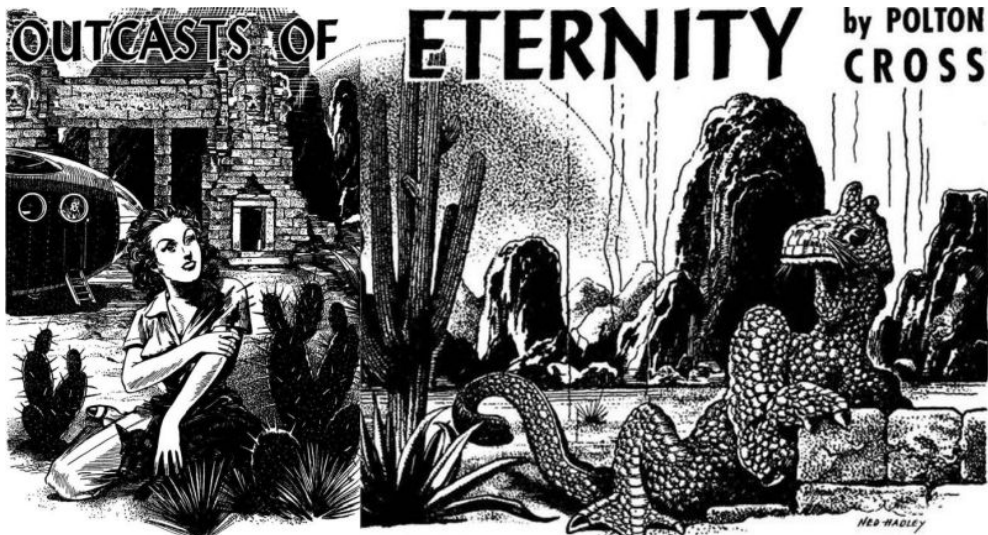
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OUTCASTS OF ETERNITY

by POLTON
CROSS



Blood welled from the wounds . . .

OUTCASTS OF ETERNITY

By

John Russell Fearn

Writing under the pseudonym Polton Cross.

Illustration by Ned Hadley.

First published *Fantastic Adventures*, September 1942.

There was no place in eternity for these unfortunates—no place in time or space. It was a fate that staggered imagination.

The space ship lay motionless in the long valley of sand, banked on both sides by gently sloping ochre walls. Eighty feet below desert level, lurked vestiges of Martian air—woefully thin, a sheer agony to breathe, but still capable of supporting life in an unprotected human being for perhaps fifteen minutes.

In the control room of the space ship were three people—Ron Dawlish, the amiable, tow-haired, blue-eyed engineer who had designed this vessel and alone possessed the secret of the special fuel which drove it through the void; Nancy Dawlish, his wife—small, slender, blonde-headed, with a bright eager face testifying to the thrill she was getting out of this first space expedition from Earth. . . .

And the third member was Clay Reynolds, Ron's lifelong friend—radio expert, astronomer, Egyptologist—in fact a veritable “Admirable Crichton” of science. Right now he sat huddled over a variety of photographic plates, earnestly studying them from under drawn brows. He didn't even seem to be aware of Ron and his wife as they stood looking out of the port.

“I just wonder what it *does* mean?” Nancy mused, for about the twentieth time. “If we could only find out it might give us a big clue to the mystery of Martian civilizations, don't you think?”

Ron nodded slowly, gazing across the sandy valley floor. The view was the most puzzling of any they had seen on the red planet. On the valley floor sprouted queer, cactuslike vegetation, armed with numberless viciously sharp barbs. This in itself was not so very extraordinary, of course, since air was present in this spot. The extraordinary thing was that the life should be present on this one spot on Mars and yet nowhere else—for in three months of probing, photographing, and securing data, the Dawlish Expedition was quite certain this life was alone in its glory.

In itself this was remarkable enough—but perhaps even more remarkable were the unmistakable remains of one-time Martian civilization in this same spot. For across the valley from where the spaceship lay, protruding out of the yellow wall of sand, were smashed and eroded stone columns undoubtedly molded at some time by intelligent minds and hands—and since then buried through incomputable centuries by the eternally shifting sand, blown in the thin arctic wind of the dying planet.

Most fascinating of all—the thing that absorbed the attention of the three, even as it had done from the first moment—was a Martian inscription. It was hewn in the stone of an

archway supported on two cracked pillars. It protruded from the waste like a forgotten signpost, or else a text or dedication of some kind.

Believing that all hieroglyphics are capable of solution, and having a sound knowledge of Egyptology and Sanskrit, Clay Reynolds had worked ceaselessly on trying to solve the inscription for nearly three weeks. First he had ventured out in a space suit and cleaned away drifted sand from the arch; then with a flame gun he had scored the marks of erosion away and laid bare the text to the weak glimmer of the Martian sun. Then he had photographed it—normally, then with infra red and ultra violet, getting every sign pin-sharp.

But, as his worried expression showed, he had given himself the devil of a task.

“Maybe it isn’t anything worth bothering about at all,” Nancy smiled, turning from the port and coming over to him.

“I don’t like being beaten, Nan,” he growled back, setting his square jaw. “Besides, I *have* got started. The first four words make me want to go on. They read—‘To Him to Whom—’”

“Sure that’s right?” Ron frowned, staring at him.

“No, I’m not sure, but it’s as near as I can translate. A queer beginning, I know—but then think of some of our Earthly legal documents which begin—‘To Him to Whom it May Concern. . . .’ It *is* possible, you see.”

Ron grinned even though his gray eyes were solemn. “Be a devil if it turns out to be a quotation like ‘Right is Might’ or ‘They Shall not Pass,’ won’t it?”

“Anyway,” Nan said, “I don’t see that we need to spend any more time here, Clay. You can work out that idea as we travel.” She glanced at Ron. “What do you think?”

“You’re right. After all, the Science Institute backed this expedition purely for research purposes, and we don’t want to be too long over getting back. We’ve got everything we need—specimens, photos, samples. Locker’s chock-full.”

“Okay,” Clay growled. “But I don’t like deserting a dead Martian city without knowing all about it.” He got up. “Tell you what— While you make the arrangements for departure I’ll take one last look around.”

“Right,” Ron nodded, and motioning Nan to help him he turned to a routine check up of the firing equipment.

In a few minutes Clay heaved his heavy, powerful form into a spacesuit, strapped on camera equipment and one or two special instruments, then with a nod of his helmeted head he made for the airlock. When he had reached it he paused for a moment and switched on his audiophone.

“Not this time, Bouncer!” his voice admonished. “This is no place for Scotch terriers. Be off with you. Shoo!”

Bouncer, a long-backed, bandy legged Aberdeen, who bore the distinction of being the first dog to cross from Earth to Mars, gave Clay a disappointed glance of his red-brown eyes, then sat down disconsolately on his haunches.

“Bouncer!” Nan called, glancing round from the rocket tubes. “Bouncer, come here, boy! Come on!”

Clay grinned behind his visor, then turned to the airlock screws and twisted them. For a moment, as he tugged the lock open, Nan and Ron felt their hearts race as the air pressure dropped: then it became normal again a few moments after the lock had closed.

So intent did they become on their work, cleaning out the firing cylinders and resetting the flash points of the electrical mechanism, they hardly noticed how the time passed, nor for that matter were they concerned about it. Clay had a habit of staying away for hours at a time when he got on a hunt. Since he was well able to take care of himself that didn't matter so much.

Then at last Nan threw down a wastecloth and rubbed a grease smudge from her tip-tilted nose.

"Don't know about you, Ron," she said, "But I'm wondering if I wasn't a bit hasty in suggesting we return home. Come to think it over, I'm not so sure I want to go."

Ron stared at her in surprise. "But why not? Space is interesting, I know—fascinating if you like—but there's a limit. I can't imagine anything worse than just wandering about in the void on constant expeditions. Besides, when we get back to Earth think of the acclaim we'll get! We're the first Earthlings to travel through space, both ways, in safety! Or we *will* be, anyway."

Ron stopped and took a deep breath. "Don't you realize, Nan, that it means the Dawlish Space Corporation will become an established fact? And with me at the head of it because I'm the only one who knows the formula for the fuel. . . . Wealth—power—success! Think of it! And then you stand there and say you're not so keen on returning!"

She shrugged, and he frowned at her pretty, troubled face.

"What *is* it, Nan?" he smiled, hugging her to him.

"Well, I know we'll get the fame and the glory; but that is simply as a matter of course. What worries me is the danger of our success. The trials of this expedition will be as nothing compared to what we'll face against the commercial moguls of Earth. Take Calver Doone for example."

"Him?" Ron looked grimly reflective. Calver Doone was head of Strat-American Airways Corporation. The discovery of super-fast fuel and space travel by Ron had already made Doone pull sundry wires—ethical and otherwise—to learn the young inventor's secret. What he would do when he knew space travel and commerce was to become an established fact was problematical.

"Well, I'm not afraid of Doone," Ron growled at last, shrugging. "I'll have strong men behind me, just as he will. After all, one can't be unreasonable enough to expect a gigantic project like space travel to be launched on a commercial basis without certain vested interests getting jittery—and tough."

"No, I suppose not," Nan admitted, biting her lip uncertainly. "But Doone is so ruthless I feel afraid for you."

"Then don't," Ron smiled. "I'm pretty hard when I'm pushed, and Clay isn't anybody's fool— Ah, talk of the devil!" he broke off, as the airlock swung inwards momentarily and closed again.

Clay came clumping in in his space suit. Slowly the air pressure went up to normal.

"Well, find anything?" Ron inquired.

"Like hell!" Clay responded, when he'd tugged off his helmet. "I'm no nearer than I was to start with, and I still don't know what the rest of those ciphers mean." He shrugged. "Well, there it is. Seems to me the best thing we can do is go back home. Everything all set?"

"I guess so," Ron nodded, moving to the control board. Then just as his hands gripped the power switches Nan gave a sudden horrified shout.

"No, no, Ron, wait a minute! There's poor Bouncer out there!"

“Bouncer!” Ron gasped, and turned to look through the port.

Sure enough there was the terrier lying on his side amidst the cactus, his ribs heaving up and down painfully as he struggled to draw in the thin air.

“The little devil!” Clay exploded. “Don’t you see? He must have skipped through the airlock when I first went out— Hey, Nan, where are you going?” he demanded, as he saw her twirling the airlock screws.

“Out to get him, of course,” she retorted.

“But wait a minute!” Ron cried. “You can’t go out just as you are! You need a—”

“Oh, I’ll be all right,” she said briefly. “It’s only a few yards and I can hold my breath . . .” And with that she slipped through the opening and closed the airlock after her.

Clay, half in and half out of his space suit, glanced at Ron. Then they both swung to the port and watched anxiously. Nan came into view almost immediately, taking the long jumps only possible in a gravity like Mars. But she overpitched her last leap and went flying a couple of yards beyond Bouncer, finally crashing into the midst of the bristly cactus.

“Ouch! I bet that stung,” Ron muttered, as he watched Nan get up and massage her arm and shoulder painfully. Then she turned quickly, picked up Bouncer, and came stumbling back.

Clay swung open the airlock for her and she came staggering in, two little smears of blood under her nostrils. She reeled giddily, then Ron caught her and drew up a chair. Slowly her labored breathing became more natural and her blood-shot eyes cleared.

“Phew, that was tougher than I expected,” she ejaculated. “I held my breath, only that fall into the cactus made me lose it in one grand puff.” She winced suddenly. “Still got some of those cactus needles in my shoulder unless I’m mistaken.”

“Soon have them out,” Ron said, and reached into the cabinet for the surgical forceps. Clay, however, was already using them, pointed to half a dozen vicious needles on the bench beside the fast reviving Bouncer.

“Um, how nice,” Ron said grimly. “What about him? Be okay?”

“Sure,” Clay grinned. “He’s Scotch, isn’t he? Bad lad,” he added, as a wicked brown eye looked at him.

Within five minutes Ron had extracted four needles from Nan’s shoulder. Then he bandaged it and handed her a glass of foaming restorative.

“Thanks,” she smiled. “You should have been a surgeon, not an inventor.”

“You feel no ill effects, Nan?” Clay asked, studying the needles under the binocular microscope.

She glanced at him in some alarm. “Why, no. *Should* I?”

“I don’t know,” he said, looking up and frowning thoughtfully. “The needles have traces of some sort of gummy substance on them. That’s no reason to suspect poison, though. I’m simply remembering that we’re on an alien world . . . Probably ordinary sap.”

“It had better be!” Nan cried, getting up and coming to look at them. “I don’t want to start passing out now just when we’re due to collect the glory.”

“We’ve specimens of the cactus in the locker,” Ron remarked. “Why not have a look at them, Clay, and—”

“Not worth it,” he interrupted. “They’re at Martian temperature and pressure in that locker. Pulling them out for any length of time into these Earth-norm conditions might kill them off—”

In any case if there were anything wrong Bouncer would show it quickly enough and he isn't doing it," Clay finished with a grin, as the terrier got up and wagged his impudent tail.

Then Clay turned to sweep up the needles, but Nan gave him pause and instead dropped them into a small vacuum jar and clamped down the lid.

"What's the idea?" Ron asked in surprise.

"Souvenirs," she shrugged. "Some day when I'm an old woman and feel like telling yarns I'll produce these as evidence. . . ."

Ron smiled a little, but he thought he detected a vague light of fear in Nan's blue eyes. Only her laughing mouth seemed to belie it.

"Well, what are we waiting for?" she demanded, as Ron and Clay both stood looking at her, still trying to interpret her action. "It is time we were on our way, isn't it? Let's go."

Ron nodded a silent acquiescence and settled at the switchboard, pulled over the power levers. With a blasting roar which sent tumbling sand in all directions the vessel lifted from the valley floor—climbed swiftly away from the enigma of a lost Martian civilization towards the eternal stars.

CHAPTER II

The journey back was monotonous insofar that it contained no new elements. There was none of the fascinating interest of the first trip into space. The view of the stars, the planets, the Moon and the Sun, had lost its attraction. The whole thing was boring, crossing a gulf of forty-five million miles.

Nor was it possible to communicate with Earth for space radio had still to be solved. Not until they got to within at least five thousand miles of Earth's ionized layer would they be able to receive or transmit messages.

So Ron, leaving the robot pilot to eat up the distance, spent most of his time classifying the specimens they had brought from Mars. Most of the period Nan helped him, or else she attended to the essential domestic part of the trip. At other times she played with Bouncer, who seemed to have quite recovered from his Martian exploit. And Nan herself had apparently quite forgotten her painful acquaintance with the cactus. Nothing untoward had presented itself, except of course a dull headache, but this she put down to space strain increasing her blood pressure.

Clay, as usual, spent every waking moment working on the Martian hieroglyphics, and little by little, as Mars waned to an orange globe and Earth increased from a green star he began to make headway, working out the root formations of the characters, their application as compared with the three words he had already solved, and so on— Until one "morning" he gave a sudden whoop.

"I've got it!" he yelled, his eyes shining triumphantly. "It checks up. So it must be right."

Ron and Nan, busy with their cataloging, looked up in breathless interest. Bouncer twisted his big head on one side.

"It's a bit paradoxical," Clay went on, pondering his notebook. "Sort of silly thing to—"

"Damn that! What does it *say*?" Ron yelled.

"It says—'To Him to Whom Eternal Life is Given, He an Outcast Shall Become'."

"Huh?" Ron ejaculated, staring at him.

"Say it again," Nan ordered, puzzling.

So Clay repeated it and looked apologetic. "I told you it was paradoxical. Anyway I believe it's right, though I don't pretend to gather the meaning. Unless the Martians perhaps somehow found the secret of eternal life and didn't like it when they *had* found it. Personally, I see very few drawbacks to eternal life. Seems to me it ought to be grand to have all eternity to work in. Think of watching inventions come to full flower."

"But there's another side," Ron reflected. "I mean the tragedy of seeing those whom you love grow old and die while you remain young . . ." He paused and shrugged. "Well, it sounds sort of screwy to me. How eternal life could make anybody an outcast I'm damned if I can see. Seems to me that anybody with the gift of eternity should be able in time to rule the world, either wisely or ruthlessly according to temperament. What do you think, Nan?"

"I don't get it at all," she said. "Sounds like a silly sort of inscription to leave on a city archway. And it tells us nothing after all. I had hoped it might explain away the mystery of Mars' vanished civilizations or something. Too bad! Now we shall never know."

With a puzzled frown she turned back to the cataloging, then began to look around her.

"What's up?" Ron asked, watching her.

“I’m looking for my pencil—”

“Looking for it? It’s in your hand!” She stared at the pencil in her fingers blankly. “Well,” she whispered; “so it is!”

“What’s the matter?” Ron asked, grinning. “Forgotten where you are, or something?”

Nan did not answer him. In fact she could not. She was too utterly shocked inwardly by the realization that her first and second fingers and thumb on her right hand had lost all sense of feeling. Even now, as she wrote stiffly, the pencil was making no pressure in her grip. She tossed it down, lowered her hand to her side. It felt like something dead hanging on her wrist. She looked at it with apparent casualness, but so far as color went it was unchanged. Only the skin seemed to have a shiny touch which was definitely unusual.

“Something the matter?” Ron asked, as she stood pondering.

Nan was not a girl to be easily frightened, so she shook her head slowly—but she was remembering that this was the arm and shoulder which had had the full force of the cactus needles—Ridiculous! Absurd! Just cramp from too much writing.

“I’m getting sleepy again,” she announced presently. “I think I’ll turn in for a bit.”

“Okay,” Ron acknowledged, pondering his list.

“Uh-huh,” Clay agreed, immersed in his Martian ciphers.

Nan turned and whistled Bouncer to her. He followed her along the passage. Immediately she had entered the tiny bedroom and closed the door her face settled into troubled lines. Her hand by now should have been normal but it wasn’t. . . .

“Bouncer,” she whispered, “I don’t feel too good. And I’m a bit scared too!”

He cocked his head and protruded his pink tongue. Struck with a sudden thought Nan turned to the dressing table. In doing so she forgot Bouncer for a moment, felt his thick front paw crunch under her foot—but his usual complaining howl failed to come forth. Instead he merely moved to one side.

Nan looked at him strangely, then squatted down and called him to her.

“Bouncer, are *you* dead in parts too?” she breathed, and he licked her hand in reply. She thought for a moment, then tugging a pin from her blouse she pushed the point gently into the pad of Bouncer’s left foot, watching him keenly the while. He took no notice . . . With a deepening horror in her heart Nan drove the pin into her own numbed hand and saw it sticking firmly into the thumb surrounded by a tiny globule of blood. But reaction was totally dead. She had never even felt it.

“Bouncer,” she said slowly, feeling the color drain out of her face, “something is terribly wrong with both of us! Maybe that cactus *was* poisoned, after all! But we’re not going to tell Ron or Clay— Not yet. The effect might go off, then think what fools we’d look! ‘Sides, we don’t want anything to interfere with his happiness when he gets back to Earth, do we?”

Bouncer jumped to the bunk beside her as she slowly sat upon it. She cuddled him up under her arm, smiled gravely into his big, solemn looking face. . . .

All unaware of Nan’s private worries—for her queer ailment showed no signs of improvement as Earth swung nearer out of the void—Ron and Clay began to look forward eagerly to the arrival awaiting them.

The radio was in operation now and they had a pretty good idea of the welcome ahead of them. In New York City, apart from the civic authorities, there were gathered the scientific representatives of every land waiting to pay due homage to the pioneers. . . .

“Great, isn’t it?” Ron breathed, as he drove slowly down at last through Earth’s atmosphere. “If those television scenes we’ve had are any guide we’re going to get the biggest ovation ever. . . .”

“Yes, I guess we are,” Nan admitted, gazing moodily down on the ever swelling, detailing landscape.

“What’s wrong?” Ron demanded, clasping her dead right hand. “You’ve looked down in the mouth now for—ages. If it’s Calver Doone still biting you just forget it. We’ll take care of it. I suppose that *is* what’s worrying you?”

Nan seized on the excuse to give a quick nod of assent. In the back of her mind she was wondering if she ought to confess how ill she felt, how curiously lifeless her whole body was fast becoming. . . . Yet still the dim hope that she was only suffering from excessive space strain, which would soon pass away, held her back from utterance.

“To hell with Calver Doone!” Clay Reynolds snorted, as he saw Nan’s nod of assent. “If he starts anything he’ll get an answer—and damn quick!”

And at this precise moment Calver Doone was standing gazing through the window of his private office window on the 152nd floor of the Doone Building. In appearance he was rather different from the popular conception of a self-made financier and industrialist.

He was small, with narrow stoop-shoulders and a face as thin as an ax. In the lean, acid features and thin-lipped mouth there was something startlingly in common with a snake. It was the kind of face from which one instinctively averts the gaze.

“Look at it!” he breathed, in a voice white with anger. “Flags, bunting, ticker-tape, bands — Look well, gentlemen, for we’re not gazing so much on the birth of a new age as on the death of our own!”

Four men were grouped about him, specially summoned to observe this gala occasion. There was Grant Meadows, the oil multi-millionaire—lanky, square jawed, habitually silent; Rolinac, the thick-necked, big-stomached steel king; Pascal, the immaculate, vinegary banker; and Dilson, Chief of United European Air Lines, a light eyed little man with knobbly knuckles which he incessantly massaged with his palm.

It was queer how Doone, for all his smallness, seemed to dominate the group. An observer would have felt compelled to look mainly at this little figure with the narrow back standing with hunched shoulders before the window. Sunlight set his thin gray hair into a haloed mist on his small head.

“He ought never to have succeeded!” he breathed, thumping his clawlike fist on the window frame. “According to the telecast a moment ago he’s arrived back safely with several Martian specimens. His wife, and that engineer Clay Reynolds; all seem to be in good spirits. . . . The world has acclaimed space travel. That means that air-borne travel and commerce will be slowly superseded by the newer, faster medium.”

“But there will still be a need for air traffic!” Dilson, the Air Chief, said.

“Don’t be a damned fool!” Doone snarled at him. “A need, yes—but what sort of a need? This man Ron Dawlish has a super fuel, manufactured somehow from minerals. It puts gasoline right out of the picture. Hear that, Meadows?” Doone grinned malignantly at the oil man. “He uses a new metal for his firing cylinders, and platino bases for his ship’s plates. That wipes our steel out. Hear that, Rolinac? So, our three interlocked interests—airplanes, steel, and oil are wiped out by this scientist who is in truth a one-man industrial revolution. And you, Pascal, as our banker, will feel the pinch, too. . . .”

Doone clenched his hands behind his back. "Now you see why I called you here. We're heading for being a second-rate power in world affairs: in fact I can even foresee total bankruptcy! The State itself is behind this Ron Dawlish, and so is the Science Institute. Interplanetary travel and super-fast fuels have come to stay. In a few months Dawlish's Corporation will be established and it is going to be a miracle if Air Line shares are going to be worth the paper they're written on."

There was a grim, deadly silence for a moment as each man, ruthlessly ambitious, saw his security crumbling before the winds of advancing science.

The silence was broken at last by the gradual crescendo of a band coming down Wall Street. Presently, the procession passed down the center of the street amidst the snow of ticker tape and the cheers of the packed people.

"Look at 'em!" Doone growled, glaring down on the superb automobile in which sat Clay, Ron, and Nancy, and beside them again the President himself and the white-haired chief of the Science Institute.

"Makes one wish for a bomb," the oil man muttered, rubbing his square jaw speculatively.

"Something violent, anyway," agreed Rolinac, his stomach pressing against the window ledge as he leaned to look.

Then Doone turned back irritably into the office and as a matter of course the other men turned with him. Seating himself at his desk he looked at them each in turn.

"We have got to act," he said, his venomous mouth setting. "And quickly! Violence is only to be our last resort because by its use we can get too easily involved with the law. To begin with it seems it is a job for you, Pascal."

The banker looked surprised. "Me?"

"You will get agents on the job to cajole Ron Dawlish into parting with his formula. Never mind what you offer him, but *get* it. If that fails then try and work a partnership with our Corporation. Whatever happens we have got to know what that formula is, even if we only get a lease on it. Promise anything until we get it. When we *have* it the legal elimination of Dawlish can be arranged somehow."

The four heads nodded. After thinking for a moment or two Doone looked at the steel king.

"You control most of the country's steel output, Rolinac. Ron Dawlish will need it in big quantities to build his space ship factories. You will see to it that every hindrance short of getting at loggerheads with the State is put in the way of delivery. And when delivery has to take place I'm not particular if the steel isn't of a high-class grade. Understand? You, Meadows, will slow up all oil transactions. Dawlish will need oil in big quantities. He can't use anything except oil for trucks and Diesel engines."

The oil man nodded, but he looked troubled.

"What's wrong with you?" Doone asked harshly. "Afraid you may lose on the deal, or something?"

"Not exactly that. I was just thinking that Dawlish has mighty powerful influences back of him—even the President himself. We've got to be damned careful."

"I expect you to be," Doone retorted. "It's as much in your interests as everybody else's to see that Dawlish is smashed utterly—or if not that then to see that his formula is known to us as well as to himself. . . . As for you, Dilson, you'll launch the biggest publicity campaign ever, telling the masses that air travel is *proven* to be safe but that space travel is still experimental. Avoid the libel angle, but lay it on thick. Understand?"

“I get it,” Dilson nodded.

“And if these efforts fail?” the steel king asked.

“Then there are other ways.” Doone smiled thinly. “Forceful ways, which one way or another, will give us back the security we have got to have. . . .”

CHAPTER III

It was not long after the speechifying and feteing was over before Ron Dawlish began to feel the commercial pressures instigated by Doone—nor did he require much imagination to know the financier was back of them. But, aided as he was by Presidential and scientific support, he gradually succeeded, with Clay's help, in establishing the first of a series of spaceship factories. His actual headquarters were in New York itself. From here Ron controlled all the details, while Clay became the foreman of works.

Altogether, a couple of months after the return from Mars, Ron was feeling pretty satisfied with himself and fairly sure—so far at least—that he had beaten Calver Doone at his own game. Not that he had any illusions about Doone, however. . . .

"Whatever he does, Nan, he'll have to put a brake on his efforts," he said one evening, as he and the girl sat at dinner in the gathering summer twilight. "We've got all people for us and precious few against us—so he'll have to watch his step."

Nan nodded absently, but said nothing. Ron lowered his knife and fork for a moment and looked at her steadily.

"You look sort of tired, dear. Is this new place we took getting too large to handle?"

"With domestics and labor saving devices? Not a bit of it, Ron— Don't mind me. I'm still trying to get over that space trip. I think it upset my nerves a good deal."

"And I've been—and shall be—too busy to console you," Ron sighed. Then he shrugged. "So there it is! But there's a fortune to be made, and one has to put a lot of things on one side for that, eh?"

She smiled an assent, handled her knife and fork with hands which were totally dead. Instead of her queer condition improving, as she had once hoped, it had gone worse with the weeks, spreading further about her body every day. And still she had kept from worrying Ron, loaded up as he was with responsibilities. But she had made up her mind to make a move this very night if Ron went out again to catch up on work at headquarters. . . .

Which he did, fifteen minutes later. He kissed her white cheek gently.

"Take care of yourself, sweet," he said softly. "Get to bed early and catch up on some sleep. Maybe you'll feel better then. 'By, Bouncer. . . ."

Bouncer stirred slumbrously for a moment, then went to sleep again. Ron looked at him with a frown.

"Seems damned dopy these days. . . . Well, I'll be back somewhere around midnight."

Nan watched him go as she stood at the window—then the moment his roadster had vanished down the drive she had Clements drive her to Dr. Andrews, the family physician since her birth twenty-five years before. In the surgery he listened with a puzzled frown as she explained her symptoms.

"And it is progressive? It gets worse?" And as she nodded his frown deepened.

"I'm getting to the limit of endurance, Dr. Andrews," she said hopelessly. "You see, I don't know if it will end in death, or what. My arms and shoulders have been dead for weeks anyway, and now it is affecting my legs and feet. Yet the puzzling part is that I can use my limbs perfectly even though they have no sensation. I'm—I'm frightened; I really am!"

Andrews led her to a chair and switched on a battery of arcs. For a long time he examined her, testing reflexes, pulse, eyesight, hearing. At the end of it he was looking more puzzled

than ever.

“I just don’t understand it, Mrs. Dawlish,” he confessed. “In all my medical experience you are unique! You are perfectly normal despite your lack of sensation. I can only assume something or other—maybe this Martian cactus you speak of—is affecting your sensory nerves and rendering them inoperative. Certainly it isn’t a circulatory trouble. Your heartbeats and blood pressure are both normal.”

Nan got to her feet slowly. “I see,” she said quietly. “You can’t advise me, then?”

“I might if you cared to stay in my sanitarium for a week or so.”

“No, no, not that. I don’t want to upset my husband for one thing . . . and anyway I might get well again. Thanks just the same.”

Andrews held her coat for her, grasped the cold hand she held out. Thoughtful, bitter indeed, she pondered her strange malady as she was driven home. Still pondering, she entered the lounge—and came to a stop. For an instant she was shocked out of her own personal worries.

In the center of the rug, stirring in a kind of horrifying blind desperation, was Bouncer. Obviously he did not hear Nan’s approach, nor did he see her even though his blank, terrible eyes were fixed upon her. Fear streamed through her as she looked at him. It needed no more than a glance to see he was strangely, outrageously ill.

“Bouncer!” Nan’s hands went to her lips in terror. “Oh, Bouncer, what *is* the matter?”

Instinct perhaps advised him of her nearness. He whimpered pitifully, lifted one paw, then the other, in a stiff sort of effort to reach her. She hesitated, uncertain what to do—then whirling round she whipped open the French window and shooed him out into the garden.

Blindly, he loped out into the moonlight. Nan watched him fixedly, stunned by the sight of strong summer grass wilting into sear dryness everywhere he wandered. In no time the lawn was streaked in a crazy patchwork of withered trails as though Death himself had walked there.

For a long time Nan could not rouse herself to grasp the situation. Her own symptoms, she knew, were identical with those of poor Bouncer, except for the fact that she, being stung much later by the Martian cactus, would naturally receive the effects with corresponding latency. But surely to God it didn’t mean that she was to become a blind, desperate thing like Bouncer, stunned of all normal faculties and so diseased that everything living around instantly withered?

Dry lipped, she turned away—and it was at that very moment that her own sensations reached a climax. The moonlit grounds seemed to swirl dizzily as she was struck by a hammer blow of pain in the head. All sense of remaining feeling left her and she crashed helplessly to the carpet. . . .

It was as though she were dead. All sight, hearing, movement, and sensation had ceased. And yet she was alive, fully aware of the fact that she had fallen and was in the grip of an iron paralysis. Then at last—she knew not how long after—there came a change. For the first time since the deadly malady had manifested itself she was conscious of returning sensation. It flowed like a steadily swelling tide through her veins. She knew once again that she had arms and legs and nerves. . . .

Hearing, sight, smell; they crept back upon her. She stirred a little, became aware of the fact that Bouncer was standing right beside her, licking her face furiously.

“Bouncer!” she whispered, clutching him. “Oh, Bouncer, isn’t it wonderful? We’re well again—!”

She sat up, gradually got to her feet and stood thinking. Bouncer headed for the garden again and Nan’s eyes followed to where he had left those trails of destruction. She hesitated, reached out towards the bowl of full blown roses on the table.

She grasped one of them. . . . It withered into brown petals!

Suddenly there blazed across her mind the remembrance of a Martian inscription—“To Him to Whom Eternal Life is Given, He an Outcast Shall Become!” It was as though the truth had been yelled at her.

“Bouncer,” she said slowly, as he came back to her, “you and me are alike! We don’t hurt each other because we’ve each got the same complaint, whatever it is— We’ve got to go away quickly, and find out what’s wrong. Ron mustn’t see us—mustn’t touch us. . . .”

She turned away quickly, reached for notepaper in the bureau. She wrote a brief note, left it with the manservant before he had the chance to contact her in any way, then she went up to her room and hastily packed some clothes. Only one other thing she included—the vacuum phial full of cactus needles which she had retained from her Martian adventure. . . .

Ron Dawlish had completed his job of going over the plans for the next day’s production schedule with Clay Reynolds, when the phone rang. Ron reached for it.

“Yeah? Dawlish speaking.”

The voice from the other end was not a familiar one. Not only did Ron hear it in the receiver but Clay also through the relay speaker. His big, powerful face darkened as he listened.

“You won’t know me, Dawlish, but that’s beside the point. I’m just going to give you a little word of warning. You must be pretty well aware by now that certain factions are not going to allow you to exert absolute monopoly over that space fuel of yours.”

“Why not call the ‘certain factions’ Calver Doone and done with it?” Ron snapped, looking significantly at Clay across the desk.

“Names are dangerous, Dawlish—on both sides. Up to now you have been smart enough to dodge a commercial embargo on your oil and steel supplies, and you’ve turned down the highest money offers for your formula. That was foolish of you, for any further obstinacy on your part is going to cost you dear.”

“Listen, you—” Ron began savagely; but he was interrupted.

“You listen to me! You’ve a lot of power on your side; that’s freely admitted, but most men start to squeal when their personal friends and relatives suffer.”

“What in hell are you driving at?” Ron roared.

“I’ll make it as plain as possible. Either you agree to enter into partnership with Strat-American Airways Corporation by midnight—that is in forty minutes—or things will start happening which will bring you such anguish of mind you’ll be begging to surrender within a week! Forty minutes, Dawlish. I’ll ring you back.”

The line went dead. Ron stared bewilderedly at the receiver, then he slammed it back on its rest. Suddenly his fury exploded.

“Of all the damned, infernal impudence! Who in hell does he think he is, anyway? He can’t get away with it, Clay! We’ll have the authorities put the finger on Doone and Strat-American Airways before they know where they are—”

“How?” Clay demanded grimly. “We haven’t an atom of proof beyond that phone call. Not a single thing we can pin on Doone personally even though we know he’s back of it. But that warning was meant in earnest all right—and we’ve got to heed it.”

“Like hell!”

Clay’s big hand clutched Ron’s arm across the desk.

“Listen, Ron, come to earth! We’ve got to think of something whereby we can gain time. Doone has agents everywhere—possibly even amongst our own staff. We can’t tell—”

“Oh don’t talk like an idiot!” Ron said hotly. He sprang to his feet and paced around savagely. Presently he stopped at the window and gazed out on the lighted canyon below. “One would think you want me to comply with Doone’s wishes,” he muttered. “I’d never have thought it of you, Clay.”

Clay got up and came over to him, swung him round.

“You know me better than that, Ron. I said we’d got to gain time. Stall. Promise anything!”

“But why the devil should I? I’m out to fight Doone, not to kowtow to him. Do you think I care what he does to me?”

“I wasn’t thinking of you. I’m thinking of Nan, for one thing—even myself for another. I’m not scared of anything Doone can do, but my elimination would lose you one trusted overseer, and well you know it.”

“Wait a minute,” Ron said wonderingly. “Do you think for one moment that Doone would dare to drag Nan into this—”

“Dare!” Clay laughed shortly. “He’d jump at the chance! He is too snaky to wipe you out personally, and besides that wouldn’t do him any good because you’ve got the formula he wants. . . . That agent of his on the phone promised you plenty of anguish— That means making you comply because all those nearest and dearest to you will suffer if you don’t! So—stall! Give Nan warning to leave town and hide somewhere; give me time to get on my guard— Then we’ll pay Doone back in his own coin.”

“I get it,” Ron nodded, calming. “Sorry I blew up on you, Clay. For that matter there’s nothing to stop me telling Nan right now to get away somewheres. Sooner she’s on the way to safety the sooner my hands are untied.”

He turned back to the phone and depressed the home number tally button. It was the voice of Meadows, the manservant, which answered.

“Oh, hallo there, Meadows? Sorry to get you up. Ask Mrs. Dawlish to com to the phone, will you?”

“I’m sorry, sir, that’s impossible. Mrs. Dawlish has left—on a sudden visit, I gathered.”

Clay looked in surprise towards the loud speaker.

“Left? For where?” Ron asked blankly.

“I don’t know, sir. She left a letter for you and instructed me to see that you got it.”

“Oh,” Ron said, thinking. “Well, all right. I’ll see to it.”

He rang off and clenched his fist. “Clay, this can only mean one thing. Somehow she must have got wind of danger and cleared off anyway.”

“I suppose so,” Clay nodded slowly. “But it’s queer she did not ring you up here.”

“Not altogether. She never disturbs me if she can help it. Yes, that’s it right enough,” Ron went on. “And it means that my hands are untied far quicker than I had expected. If you are ready for anything that might happen I’m going to tell this agent of Doone’s to go to the devil when he rings back again.”

Clay nodded a silent assent. After that he and Ron waited in comparative silence until the stipulated forty minutes had finally expired. Right on the tick the bell rang.

“Well, Dawlish, have you decided?”

“Yes, I’ve decided,” Ron answered bitterly. “You can tell Doone I’m not afraid of him, you, or any of the damned set-up. See?”

“You’re a fool, Dawlish, as you’ll very soon find out—”

Ron cut him off savagely and got to his feet.

“I’m through listening to those kind of threats,” he snapped, getting into his hat and coat. “I’d better be getting home and see what kind of a note Nan left for me— What are you going to do?”

“Stay here,” Clay shrugged. “Way things are looking it seems advisable to me for one or other of us to be on duty all the time. We’ve a fight on our hands now, Ron. Doone will strain every nerve.”

Ron nodded slowly, tightened his lips. “Okay—I’ll be here by seven in the morning—and watch out for yourself.”

With that he left and hurried out to his car. Inside ten minutes he was home, followed by the berobed and tousled manservant into the lounge. He handed over the letter Nan had written.

“Mrs. Dawlish left no other instruction than that I hand you this, sir,” he said.

“Um,” Ron said moodily, tearing the flap. “Anybody call or ring up my wife during the evening?”

“Not to my knowledge, Mr. Dawlish.”

“Okay. You can get back to bed.”

“Thank you, sir. Good night.”

Ron didn’t answer: he was too busy reading the letter—

“Dear Ron:

I know you’ll forgive me, but I feel an urge to go away and rest up a bit. My nerves, as you know, have not been so good ever since we got back from Mars, and I feel I must rest. I’ll stay at an hotel somewhere in the country: I’ll have to let you know the address later on. I’ve taken Bouncer with me for company. Please don’t mind, will you?

“Anyway, you’ll have busy days ahead of you and maybe you will get along quicker if you know I’m trying to recuperate myself. . .

“Always yours,

“Nan.”

“Queer,” Ron muttered to himself, frowning. “But probably I’m worrying over nothing. Doesn’t sound here as though she got any hints about Doone. Must be just coincidence . . .”

He thought for a moment. She had not explained why she had not used the phone. She hardly could, considering she had not wanted to argue the matter of her going. But it baffled Ron just the same.

At last he shoved the note in his pocket and stood staring at the rose bowl, plucked out the dead one and wondered why Meadows had not seen it. Odd for that one rose to be dead and the rest of them flourishing . . .

Then as he stood twirling it in his fingers the phone rang. In a moment his troubled face lighted up. He lifted the receiver.

“Yes, yes, that you, Nan—?” Then he stopped and gave a grunt as the voice of the night watchman came over the wire from his city headquarters.

“You’d better come over at once, Mr. Dawlish. Something awful has gone and happened. It’s Mr. Reynolds, sir. He’s gone and fallen down the elevator shaft and—”

“He *what?*” Ron shouted hoarsely, coming to life and clutching the phone tightly. “What did you say?”

“I don’t rightly know what happened, Mr. Dawlish. I was in the office doing a bit of tidying up when Mr. Reynolds got a call to go over to the factory. He said he’d come right away and went for the elevator. Next thing I heard was a scream— I found the elevator was at the top floor. Somebody must have planned it.”

“Did you call the police?” Ron asked dully.

“No, sir. Matter of fact I didn’t know what to do. I found Mr. Reynolds lying dead so I rang you up and—”

“All right,” Ron interrupted him. “I’ll be right over.”

CHAPTER IV

Walter Moorland, the real estate dictator of Newingham, a village “somewhere” outside of the city’s boundaries, was distinctly puzzled by the woman in the veil who, accompanied by a Scotch terrier on a leash, arrived in his office the moment it was open the following morning.

“Good morning, madam!” He held out a cordial hand, tried not to look slighted when it was ignored. With eyebrow raised he tried to pierce the veil to the features beyond. All he could see was a worn face and alabaster-white complexion.

“You have a villa for sale with six acres of land—just down the main road? Or rather just off it . . .”

“That’s right, madam. I can assure you it is—”

“I’m not interested in the sales talk, thanks. What’s the price?”

“Two thousand dollars.”

“Have the deed of sale drawn up immediately,” Nan said. “I’ll write you out a check.”

She pulled off her gloves and Moorland found himself gazing fascinatedly at her hands. Dead white they were, superbly manicured, but totally bloodless. Except for their smoothness he could have said they were the hands of a corpse.

“I have not much time,” Nan said, looking up momentarily from writing the check.

“Eh? Oh, I’m sorry.” Moorland came to himself with a start, busied himself with the details of the deed. Within ten minutes, bar the official stamping, the negotiation was complete. Moorland studied the check.

“Is the name—Dawlish?” he asked finally.

“Nancy Dawlish,” Nan acknowledged. “Heard it before?”

“Somewheres, I think . . .” Moorland shrugged. “Not that it matters. I’ll get you the keys . . .”

He brought them over from a pegged board and held them out. Nan said briefly,

“Drop them on the desk, please.”

Staring at her he complied, then his jaw sagged a little as he noticed something. In reaching for them Nan’s costume sleeve brushed the fresh sweet peas on top of the desk. For some incredible reason they all turned black, then wilted into dryness. It was the most astounding thing Moorland had ever seen. Nan had seen it too and frowned in annoyance at herself. Then she straightened up and put the keys in her handbag. Her voice was quite composed.

“Thanks, Mr. Moorland. There is just one other thing . . .”

“Yes?” he whispered, staring at her in sober wonderment.

“If anybody should inquire as to my whereabouts—though I don’t altogether expect it—you know nothing of me.”

“Yes, yes, madam—of course. But look, can’t I show you round the villa—?”

“Thank you, no. I’ve seen it already through the windows . . . Good morning.”

Again Moorland found his proffered hand ignored, but as he pulled the door open for her fingers, reaching for the knob, inadvertently touched his wrist. With a terrific effort he mastered a scream, smiled her out from a deadly pale face.

When he looked at his wrist a moment later the back of it had three white spots where she had touched him—spots ice cold to the tapping of his other hand. Ice cold and feelingless. He

stared after her as she went down the pathway, then his gaze swung to the dead sweet peas . . . Suddenly he realized he was wet with perspiration. Death had come into his little office this morning—

Within three days Nan had her villa duly furnished and fitted out, and everywhere she had been her strange manner and deliberate avoidance of contacting anybody had been noticeable. Only when at last she had settled in the place and locked the doors on the outer world did she feel safe, and for that matter able to fully analyze the strange sensation that had been governing her ever since her recovery from the initial paralysis. To Bouncer she summed things up, and with a solemn black face he sat and listened.

“Bouncer, I think we know now what the Martians meant, don’t we?” she whispered, stroking his head and staring moodily out of the window onto the countryside. “Only you and I can touch each other and still live—but to other living things, human, animal, or vegetable, we’re deadliest poison . . . We’re outcasts Bouncer. Eternal but damned!”

She smiled faintly. “Odd to think that we can live forever—and yet because of that very fact we must never touch anybody, never contact a living thing. But because we suffer from the same thing we’re immune from each other . . .” Nan’s face saddened as she thought of Ron. “Never, never must I see him again, Bouncer. That would mean his death . . .”

She stopped, reflecting. Once again she was swept by unfathomable emotions, those same emotions she had noticed so often lately. At first, upon her initial recovery from the paralysis, they had been unformed stirrings in her consciousness—dim, complex glimpses of a vast and overwhelming science. As she had been then, terrified at her physical condition, it had signified but little—but now she had realized the crushing fact that she and Bouncer were eternal outcasts in a world of the living she felt it was imperative to encourage these enigmatic conceptions struggling to be born.

Perhaps a heritage of some kind—a Martian heritage? As yet she did not know. The main obsession in her mind at the moment was to determine *why* she was eternal, and if possible find a way to neutralize the terrifying bequest. Eternality, at the price of bringing death to everything else that lived, was the crudest, most terrible of jests. If it came to that, why *did* she bring death to those that lived if her heritage was eternal life?

Her thoughts moved on to the realization that she needed a laboratory. If indeed eternity *was* her heritage, there were many scientific occupations with which she would have to fill up her lonely life.

Turning, she picked up the telephone directory, looked up the numbers of the nearest construction companies . . .

For nearly two weeks after the death of Clay Reynolds, which Ron had not the least doubt had been deliberately engineered—though it was impossible for him to find the exact culprit—there was a continuous series of mysterious happenings which came close to driving Ron to distraction.

In the first space ship factory which was under construction there was constant sabotage and bad workmanship. Time and again steel girders collapsed without warning, bringing a gradually mounting death roll among the workers. This in turn precipitated unrest, and in some cases blank refusal to work at all. Desperately Ron argued with the men but got little satisfaction; nor was it a matter which he could refer to the State for the workers had powerful labor combines on their side who fully supported their complaints.

On top of this things began to go wrong with the transports. One half of them found their gasoline tanks full of “treated” spirit. The great storage tanks were immediately examined and found to be full of doctored fuel.

Bitter, grim, Ron sent for the works manager. He had taken the place vacated by the highly efficient Clay and Ron had felt at the initial interview that he was the right man for the task—big, husky, genial, intelligent . . .

He looked rather puzzled as he faced the haggard Ron across the desk.

“Look here, Benson, where did you buy that latest consignment of steel?” Ron demanded.

“Why, from Rolinac’s Syndicate, sir.”

Ron leaped up. “What! What the devil do you mean by taking things into your own hands in this fashion? Didn’t I give you implicit instructions to get all steel from Meredith’s?”

Benson was silent, his square jaw firming.

“And the gasoline?” Ron barked. “That, I suppose you got from Meadows’ Oil Company?”

Benson shrugged. “Only because they’re both the biggest men in the business. So I thought—”

“Your job is to act, not think! You’d better come clean, Benson, and admit that you’re in the employ of Calver Doone—that you are here with the express intention of trying to wreck my space ship projects. That’s right, isn’t it?” Ron reached out and caught the works’ manager by the lapel of his overall.

“Okay, it’s right.” He grinned cynically. “And we’re making a pretty good job of it, aren’t we?”

Ron snatched his hand away. “Get out!” he blazed. “And stay out!”

Benson shrugged, then with a grim smile silently departed. For a moment or two Ron glared at the closed door bitterly, then sat down again at his desk. For several minutes he sat thinking, brows down, faced with ticklish problems. The worries connected with trying to start his space ship factories were legion—but back of his mind was a greater anxiety—the peculiar silence of Nan after her promise to send him further word.

So thick and fast had his troubles piled upon him he had hardly noticed the lapse of time. Surely she must have found an hotel by *now*? Two weeks! That she hadn’t sent him a single word or even phoned him was the oddest thing out. More, it was alarming. Perhaps a matter for the police—

“Excuse me, Mr. Dawlish—”

“Well, what is it?” He looked up with a start as a clerk came in.

“There’s a Mr. Doone to see you, sir—”

“Calver Doone!”

“Do you mind so much, Mr. Dawlish?” Doone himself came in behind the clerk, hands clasped tightly behind his back. He only unclasped them to take off his hat and gloves.

“You can get out,” he said, to the hesitant clerk.

“That might apply just as well to you, Doone,” Ron said, glaring at him.

Doone’s response was to sit down. He leaned back in the chair with an acid smile.

“Suppose we get down to business, Mr. Dawlish? I think that there is little doubt that I have you just where I want you.”

“Yeah?” Ron gave a grim smile. “Killing off Clay Reynolds and fixing a phony works’ manager isn’t the end of the world, Doone.”

Doone was silent while he lighted a cigarette.

"I was lucky enough to find out about your phony dealing in time," Ron went on savagely. "Inside two hours I'll have my own steel company—Meredith's—back on the job, and my tanks will be emptied and filled with first-grade gasoline."

"Somehow," Doone said calmly, "I think you're going to be disappointed."

"Meaning what?"

"I realized that I left too many loopholes before, my friend. There were too many independent sources from which you could buy steel and oil, too many sources from which to get the resources for space ship building. So I decided it would be worth my while to use every influence I possess to secure controlling interests in all concerns likely to be of use to you. I confess it has been an expensive job, but well worth the investment. By tomorrow at the latest the final ratification of a giant merger will take place."

"By God, Doone, if you mean—"

"I mean, Mr. Dawlish, that you are powerless!" the financier snapped. "Though the final signature will not be given until tomorrow the merger is in force and you cannot get away from its influence! Oil, steel, and base metal industries are nominally unchanged so far as outside orders are affected—but where *your* contracts are concerned *special* attention will be given. Do I make myself clear?"

Doone leaned forward and slapped a thin hand on the desk. "You are cornered, Dawlish! You will only get the right materials and smoothly executed contracts when you cooperate with me—not until! And it isn't just me that you are fighting now but the commercial dictators of the day."

"Of which you are the supreme one," Ron breathed, clenching his fists. "Everybody knows you are pretty well the master mind that tells Wall Street what to do. Well, you're not getting that formula of mine! I'll get through if I have to drill for my own gasoline, mine my own ores, and build the factories nail by nail. I didn't brave a space ship journey to Mars just to hand the formula to you. When a Space Corporation comes into being *I* will be the President of it. Make no mistake!"

"This is all very futile with the commercial giants against you, Dawlish."

"Not so foolish with the President and the Science Institute backing my project. This isn't a two-cent discovery, Doone: it is the biggest thing since man learned to fly."

"I know," Doone said grimly. "Why else do you think I am spending millions to crush you? If you succeed, I collapse. I'm fighting for my life."

"If you and your commercial cronies were anything like men of vision instead of public-frisking moneymakers, I'd agree to compromise," Ron snapped. "But I'll have no truck with men who use murder and sabotage as their weapons. . . ."

Doone reflected. "Clay Reynolds died, didn't he? That was a personal blow to you. It would be most unfortunate if the same thing were to happen—to another even dearer to you. . . ."

Ron stared at the snakelike eyes. Nan! Of course! What an idiot he had been not to have seen it before. Gone away for her nerves indeed! Of course Doone had been behind her disappearance. No wonder she had sent no word. Somehow he had forced her to write that letter and—

"So you are responsible!" Ron blazed, leaping up. "You dirty, cheap gangster! *You* kidnapped my wife to force my hand!"

It said much for Doone's imperturbability that he made instant use of the obvious mistaken conclusion.

"I warned you, didn't I?" he said gravely. "Or rather I *had* you warned that worse blows might befall you. At the moment your wife is safe. Her continued well being depends entirely on you."

Ron beat his fist on the desk. "At least give me time to think about it!"

"But why?" Time was the last thing Doone could grant in case the mistake was discovered. "I've shown you what I can do, and what I will continue to do. Either you surrender that formula to me *now*, or you'll never hear of your wife again and your potential Corporation will never materialize."

Ron hesitated, then with a hopeless gesture he turned to the private safe in the wall. . . .

CHAPTER V

In two weeks events had moved swiftly for Nan also. Though she had not understood at the time *why* she had such scientific powers, she certainly had had no difficulty in using them. First she had set about gratifying her longing to see the outer world by constructing a tele-detector. Tuned to the electrical aura of any human being it automatically contacted any desired person the moment its detector beam was switched on.

To build the instrument, once she had ordered the components from various electrical firms, had taken her only three days. Immediately she had directed the X-ray-like beam towards Ron's headquarters in the city and finally, picking him up, had noted his aura frequency. From then on the instrument had—and would—pick him up the moment it operated. . . .

For several days it had worried Nan to see and know of his anxieties on her account, to hear his words of harassment—but still dead silence on her part was necessary if she was to keep him away from his own destruction.

Most of her time she sat watching and listening to his shadow self on the big screen. At other times she took a bit of exercise on the land at the back with Bouncer; or else she studied the cactus barbs which had brought her and the dog to such a strange pass. . . . And, with her newly conferred knowledge, she began not only to understand the nature of the barbs but the cause of her condition. When she finally withdrew a drop of blood from her finger and studied it she knew her deductions were right.

"Bouncer," she said, on the evening two weeks after they had fled from home, "I know what's wrong with us. . . . In a world as barren as Mars and devoid of all water vapor, the only vegetation that could survive must be of the evergreen variety, its inner chemical structure breaking down the molecules in the dry sand and transforming them into a substance capable of supporting life—just the same way as an earthly plant breaks down poisonous nitrates and turns them into stimulants. . . ."

"It is possible—in fact probable—that the Martians realized that if a plant had the power of achieving eternal life on a dying planet, so might a human being—or at least a flesh and blood being. The Martians must have utilized the plant sap and then discovered, too late, its effect on the flesh and blood system. . . ."

Nan paused and thought for a moment, then went on absently,

"You see, Bouncer, I think we may assume the Martians were flesh and blood like we of Earth, only with different anatomies. At any rate, I think their bloodstream must have corresponded with ours. See this drop of milky white on the microscope slide? It's my blood, Bouncer—and yours must look the same. The red corpuscles have been destroyed. Normally that would lead to extreme anemia, even death, and it was while this process was going on that we lost all sensation. But the poison of the Martian cactus supplied something else in place of the red corpuscles—a colorless fluid which is immensely powerful and readily assimilates into the bloodstream, finally turning the blood into a fluid incapable of deterioration. Because of that, ketabolism is absent and cellular breakdown cannot occur. The body is literally filled with the elixir of life. . . ."

Nan stopped, and with a sad smile fondled the dog's head.

“But for the gift of eternity there is a dreadful price—one which the Martians discovered, hence their warning over that archway. You see, Nature must have a balance. Birth, maturity, and decay are the law of the physical world. Eternity is an outrage on Nature. All things live, Bouncer, because they are interdependent one on another. A living unit—an *ordinary* living unit—cannot exist unto itself: that is a fundamental law of science. And if living things are brought into contact with something which is possessed of full life-force—like you and me—the immense shock does not stimulate, it destroys! Just as some radiations are stimulating in small quantities and deadly in large quantities. The plants themselves had only their needles with which to transmit the deadly force, so we were not killed by it, but absorbed it.

“But we have our whole bodies radiating it. We stimulate all living things into instant death. Now we know what is meant by that Martian inscription. . . . And my scientific knowledge? At first I suspected it was some kind of heritage. Now I know differently. The brain, Bouncer, is fed by the bloodstream. According to the quality of that stream the brain is keen or dull. But now your brain and mine is fed with a non-deteriorating fluid, sharpening them in every respect. Normally I was a fair scientist: with this new bloodstream I am almost a genius. I am capable of learning and mastering problems that would have been beyond my capacity before. In time, Bouncer, as years go on, I may become the greatest scientist that ever lived. . . . And why not indeed, with all eternity in which to accomplish it . . . ?

“But we face a terrible ordeal, Bouncer,” Nan sighed. “To be separated forever from living beings. . . . What is there left throughout eternal life but to study and master the mysteries of science? Thereby we might find the way to either the blessed touch of a human being, or maybe . . . death.”

With a fatalistic shrug she turned and switched on the tele-detector. In a moment or two Ron became visible. Nan started to attention as she saw Calver Doone seated opposite to him at the desk.

“. . . you are responsible!” Ron shouted. “You dirty, cheap gangster! *You* kidnapped my wife to force my hand!”

Nan watched and listened grimly to the words exchanged. She got up with a futile cry of warning as Ron went over to his wall safe and tossed down his precious formula into the desk.

“Well, there it is, Doone,” he snapped. “I’ll risk anything and I’ll face anything—except the chance of my wife’s death or injury. You found the Achilles Heel, damn you!”

Doone picked up the formula, surveyed it, and nodded.

“You’re a sensible man, Dawlish. But I won’t be hard on you. I suggest a partnership—”

“Yeah, with you in control? Nothing doing! I shall found my own organization and you yours. Whoever gets the biggest space service has their own ingenuity to thank. . . .”

“No,” Nan whispered. “No, Ron, not that! You’re just ruining yourself— You know you are!”

She stood helplessly for a moment, picked up the phone, then hesitated. The number could be traced. She turned, bundled on her hat and coat, and raced from the villa with Bouncer at her heels. In five minutes she had reached a call box and dialed hurriedly.

In his office Ron broke off his conversation with Doone to lift the receiver. He sat listening, Doone watching the expressions chasing across his face.

“But where *are* you?” Ron demanded at last. “I’ve been trying to trace you. Even the bank wouldn’t help because your separate account is wrapped in mystery— Hey, wait a minute—!”

He broke off savagely, joggled the rest. Then suddenly flinging the phone down he reached over the desk and grabbed Doone by the collar, yanked him out of his chair. With his free hand he whipped the formula from the financier's breast pocket.

"Clever, weren't you?" he asked furiously. "That was my wife on the phone. You *didn't* kidnap her. I jumped to conclusions . . ."

"You're only a bit ahead of time that's all," Doone said dryly. "I'll get her somehow, Dawlish, I promise you—"

"My wife is safe," Ron interrupted. "Though she is absent for a reason I don't understand. You haven't got my formula and you won't ever get the chance again . . . Now get out!"

For a long moment Doone hesitated, then he turned and left. Once he got home he spent an hour in his library finishing off new plans of attack and the final details of his merger on the morrow. Then he retired to bed.

It was towards two in the morning when he fancied he heard a noise in his magnificent bedroom. Sharply, he sat up, reached for the bedside lamp and switched it on.

The sudden glare revealed a dead white hand reaching towards him from the shadows back of his bed. He fancied that for a moment he caught a glimpse of a veiled face and heard the sullen growling of a dog—

Then the hand gripped his wrist. Consciousness, life, all conception of things, streamed out of him in a tide . . .

Ron stayed at his headquarters for the rest of the night, laying plans just as Doone had done for defending himself against the attacks which would undoubtedly be launched against him commercially. He needed a fresh and trusted foreman, contact with oil and steel companies who had escaped the full sweep of Doone's brush—These, he felt, were problems which could be best solved by appealing for State aid. In any case this was still a secondary anxiety. Nan was the real trouble. He *had* to find her.

He tried to trace her phone call, but since it had been on the automatic this was impossible. Regardless of the fact that it was early morning he rang up all her friends in the hope of getting a clue. All he did get were grumbles for being so inconsiderate.

Finally, when dawn had come, he gave it up for the time being. He had a shave, got into his car, then went out to breakfast. When he opened the morning paper he suddenly found the worst problem of his life lying solved before his eyes.

The headlines in themselves were enough—THREE MAGNATES DIE!

Astounded, his breakfast forgotten, he read the columns. There was a wealth of sensational detail, but the main facts which stood out were that Doone; Rolinac, the steel king; and Meadows, the oil czar, had all died during the night. Struck by the coincidence of the deaths, the police had investigated. Apparently death in each case was due to heart failure—but why had each victim a leprous white mark on his wrist? Foul play?

At any rate the police were anxious to trace a veiled woman with a Scotch terrier whom Officer 796 had followed from the oil king's residence to Newingham village outskirts, then he'd lost sight of her in the mists . . .

"Nan!" Ron whispered stupidly. "It must be her—with Bouncer. But what in God's name has she been up to. . . ?"

The fact that his chief enemies had been wiped out, and before that merger could be ratified, was purely the background to the much greater riddle of Nan. Newingham village?

Ron set about his breakfast hurriedly, called the waitress to him and got the whereabouts of the village from her.

Ten minutes later he was heading in his car out of the city. Now and again, as he dodged in and out of the traffic, he wondered if the big blue sedan in his rear was merely taking the same road by chance. His wonder deepened into suspicion when he swept along the quiet road leading to the open country.

All the way the car followed at a respectable distance, and to dodge it was impossible if he was to find Newingham. When at last he did arrive he pulled up outside the post office. All inquiry concerning Nan drew blank.

“But of course,” the postmaster added, “you might try Moorland, the house agent . . .”

Ron did, and by skillful pumping learned all he needed to know, even about the wilted flowers. It brought recollections of a dead rose to his mind, and with it a profound bewilderment. Something was decidedly wrong somewhere.

Jumping into his car he drove on again. About two miles down the road, Moorland had said. Or rather just off the road itself in a side lane— And immediately that blue sedan came into view once more on Ron’s rear mirror. He put on speed, but couldn’t shake it off, then he forgot all about it for the moment as the house he wanted loomed into view, almost isolated in fields.

Bumping and bounding his car went speeding along a rough path. As he came nearer he could see a slim figure outside the villa, playing with a dog. Suddenly she must have seen him for she stopped and looked up—

Ron put on speed, only to find he was nearly involved in a collision as the blue sedan put on a sudden spurt and swerved right across his track. He jammed on the brakes and waited grimly. Four men, each armed with revolvers, tumbled out of the blue car and came walking towards him.

“Okay, Dawlish,” the leader said, through the open side window; “the ride’s over. Out you get!”

Powerless to do otherwise Ron obeyed, found the gun jabbed in his ribs.

“Time to settle accounts, feller,” the trigger man explained. “Somehow you managed to get Doone, then you wiped out the oil and steel men just to make yourself safe. You had a woman do it according to the police. Our orders from Doone’s agents were to see where the woman was and then get the pair of you, see? That’s why we followed you . . . And I guess that’s her, eh?”

Ron glanced up in a mixture of relief and alarm as he saw Nan and Bouncer coming slowly along the dusty lane. He stared at her. Her deathly white pallor; how strange she looked . . .

“Better finish this guy before he warns her,” one of the men said, and brought up his gun. Before Ron had the slightest chance to utter a word, savage anguish tore into his chest. It came again, with even more excruciating force . . .

He dropped into the dust, groaning.

“Hey Slug, I don’t like this,” whispered the one who’d taken aim and fired at the girl. “She don’t seem to be hurt—”

“You’re not aiming straight, that’s why,” Slug retorted. “I got this guy didn’t I?” He kicked the prostrate Ron, then steadying his own revolver he fired point blank at the oncoming girl.

In fact he fired twice in quick succession, and he knew he was too good a marksman to miss . . . but still she came on.

“Hell!” he whispered dazedly, his throat dry; then with a sudden premonition of the supernatural he dived for the car with his fellow gangsters beside him. The girl had just reached the car door as Slug jammed his foot on the accelerator and drove hell for leather down the lane towards the roadway.

Nan stared at the settling cloud of dust, then back to where Ron was weakly beckoning her.

“Nan dearest—give me a hand!”

She came nearer and looked down upon him tensely, holding Bouncer away by his collar. Ron stared up through pain-glazed eyes.

“Nan, what is it? What have I done? Why don’t you help me—?”

“Oh, Ron, I dare not! Don’t you understand? I dare not touch you—nor dare Bouncer. If only I’d had the tele-detector on I’d have known you were coming this way and would have left—. But I never even guessed. We’re outcasts, Ron. Eternal—and deadly!”

“I don’t get it,” he said huskily, clutching his reddened shirt front.

The story came from her in a torrent. At the end of it Ron was deathly silent, gulping for breath at intervals. Then he essayed words again.

“Looks like the Martian—trip didn’t do us—much good, eh?” He gave a ghastly smile. “You became an outcast and I got death.”

“No, Ron, you can’t—”

“I’m a gonner, Nan,” he said in a whisper. “A pity, because the path is clear now that you bumped off Doone and his cronies— Nan, you’ve got to take it on. You must! Build up an interstellar empire. Somehow! Despite this deadly ailment of yours . . . Promise—promise me you will.”

“I will, somehow,” she said quietly.

He relaxed. “Good. I—I thought I could count on you. And—with eternity you can make—a grand job of it. Only one thing more— A kiss! I beg of you! I can’t stand this any more . . .”

She hesitated, then came forward and went on her knees, her face close to his.

“Let me die with that sweet memory,” he muttered.

She stooped until her lips touched his. When, a moment later, she looked down on the white, cold being in the dust she realized more clearly than ever before that the future was hers alone, to mold scientifically to her will . . .

[The end of *Outcasts of Eternity* by John Russell Fearn (as Polton Cross)]