

Roadways of Mars

Harl Vincent

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Roadways of Mars

By Harl Vincent

This is a Martian story by Harl Vincent who ranks as one of the great favorites of our readers. There is plenty of adventure in it and some nice, little bits of astronomical science. If we said too much we would be killing the story so we leave our readers to work out its intricacies for themselves.

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CHAPTER I

Into the Drylands

Swerving sharply from the main roadway along Canal Pyramus, the glistening nickel-cobalt surface of a narrow and seldom-used branch stretched out into the desert. Bob Coleman, leaning forward in his seat beside the Martian operator of the government ronsal, looked out over the smooth ribbon of metal that unrolled so swiftly beneath them.

"How much farther, Dako?" he asked.

"About six linis—hardly ten minutes of time as counted by your terrestrial chronometer."* The coppery-skinned Martian replied in the respectful, unhurried drawl of his kind, but his pale eyes never left the roadway before them nor his hands the controls of the vehicle which sped through the thin air a few feet from the surface of the track.

* The Martian day is slightly longer than that of the earth, the planet Mars rotating on its axis once in 24 hours 37 minutes of earth time. This longer day is divided into 30 derlinis, and each derlini into 30 linis. 900 linis comprising one Martian day, the lini is thus equivalent to approximately 1.64 minutes. The smallest time division of the Martian clocks, known as the zut, is

the hundredth part of a lini and is therefore almost exactly equal to a second of time as measured by terrestrial chronometers.

They spoke in Sol-ido, the simplified tongue of twenty-first century interplanetary travelers. And the words that had passed between them since leaving Risapar, capital of the Canal Cities Union of Mars, were few in number. Neither man was of talkative disposition.

Bob turned his head and gazed through the glass partition which separated them from the passenger compartment. With satisfaction he observed that his own men, eight in number and Americans all, were in cheerful spirits, though keenly regardful of the parched drylands that spread beneath the elevated roadway. The five Martian police officers who had accompanied them from Risapar, lolled in their cushioned chairs, somnolent, and with bronzed features relaxed. But Bob knew they could be relied upon in an emergency.

It was more than he had bargained for, this missionary jaunt into the most dangerous province of the drylands. But now he was in it, he would see the thing through to the finish. And who in his position would not? Taking the long rocket trip from the earth to Mars, he had come as a free-lance, transportation engineer, worming his way into the confidence of the Canal Cities Council and obtaining a contract for the construction of two thousand miles of nickel-cobalt roadways into hitherto unserved territories. A nice fat contract it was, and highly lucrative. He had not seen the joker in it until it was too late to withdraw, even had he wished to do so. A joker that made of him first a

propagandist, sending him into the far-flung arid lands, where he must convince the nearly savage natives of the benefits that must accrue to them with the coming of the lofty towers and their roadways of swift traffic.

An unprogressive and superstitious lot were these drylanders of Mars. Bleached of skin and uncouth of speech, they were a race unto themselves and dwelt in distrust and savage defiance of their more fortunate kin who lived in the fertile lands along the canals. There was warring continually between clans, and productive of many dangerous bands of marauders, whose depredations extended even to the greatest of the canal cities.

As the ronsal neared the end of the branch roadway, Bob turned again to the operator.

"Dako," he grinned, "There'll be thrills in this for us. We've spoiled our own world, overcivilizing it. Spoiled it for adventure, at least—there's none to be found there nowadays."

"You will find it without seeking in the drylands," the Martian drawled, "But it is not for me. I return with the ronsal."

Bob Coleman laughed. "You Martians are without romance," he observed. "You're too stoical and easy-going. Don't you ever get a kick out of anything?"

Dako turned pale but expressive eyes on him for the briefest instant, then shrugged his broad shoulders. "Hardly

ever," he conceded. "It may be we have tired of the struggle. Or, possibly, the climate of our land has made us lethargic. And that is why you strenuous Americans have been so successful among us, commercially and in promoting engineering projects such as this."

"The bandit tribes of the drylands seem to have enough energy." This was sheer baiting of the operator and Bob cast a sidelong glance at him in anticipation of a protesting rejoinder.

But none came. Instead, the imperturbable Dako shrugged again. "You have heard from your brother?" he asked irrelevantly.

The American sobered. "Yes, by etherphone just before we left Risapar. Gordon is awaiting us at the terminus with pack animals and provisions, arms and ammunition—everything. Why do you ask?"

Dako made no reply. He was too busily engaged with his controls as the ronsal slowed down and came into the shed of the terminal station. When the tapered cylindrical vessel had ceased its forward motion, there was the soft throbbing of the atomic engines in the rear compartment. And they hovered there in midair an instant before the repelling energies of the charged nickel-cobalt roadway were neutralized by the ronsal's powerful force generators, then sank gently to the surface.

Here amongst the latticed towers at the end of the branch roadway sprawled the village of Tos-tanor, ostensibly under

Union rule, but comprising a motley population of lawless outcasts of the canal cities. Beyond lay the powdery bleached sands of the desert.

Bob and his party came down from the roadway by way of the lift. Emerging from its cage in the waiting room of the station, they saw that the place was guarded by Union police and that a large crowd had gathered in the square outside.

"Looks like a reception committee," grinned Bob.

But Danny Matthews, his civil engineer, was solemn as he replied, "May be a hot reception, though. The cops are having some trouble keeping them in order out there."

What Danny said was true. An ominous muttering swept over the mob as the Terrestrians and their Risaparian guards pushed out to the railed balcony of the station.

Gordon Coleman was there on the balcony with his friend Kurt Davis and a low-caste bronze-skinned Martian. Faces looking up from the square, some coppery in hue, some ghastly white, were unfriendly and grimacing. Many drylanders had come in from the desert.

"It's all right, Bob," Gordon assured his older brother, gripping his arms in powerful raw-boned hands and looking into his face with black eyes alight with excitement, "Just as I told you. This little demonstration doesn't mean a thing. Our jikiris—the tough little burros of the drylands, you know—are just outside the town. Arms, supplies, and all are ready. And Zeranu here——" He thrust forward the shifty-eyed

Martian who was with him. "——Zeranu will interpret for us so the drylanders will get it all. Better talk to them, Bob."

"Gordon." Bob's keen eyes looked into those flashing black ones that were level with his own. "You've been lying to me. Hell is brewing out here and you know it. You've been hurt, too."

"Oh, that." Gordon Coleman laughed as he caressed the surgical dressing that extended from the angle of his jaw up back of his ear and over several inches of scalp. He tossed back his mane of black hair and hooted disdainfully. "Nothing but a scratch. And I didn't lie, Bob, I didn't. This mob'll listen. When *you* tell 'em, they will. Go on now, give 'em the works."

Pride was in the youngster's voice and utter confidence in the spellbinding ability of the brother he had looked up to since his earliest remembrance. But underneath his care-free assurance was a jerkiness and nervous uncertainty he could not hide from Bob.

"Gordon——" the older man gulped.

"Do as he says," hissed Danny Matthews, interrupting.

"Yes, you've *got* to," Kurt Davis put in, "They're waiting."

A hush had come over the crowd, whether threatening or merely expectant they had no means of knowing. The local police and those from Risapar were stolidly watchful.

"All right." Suddenly decided, Bob Coleman grasped the skinny biceps of the interpreter. "Tell them, Zeranu," he snapped, "that I wish to address them, that you'll translate."

The shrill chattering of the outcast Martian cut into the twilight. Utter silence greeted his words; the rabble was indeed waiting.

Bob spoke then without preamble. "This thing we are doing," he told them, "will bring prosperity and new opportunity to the drylands. It will carry to the remotest province the advantages of the canal city dweller. Pipe lines will come with the roadway; there will be water to increase the fertility of your lands. A closer understanding will arise between the races."

He paused while Zeranu translated rapidly. A bellowing voice answered from out the rabble—gibberings in the dryland tongue.

"What did he say?" growled Bob.

"Him say," in halting Sol-ido from the interpreter, "that devils of fire live on top towers. Imps of flame dance in darkness."*

* A large amount of electrical energy is transmitted along the towers for energization of the thousands of miles of nickel-cobalt roadways paralleling the canals of Mars and now extending into many sections of the drylands. The force by which the ronsals are raised from the road surface, in order that wheel bearing friction and traction losses be eliminated, is one that has the effect of

producing a gravity-neutralizing field immediately above the smooth metal ribbon of nickel-cobalt alloy. In producing this field, high frequency currents having a tension of 600 kilovolts (600,000 volts) are used. The corona discharge from conductors subjected to this super-voltage is observable at night in brilliant tufts of eerie blue light and is caused by the ionization of air surrounding the conductors. In the denser and slightly differently constituted atmosphere of the earth, similar discharges are observable in power transmission lines of even lower pressures such as the usual ones of 66 to 220 k.v.

Bob chuckled appreciatively, having seen the eerie corona discharge of the nickel-cobalt roadways by night. Again he raised his voice—"There are no devils; it is merely a force like that which lights the cities. No—it is more like the natural force which causes a body to fall to the ground, excepting that it works in the reverse direction. It is harmless, only lifting the cars from the roadway so they may be driven speedily on their way with only the friction of the air to hold them back. We are unharmed, we who have ridden _____"

"It's too deep for them," husked Gordon, at his side. "Try another line. Bob."

But Zeranu was chattering importantly, explaining to the mob. A murmur of amazement and indicating some degree of understanding swept across the square. Outcasts from the cities were confirming the words of this Terrestrial in swift mouthings addressed to the drylanders with whom they rubbed elbows.

And then a hideous uproar came up from the far side of the square. Charging down one of the narrow streets was a group of riders led by a huge bearded drylander. At the swift clattering of jikiris' hoofs the mob broke up, panic-stricken and screaming as they crowded into the nearby dwellings and fought to escape through the constricted, cobblepaved alleyways. The local police stood their ground until spouting white flame from the riders' pistols put them to rout. The Risaparian officers, better trained and of greater courage, went into the fray undaunted and with riot-pistols roaring.

"It's Bingord, Bob," Gordon was yelling, "Quick, down through the station and out behind. Here's a flame pistol."

With the cold metal butt of the weapon in his fingers, Bob wanted to fight it out with the bandits. But Gordon pulled at him frantically and the others urged him to retreat.

"They're too many for us," his brother panted as they ran through the darkening and deserted station, "And Bingord is the toughest bandit in these parts. We are not all armed, either—not yet."

Outside the station, they were carried along in a howling, fleeing rabble. Gordon pushed on ahead, flinging aside those who obstructed his path, as if they had been ninepins. A rider swung in out of a side street and white flame streaked out toward the bobbing, black head of the sprinting youngster. A miss. Bob shot down the bandit, shouting to Gordon as the raider's one blast splashed harmlessly against a wall.

"Stay with us, boy," he yelled. "We've more chance together."

"I'll get him," Kurt Davis grunted, forging ahead through the jam. "We'll make the camp all right. It's just outside town at the end of this street. Hurry——"

Then both youngsters were gone and the nine Terrestrians with Bob Coleman at their head were battling their way past steaming, filthy creatures who ran and fought and screeched unceasingly. It was a bedlam, a horrible endless dream. The short Martian twilight deepened abruptly into night. And over it all rose the crackling roar of flame pistols and the hoarse shouts of the raiding bandits.

Danny Matthews was at Bob's side, driving piston-like punches into leering faces that loomed up before him. Trampling the limp bodies that slumped to the pavement under his blows. And the rest of the Terrestrians, yelping their defiance, were close behind.

Stumbling, panting, groping in the darkness, they came out of the narrow lane. Abruptly they were in the desert where the sands gleamed whitely in the starlight. The darkness was shot with stabbing shafts of light over to the left where there was a blur of dark forms. And the shouts of battling humans mingled with the crackling of flame pistols and the doglike yapping of jikiris. A clattering of many hoofs was trailing off into the night. Silence then, save for the hubbub in the village which was gradually subsiding behind them.

"The devil!" roared Bob, "It's our outfit. The bandits—that's why Gordon went on ahead. Come on, men."

"May be they're safe," Danny Matthews tried to tell him.

But Bob hardly heard. "Gordon!" he called out again and again. And swift terror clutched at his heart.

A voice replied unintelligibly, and then he had stumbled over a dark form that showed dimly against the white sands. Jikiris stamped and yapped close by.

Danny and Bob were on their knees when the rest of the party closed in around them. It was Kurt Davis who lay there, with half his chest seared away by the white flame of a bandit's pistol, his clothing charred and smouldering over the horrible injury.

"Bob," he whispered, "They—got him—got Gordon _____"

"Killed him?" An unrecognizable voice came from the big American who knelt there, a voice fraught with misery and cold with the promise of vengeance. Bob Coleman's voice and yet that of a stranger.

Danny Matthews' teeth chattered. Bob heard them distinctly.

"No." Kurt Davis moaned and his voice quavered off into silence. The watchers were sure he had gone. Then, weakly—"Bingord rode off with him—kidnaped him, Bob—he _____"

A rattling cough, a last effort to speak, and the dark form lay still. Bob Coleman bared his head to the Martian sky as he rose to his feet. Danny Matthews cursed softly but with deadly earnestness.

CHAPTER II

Bingord's Trail

Phobos, inner satellite of Mars, rose swiftly above the western horizon, casting long black shadows of the tethered jikiris. Though much smaller and less bright than earth's moon, the illuminated body was in full phase and proved a vast improvement on the faint light of the stars.* But the drylands ahead were empty of life, mysterious. And the village behind was a dark smear against the sky, a sprawling blot where a few lights flickered and ominous silence reigned.

* Two small satellites, Phobos and Deimos, revolve around Mars in an eastward direction and almost in the plane of its equator. The larger of the two, Phobos, is hardly more than ten miles in diameter and is but 5850 miles from the center of Mars. Deimos, the smaller, is 14,650 miles from the center. The mean diameter of Mars being 4339 miles, Phobos is only about 3680 miles from the surface. The curvature of the planet's surface is such that Phobos can not be seen in latitudes greater than 68 degrees 15 minutes north or south of the equator. The period of Phobos is 7

hours 39 minutes and Deimos 30 hours 18 minutes. Thus Phobos makes more than three revolutions while Mars rotates once. This moon, therefore, rises in the west, passes eastward across the sky, and sets in the east. The period of Phobos from meridian to meridian is 11 hours and 7 minutes. On the other hand, Deimos, due to a period of revolution longer than that of the rotation of Mars, rises in the east and sets in the west with a period from meridian to meridian of 131 hours 14 minutes. In the case of Phobos the direction of apparent motion is the same as the actual while the reverse is true of Deimos, one being faster than the mother planet and the other slower, but all three moving in the same direction.

Other corpses were here in the white sand, three in all. One was that of the Martian youth whom Gordon had hired as a guide; two were bandits. Resistance had not been altogether futile.

The Americans were among the jikiris, soothing the excited beasts with gruff, friendly words and fingers that stroked the sleek bullet-shaped heads.

"Nothing missing here," Danny Matthews announced. "At least they left us our animals and supplies. Wonder how come."

"Yeah, it's queer. And why the capture of Gordon—beating it so quickly with him?" Mystified by the bandits' tactics and undecided as to the next move called for, Bob was examining the trappings of the jikiris. "Ten with light packs and saddles," he muttered, "and two loaded to the guards. Good job the boy did."

"What do we do now?" asked Danny.

"We'll get them—get Gordon." Bob raised his voice in sudden decision: "All right, men, choose your mounts and make sure your flame pistols are in their saddle holsters. We ride tonight."

"With no guide?" one of the men objected.

"Ought to be plenty of guides in Tos-tanor. We'll go back and take one on." Bob had singled out a lively jikiri and was astride him as he spoke.

"No need hunt guide in village. She's all locked up in houses, afraid from Bingord," a scornful voice spoke out of the shadows.

"Zeranu!" Bob wheeled in his saddle and stared down into a pair of beady eyes that flashed bright in the light of Phobos.

"Yes, Zeranu follow. Know Bingord come out from village to get young Gordon. Know many things. Zeranu will show way to dryland devil place where Bingord live."

"You're hired, if you can do this," exulted Bob, "but——" hesitating, "why are you so anxious for the job?"

The beady eyes were eloquent with hate. "Zeranu wait long time for this chance," the wizened Martian snarled, "Long years wait since Bingord kill Zeranu's woman. Now men from green star come and see; kill Bingord. We go?"

Bob Coleman whistled. There was no doubting the outcast's sincerity; the cracked voice bespoke undying

ferocity born of his wrong, and eager assurance.

"You bet we go—*now*." Pressing knees to the sides of his restless mount, Bob was off into the desert. "Come on Danny. Come on you fellows that wanted action!"

Zeranu was in saddle and alongside in a flash, the rest of the outfit straggling after them as they rode.

"Not too quick, boss," the Martian advised, "We ride long time. And must go more to right. See, the way marked by great star there."

Sirius, the dog-star!* Bob's gaze followed the pointing finger and he marveled at the brilliance of the body as seen through the thin atmosphere of the red planet.

* So-called by Terrestrials because it is the brightest star in the constellation *Canis Major*, the "Greater Dog" of the heavens. Sirius is likewise the brightest star in the heavens and one of the nearest. Its distance is 2.7 parsecs or 6.8 light years (51 million million miles). Its mass has been determined by Kepler as 2.4 times that of the sun. Its spectrum indicates a surface temperature of 10,000 degrees as against the sun's 6,000. Its light a correspondingly whiter.

All that night they rode across the ghostly sands, and Zeranu talked incessantly. Prompted occasionally by a word of interrogation from the big American at his side, he related strange legends of the pale and dark races of Mars and stranger facts concerning the existing feeling between them.

He enlarged upon his own family history and told of Bingord's systematic terrorization of the three provinces that lay in the line of the proposed roadway extension. The story of the downfall of the Canal Cities Empire and of the rise of the Union was his chief interest, and the many superstitions of the drylands his great delight. There seemed to be no fear in the scrawny Martian. And it was increasingly evident that he had not idly boasted of knowing many things.

Bingord, it developed, was a bandit extraordinary. A half-breed, born of an exiled princess of the old Empire and a giant dryland rover, he had been educated in the universities of Risapar. Acquiring thus a bitter hatred of the favored city dwellers and a deep contempt of the untutored drylanders, he had established himself as a foe of both races. And his stronghold in the lava beds of the first province was a place of terror to all who knew of its existence. To the chalky-skinned natives it was known as an abode of devils and of black magic; to such city dwellers, who had been reached by the long arm of Bingord, it was a fortress of ultra-modern defenses, where fiendish devices of torture were used on the hapless victims of the bandit.

It was Bingord who fought the coming of the nickel-cobalt roadway, for well he knew that his dominance of the three provinces was at stake. And, by his reign of terror in the dryland villages, he had thus far succeeded in maintaining the stubborn resistance of the natives.

The raid on Tos-tanor and the rioting there had been a sample of Bingord's methods. Only here there was a deeper motive. Heretofore all representatives of the Union

Roadways System had been politicians or engineers from the cities and consequently were easy to deal with. Now it was a different matter with the aggressive humans from the green star, the earth, in his dominion. And the young Gordon had learned too much during the days of his sojourn in the drylands. That was one thing. Still more important to Bingord than this was his value as a hostage and a bait for the luring of the entire party of Terrestrials to destruction. Thus had the attack on Tos-tanor been planned and timed. Its double purpose was plainly apparent.

In the deliberations of the Council of Risapar the true facts were ignored, Zeranu declared. Perhaps, even, the councillors had not been able to learn of the real conditions, since the drylanders are stubborn and close-mouthed. And properly so, for they are too fearful of the might and the magic of Bingord to risk a betrayal. Zeranu, dwelling amongst them for nearly a generation, had learned these things. He knew but was not afraid.

Only to rid the provinces of the scourge of this Bingord and all would be well, he averred. No further difficulties then with the natives. Most gladly, instead, they would hail the men from the green star as their deliverers. And they would be most reasonable in permitting the construction of the long-fought extension of the roadway through their territory.

Bob Coleman believed the ancient Martian. And, believing, he was appalled at the prospect. Chill forebodings assailed him as he came to realize fully the position of his younger brother.

"What makes you believe we can succeed against this terror of the drylands?" he asked his informant, when they had ridden for some time in silence.

"Your kind never fail." There was quiet confidence in Zeranu's reply. "Much more brave and strong as any Martian. More quick in brain also. You see."

"Hmph. Wish I were as sure of that as you are."

The first faint light of dawn was painting the sky when Bob called for a halt. They had ridden steadily and far. On such a ride the muscles of men not lately accustomed to the saddle become cramped and sore, their joints stiffened. Besides, the jikiris needed a rest—and water.

He slipped easily to the white sands, mindful of the fact that a Terrestrial must move lazily in this gravity that reduced his bodily weight by nearly two-thirds. Breathing deeply in the rare air which never fully satisfied earthly lungs, he stretched mightily. A steely glitter was in his blue-gray eyes as he looked out over the drylands and bleak lines came into his face with the compressing of his lips. No cheering prospect was presented by the view.

His men, weary but in good spirits, were rummaging in the packs for food and unslinging water bags from the jikiris. Danny Matthews' broad grin was in evidence as the daylight revealed him as something more than a shadowy form. His gaze was upon Zeranu, admiringly.

"The old boy sure can spin a yarn," he said to Bob in English.

"Did you hear it all?"

"Mostly, I guess. And he gave me the creeps sometimes."

"What do you think, Danny?"

"I think we've got a large order—smoking out this Bingord. And I hope Zeranu's on the level. If he isn't we're sunk."

Their guide broke forth in a torrent of expostulation, waving his skinny arms and shaking his head until the long hair nearly hid his wrinkled, leathery countenance. "Zeranu spik your Inglis same like Sol-ido," he clucked. "And Zeranu not lie. Take you to Bingord now—before half day. You see."

"Inglis!" Danny grinned, "Better stick to Sol-ido, old boy."

"Lay off of him," growled Bob, "This is a real jam we're in; can't you get it through your head? Gordon's out there and _____"

"I know, Bob. Sorry." The young engineer sobered instantly. Then, turning to the muttering guide—"Don't mind me, Zeranu. I'm always this way. But I'll be Johnny-on-the-spot when you show us where to find this bad man of the desert."

Zeranu blinked rapidly, understanding only a part of the speech. But his swarthy face relaxed once more into its accustomed impassivity. No one, not even an outcast Martian, could long harbor resentment against Danny Matthews.

After that came the business of eating and of apportioning the limited allowance of water to man and beast. Conversation was lacking as the meal was wolfed down. And, in a very short time the jikiri train was again in motion.

The character of the drylands changed as the tireless little animals plodded onward. Where at first there had been only the level monotony of the powdery white sands, outcroppings of volcanic rock now showed here and there. And a range of low hills loomed up before them. Within three hours of daybreak they had left the sandy plain far behind and the jikiris were picking their way sure-footedly through a torn and broken area where their progress was impeded by tumbled masses of spongy stone, bleached to chalky whiteness as had been the sands.

Coming out through a narrow gorge they saw a fertile spot. A tiny dryland village nestling amidst the dwarfed purple brush that marked the location of a water hole.

"Not far now," Zeranu grunted when they neared the settlement. "Fill water bags here, Boss. Then go to Bingord—quick."

A group of excited villagers greeted them when they rode in among the collection of rude huts. In their midst lay a horribly seared and mutilated native, his body mourned over by a sobbing woman. Zeranu dismounted and chattered earnestly with a red-bearded drylander who seemed to be the spokesman of his clan.

"Him say," he translated rapidly to Bob, "Bingord here not long after sun come up. With five, six, nine men. And the young Gordon bleeding. Tied up on jikiri's back. Man on ground here try help him escape. Bingord slay foolish drylander before go. Beat the young Gordon with pistol until fall down. So!"

Wrathfully Zeranu switched from the Sol-ido into a gibbering of Martian invective.

Slowly the color drained from Bob's face, leaving it an ashy gray. His lean jaw tightened in grim lines. But no words came from his thin lips; he only beckoned to his men to make haste at the water hole.

CHAPTER III

Repulse

From what Zeranu had said, Bingord's stronghold was to be found in a most inaccessible location. It was a walled

village on an elevated site, with the only approach across broken lava beds that were almost impassable. And certainly, as they progressed, the way was becoming increasingly difficult. The jikiri train, at times, skirted the crumbling rims of yawning chasms where the slip of a hoof meant swift death to beast and rider. At other times the riders were forced to dismount and lead their tired animals through tortuous, arched-over crevasses that hardly provided sufficient clearance for the packs.

Fervently Bob wished for a plane or a helicopter. An impossible wish here on the red planet, where the nickel-cobalt roadways were the sole arteries of rapid transportation. Not that the dwellers of the canal cities had progressed insufficiently along scientific lines to develop air travel; it was merely that ships of the air were at a great disadvantage due to the rarity of the atmosphere and the extreme thinness of the layer surrounding the globe. An unsound proposition economically, for huge wing-surface and tremendous power would be required in climbing only a few hundred feet. Hence the roadways of Mars.

Still he could not but think of the advantage that would be theirs now, had they a swift plane at their disposal. Digging his unspurred heels into the flanks of his jikiri, he pulled up beside Zeranu. More than two hours had passed since they left the water hole back there and he had an idea they were nearing their destination.

"Are we nearly there?" he asked the guide.

For answer Zeranu extended a skinny forefinger. From behind a low ridge not a thousand yards away a column of black smoke curled skyward. Unmistakable signs of human habitation.

The sight gave Bob pause. "Pretty close by," he muttered. "Can we approach without being seen?"

"Yes, boss, Zeranu know how. Around end of hill can see place. But we go in cracks of stone, so Bingord not can see us. Wait."

"Hm. How many men in the band?"

"Not many. Maybe twenty, maybe fifty—who knows?" The Martian shrugged his scrawny shoulders. To these superior beings from the green star it should make little difference what the odds were.

They came through a defile that split the end of the ridge. A well-worn path branched off here in the direction of the bandit's lair, but Zeranu drove his jikiri down into a dark crevasse that went deep into the spongy lava bed in the opposite direction. For an instant Bob caught a glimpse of the stronghold, an impregnable position, it seemed, on a rocky prominence not more than a half mile distant.

"Not so good," commented Danny Matthews, "How in the devil we're going to get to them I don't know."

"Zeranu know." The Martian was unfazed by the prospect. "We come in very close so can shoot. They not see us. Zeranu know way."

"I hope so." Danny was dubious. "What's your plan, Bob?"

"Well, we can't use the torpedo projectors on account of Gordon. We could wipe them out from here if they didn't have him. Guess our best bet is to use the tear gas if we can get near enough to toss our grenades. That's my idea, at least."

"We get close," Zeranu assured them, "Bingord not can find us in cracks of stone. Zeranu know every crack."

"The old boy's been scouting around here for years," chuckled Danny. "Guess we can trust him."

They were in a veritable labyrinth of fissures, some rising nearly to the surface and others dropping rapidly to depths of fifty feet or more. At one point Bob was able to raise himself and look out over the lava bed. He saw that they had covered more than half the distance to the stronghold.

As he dropped back into his saddle a great voice rolled out over the valley. A Brobdingnagian voice, that reverberated through the passages and smote upon their eardrums with deafening power. A voice that was hideously raucous—metallic. And it brought understandable words to the astounded hearers. Words in the Sol-ido tongue.

"Make haste, Americans," it sneered thunderously, "Bingord awaits your coming with keen anticipation."

There was silence then save for the echoes that came back from the low hills. Zeranu wheeled in his saddle and a

twisted grin contorted his narrow features.

"Drylanders say this magic," he cackled. "But we know it machine talk of Bingord. Big horn make noise but not scare us. So?"

"It means we've been seen though." Bub pulled up his jikiri and stood in the saddle, drawing himself to the edge of the crevasse. No sign of life was there at the bandit's fortress.

He had known instantly that the great voice was a human one, enormously amplified by electric means. Nevertheless it had awed him by its vastness and had silenced his men; it was no wonder the drylanders shunned this place. And most disturbing was the knowledge it brought that the enemy knew of their approach, and the certainty that Bingord was equipped with the most modern of devices.

Zeranu's expression was not as confident as it had been. "Maybe they come out with flame pistols," he offered.

"Or cannons," grunted Danny Matthews. "Afraid we'll have to rush the joint, Bob."

"That would be suicide. No, Dan, we'll go on and try the gas."

"How about loading a torpedo with the stuff and shooting it over?"

"We could do that." Bob pondered this as they pushed forward. "But I'd be afraid of it, Danny. The bursting charge

would have to be quite powerful and we don't know about Gordon. Might hit him."

The way dropped sharply into a roofed cavern where they were in near darkness.

"Come close now," whispered Zeranu, "When come out of cave be right under wall. Throw gas bombs then."

"All right, fellows," Bob called out softly, "All get set with a grenade apiece. When I give the word, we'll fling them over the wall. Then rush the entrance. They'll be blinded and helpless."

"So?" Startlingly, the great voice of the amplifier echoed in the cavern. "Come out into the light, men from the green star, that Bingord may welcome you fittingly."

Whereupon the voice laughed hideously—mockingly.

Zeranu's mount backed frantically into Bob's and there was an instant confusion in the cavern. The jikiris yapped their alarm and the oaths of the Americans mingled with their mouthings.

"Come on!" yelled Bob. "He's trying to scare us off like a pack of ignorant drylanders. Come on—one, two, thr——"

At the count of three he was in the open air, his arm drawn back with the egg-shaped grenade gripped tightly in his fingers. Danny and Zeranu were off their jikiris and at his side in a flash. The others were not far behind. And over them loomed the smooth wall of the bandit's stronghold.

But the gas bombs were never thrown. Zeranu's shrill yelp cut the air like a knife and he dropped the grenade Bob had handed to him.

"Hells bells!" roared Danny Matthews. "It's hot." His own missile flung out in a puerile arc, sputtering to a white heat as it left his hand.

Too astonished to release his grenade at once, Bob suffered severe burns before opening his fingers. And he watched in amazement as the metal casing with its charge of ethyl iodoacetate disintegrated into complete nothingness at his feet.*

* Ethyl iodoacetate, $\text{CH}_2\text{ICOOC}_2\text{H}_5$, lachrymator developed by terrestrial chemists early in the preceding century. This gas, in the "World War" of 1914 to 1918, was found superior to xylyl bromide, $\text{CH}_3\text{C}_5\text{H}_4\text{CH}_2\text{Br}$, in that the approximate concentration required to incapacitate a man by lachrymation and coughing was one part in five million as compared with the one part in two million of the latter. In greater concentration, which is to say of the order of one part in 50,000, the breathing of Ethyl iodoacetate for one or two minutes will cause actual and lasting damage to the lungs. Such so-called "tear" gases are extremely effective against a massed enemy since, singly and collectively, he is rendered helpless so soon as to be unable either to attack or to defend himself.

"Lord!" he groaned, "They're broadcasting some energy that disrupts the atoms. Go back, fellows, back into the cavern!"

They had not heeded his command and were crowding into the semi-darkness. Shouts and curses echoed in the enclosure. His men were as demoralized as were the jikiris.

And over all boomed the mighty laughter of Bingord's amplifier.

"What's wrong with you fellows?" Bob roared, recovering his equanimity and boiling with sudden wild rage, "Are you afraid of these cute tricks? Come on now—after me! We'll rush the gates with flame pistols."

The butt of his weapon was in his hand as he rushed out in to the open. Zeranu tried to restrain him but his own men streamed out after him, anxious to do battle and heedless of the consequences.

But no enemy appeared at the double gate. There was no living being in sight on which to direct the spouting white flame of their weapons. A huge rusty lock secured the entrance and Bob was struck with an idea at the sight of it.

"All together, fellows," he whispered hoarsely, "Aim at the lock. We'll melt it away."

Nine flame pistols were raised and nine incandescent blasts shot forth. But they never reached their mark for the disintegrating force smote out from behind the wall. Soundlessly, invisibly, yet heating the metal of the weapons so swiftly that flesh was seared in the discarding of them. Some of the pistols vanished in puffs of vapor ere they

reached the ground. And again came the thunderous laughter of the bandit's amplifiers.

"Devil take him!" shouted Bob. "He beats us at every move. Why doesn't he come out and fight?"

He raised his voice to the blank wall in furious challenge, but the maniacal laughter of the giant voice drowned out his words.

"Better go back and talk it over," Danny suggested, ruefully nursing a scorched palm. "This Bingord knows a few tricks. He's too many for us—so far."

"Yes," Bob admitted grudgingly, "We'll have to figure out a bit of strategy, I guess."

They retired to the cavern where Zeranu awaited them with a long face.

"Zeranu try to tell you," he accused Bob. "No good for go out now. Bingord got seeing machine somewhere—know what we do. Must wait for dark. Then throw gas bombs."

"Nothing doing." Chagrined though he was by this first failure. Bob Coleman had been goaded to stubborn determination by the sardonic, giant voice that was everywhere about them. He was in no mood to consider further delay. And his men were of like mind. "We'll have to attack at several points," he growled, "That's the only way we can put this across. What's your idea, Danny?"

"Same as yours. And, listen: suppose I take six of the men and the animals and strike out through the crevasses to make an attack from the rear. They'll think we've all gone. You wait here and when you hear the explosion of a torpedo, you can charge the gates. I'll fire on the base of the wall back there with a projector and it'll probably blow a hole through it at the same time. We can——"

"A good idea, Danny. Let's go."

"No, no!" their guide expostulated shrilly, "Zeranu not know way to rear. Drylanders say much black magic that way. You not live to reach back wall. Must think other way to do."

"Nonsense." For the first time Bob was impatient with the old outcast. "You're believing some of this native superstition. We'll break up as Danny suggests."

"Can't do," wailed Zeranu, "Lose men, animals, everything. You see. Not black magic but machines of Bingord kill. Can't do."

"Shut up!" Bob roared at the cringing Martian. Then swiftly to his men—"You Phillips and Morey—stay here with Zeranu and me. And here, Danny—just a second—leave us grenades and new flame pistols. You take the rest. Take all the jikiris and make as much noise as you want getting started. The four of us here will keep hidden until we hear your shot. Better make it two torpedoes in quick succession so we'll be sure it's you. Beat it now."

In the half light Zeranu's leathery countenance was a tragic mask. But he forebore the offering of further objection. Gleefully singing out his orders, Danny Matthews led his little party off through a branching passageway that paralleled the wall.

CHAPTER IV

Black Magic

The four men, huddled into the darkest recess of the cavern, kept strict silence while they waited breathlessly for Danny's signal. A half hour passed without sound, when Bob could stand it no longer.

"Must have reached it by this time," he muttered huskily.

"Hush—maybe hearing machine in cave," Zeranu whispered in his ear, "Not time yet—pretty soon."

Three quarters of an hour and still no signal. The silence was uncanny; there was not even the faintest sound from behind the wall of the fortress. Bob fidgeted but held his peace.

One hour. Bob Coleman held his watch before him now and its illuminated dial was an eery flickering thing in the

darkness as it fluttered in his trembling fingers. The strain was telling.

And then a ghastly sound came to their ears. The shriek of a man in mortal agony. Whether it came from within the wall or from the rear, they could not determine. But it was the voice of an American, that was certain. And immediately after it came the crazy laughter of the blasting amplifiers.

"That settles it." Bob leaped to his feet and his heart was heavy within him. "They've got Danny and the rest," he said tonelessly. "They must have, or we'd have heard those torpedoes. Come on fellows, we'll have to go after them."

He was thankful that Zeranu had no "I told you so," with which to reprove him. Instead, the scrawny outcast clucked sympathetically and ducked into the branch passage after him. Phillips and Morey spoke no word as they followed.

The passage widened out and soon the pale green of the sky was above them. This was a sizeable gorge they were traversing and the going here was easier than they had found it since entering the lava beds. They had gone but a little way when the nature of the spongy walls changed; they smoothed out, as if cut through the lava by the hand of man. And the depth of this channel was not more than ten feet.

Presently they entered a circular well of similar depth. And from it radiated no less than a dozen cleanly cut passages. They were in a cleverly conceived maze of human—or inhuman—origin.

From this point they could see the wall of the stronghold. And it still presented a blank expanse of smooth stone. Forbidding. Unmarked by the presence or nearness of any living thing.

"This what Bingord want us to do," Zeranu observed sagely, "Not come out to fight because expect him lead us here where most good for he self. Not good for we."

"Looks like you're right," Bob admitted ruefully, "And I'll be damned if I know which way to go now."

"Why not call out to Danny?" whispered the lad called Morey, "The bandits probably know we're here anyway."

It was not necessary to follow the suggestion however, because a second hideous shriek rent the air at that instant. And there was no mistaking the direction from which the sound came, for it rang out from one of the smooth passages as if carried through a speaking tube.

Without hesitation Bob dove into the smooth-walled channel, and the others were hard on his heels. A bedlam of frightened sound was in their ears as they ran. Blasting laughter that beat at the eardrums and smote their cheeks with a distinct sensation of vibration of the air around them.

Abruptly they debouched into a walled-in rectangle. And the sight that greeted them sent Bob Coleman back on his heels.

A faint mist of rosy hue was in this place, a mist that lay in two pulsating strata, one shoulder high, the other close to

the ground. Danny and the rest of the party were here, but scarcely recognizable in the frenzy that had come upon them. The jikiris were stamping and pawing frantically, without uttering a single plaintive yap. And two of the men were down, bleeding from horrible wounds. They had been trampled by the mad jikiris, or had killed themselves in the insanity that was brought on by some diabolical energy with which Bingord was charging the whole of the area.

Danny Matthews, his face bloated to incredible size and his eyes popping from their sockets, was babbling hoarsely, almost inaudibly. Pointing to the wall of the bandit's stronghold. Unconsciously, Bob's gaze followed his finger and he thought he saw a misty shape atop the wall. A huge shadowy form; weaving in the weak sunlight. He rubbed his eyes and it had vanished.

Another of the men—Glenn Thomas—went stark mad and staggered to one of the jikiris, beating at the round head of the bucking animal with clubbed flame pistol. Bob went after him, bellowing. Dragged him from the foam-flecked creature before he had killed it.

And then he too was smitten by the weird force that had the rest in its throes. His vision was distorted and there came a pounding at the innermost cells of his brain that drove all sane thought from his mind. Up there on the wall was a monstrous grinning figure, swaying in the breeze. A solid figure, of flesh and blood, yet fully fifty feet tall, a colossal reproduction of the bearded bandit, Bingord, in the flesh, grinning evilly. Gloating. Bob tried to cry out, but no sound came from his parched lips.

One of the jikiris flung itself against him in its frenzy, catapulting him to the wall of the arena. The shock cleared his brain slightly. And suddenly he knew that this energy emanated from the very walls about them. He had seen two metal strips there, one close to the ground, the other shoulder high. Desperately he fought to retain his senses as the radiation beat at him anew.*

* Human nerve currents and the functionings of brain cells are known to be electrical in nature. With the oscillograph, an exceedingly delicate instrument for the measurement and graphical recording of minute and swiftly fluctuating currents, they have been found to be uni-directional and of interrupted or oscillating voltage characteristics according to the functions performed. Bingord's radiations were designed diabolically to counteract or to alter in action both sensory and motor impulses of the nervous system and to partially paralyze certain regions of the brain to produce the illusions and the insane actions of those subjected to them. Continued exposure to the radiations brought death by complete destruction of the brain cells.

Groping—for the rosy mist was thickening—he found his way to Danny. Shook him mightily. But Danny only stared with those popping eyes, and gibbered through swollen lips, with horrible sounds that scarcely could be heard. Great purple veins stood out in his forehead.

Another shriek rang out—and another. Two of the men were in violent conflict, battering out each other's brains with their pistol butts, wallowing in their own blood as they rolled over and over on the hard ground. And the laughter

thundered from the widespread mouth of that inhuman giant top the fortress wall.

Bob must have gone completely mad for a moment after that, for the next he knew he had wrestled a jikiri into submission and was pawing through its pack for a torpedo projector. Insane laughter would have come from his lips had he been able to open them. And then he was fondling the long slim tube of the projector, withdrawing the plug of the generating mechanism in the stock. The whirl of the generator inside was a welcome sound above the roaring that was in his ears.

Crazily he backed to the wall and leveled the weapon at the impossible figure of Bingord. The colossus swayed and grinned as before, but now its bloodshot eyes were directed at the puny being down there, who dared to think he might prevail against his might. In a daze, Bob saw Zeranu endeavoring to scale the wall; saw him batter his head against the unyielding stone in a frenzy. He hardly knew he had pulled the release of the torpedo projector; would not have known it had not the spang of its propelling ray penetrated his consciousness. And the torpedo, with its deadly charge of ultranite, sped on through the monster on the wall. Out past the rosy mist he saw its leisurely arc as it rose and fell into the lava bed, far beyond the stronghold of the bandits. The sound of a terrific explosion, harmlessly expended, and the raucous laughter of the unharmed monster on the wall were all the reward he had for his pains.*

* It was learned later that the monstrous figure on the wall was not altogether an illusion of their tortured brains. Bingord's apparatus included clever adaptations of television and sound projectors. The fifty foot images were produced as exceedingly lifelike representations by utilizing a great jet of conducting vapor, in the particles of which enormously enlarged three dimensional figures were built up from the impulses of special television scanning equipment.

The drylanders were right. This was a place of black magic, after all. A jikiri, enormously enlarged in Bob's vision, charged him and drove him against the wall. With arms flailing mechanically but effectively, he flung the crazed animal off.

Behind him there came a brilliant flash and the torpedo projector was almost wrenched from his grasp. It had contacted with the two horizontal strips of metal along the wall and the short circuit heated the tube noticeably. A second flash followed as he pulled the weapon away, but his senses were too far gone to permit of the significance of the phenomenon impressing him at the time.

Looking out beyond the pulsating rosiness of the mist, he saw that a new and different figure had appeared on the wall of the fortress. As huge as the figure of Bingord had been and apparently as real. But this one—it was incredible—this was Gordon! Gordon Coleman, tied fast to a metal grid, his face contorted in unspeakable agony. They were torturing him—torturing him—torturing Gordon by some devilish means that involved a flashing display of pyrotechnics which

penetrated his body in emanations from the latticed metal behind.

Something snapped then in Bob's harrowed brain. He flung himself at the wall of the pit, deliberately shortcircuiting the two glowing strips with the tube of his projector. As before, there was the violent flash and the tube became warm in his hands. He released his grip of it and it clung there, heating rapidly to a cherry red as he watched stupidly. Instantly it seemed that his mind was clearing. Slowly and painfully, to be sure, but he *had* remembered that incident of the first short circuit. He *had* been able to figure out for himself that in this manner the effectiveness of the maddening energy might be nullified.

A great roaring as of rushing waters was in his ears as he slid to the ground. The utter blankness of insensibility swooped down over him.

Darkness had fallen when Bob awoke. For a long time he lay on the hard ground, trying to remember. A dull glow beside him drew his attention and he turned his head to stare. It was the tube of his projector, still red hot from the power which flowed through its slim length. Memory returned with a rush and he staggered to his feet.

Dim forms were there in the pit, some of them corpses, some living creatures. Stumbling from one to the other he quickly found that Zeranu was alive, with his senses just returning, and Danny Matthews too, for which Bob was fervently thankful. Phillips, Morey, Donaldson—six of them

altogether had survived, whereas ten had come into this place of horror. And the jikiris all were stark and rigid in death.

Sounds of revelry came from beyond the wall of the stronghold. Bingord, thinking he had destroyed them all, was celebrating.

Grimly Bob was shaking Danny into complete wakefulness.

"What the devil? Where am I?" His friend sat up, weakly swaying, surveying the hazy form before him with incredulous eyes. "Oh, it's you, Bob." Suddenly he got to his feet.

"Come on, Dan, snap out of it. There's work to be done." Bob still gripped his arms, continuing the shaking process. "We've got to storm Bingord's gates and get Gordon," he grated, "Dead or alive, we'll get him. Hear me? Understand?"

"Sure I hear. Let go my arms." Danny was himself once more.

"Stout fellow: listen Danny. There are six of us yet, including Zeranu. The jikiris couldn't hold out. But there are flame pistols and torpedo projectors galore. And Bingord thinking we're all out of the picture. There'll be no look-out."

"Right-o!" Alert as if nothing out of the ordinary had occurred, Danny Matthews proceeded to the task of reviving Donaldson.

Morey and Phillips, having been exposed to the energies for a shorter time, were already on their feet. And Zeranu, shrilling his rage, was at Bob's side.

"Cut out heart from this Bingord," he cackled, "Zeranu do it, boss. You see. We go now?"

"Yes, but you're to leave Bingord to me. You hear? Understand?" Bob remembered that the Martian had an old score to settle with the bandit chief. But he had a fresh one himself. If Gordon——?

"All set." Danny's cheerful voice came out of the darkness.

Searching the packs of the dead jikiris, they soon provided themselves with weapons. For once, Zeranu was uncommunicative.

This time they came boldly out into the open. With earthly muscles accustomed to a bodily weight nearly three times as great as here in the gravity of the red planet, the Terrestrials had no difficulty in vaulting the ten foot wall of the pit. Reaching down then into the blackness, Bob and Danny drew Zeranu up after them.

Above them reared the wall of the stronghold. They skirted its base and made for the great double gate at the front. Ribald laughter and hoarse shouts of merriment came from within, but no devastating energies struck out at the attackers. Their approach was unseen, unsuspected.

CHAPTER V

Within the Gates

The huge lock melted swiftly away under the combined attack of a half dozen flame pistols. Before its liquid metal had ceased dripping Bob was pushing through the gates.

"Remember, Zeranu," he warned the chortling outcast, "Bingord is my meat. I'll tend to him in my own way."

The wizened Martian stopped his exultant chatter, but a crafty light was in his beady eyes.

Danny and the others slipped through after them and stood within the gates, their eyes widening at the sight presented in the open area before them.

"Good Lord!" gasped Bob, his fingers tightening on the butt of his flame pistol, "Look—look what the devil is doing to Gordon."

The younger Coleman was a sagging, half naked figure, strapped to a vertical metal grid that glowed with eery flickerings of the fiendish energy with which it was charged. Bloody sweat oozed from every pore of his bared chest and stood out on his brow in great drops. But his gaze was steady, fearless.

Bingord stood before him, reeling drunkenly. On his ugly head was a metal cap from which cables led to the grid. Massed against a long dormitory-like building at the rear were Bingord's men, probably sixty or seventy of them. Chulco, the intoxicant, was flowing freely and its fiery potency had already laid out a number of the revellers in the deep coma which follows upon the first mad exhilaration of the vicious Martian distillate. Others of them were rapidly approaching the same condition. And the entire scene was lighted to daylight brilliancy by floodlights mounted on the great wall.

Strangest of all were the antics of Bingord. He capered before his sweating victim like a maniac, snarling wrathful invectives, quite obviously beside himself with a rage that was inflamed by the heat of the chulco he had imbibed.

"You still defy me, do you?" he bellowed, "Still the braggart Terrestrial holds out against the might of Bingord. Very well, you shall see the horrible fate to which your brother was lured in the pit. After that I shall increase the power. To the limit."

The floodlights dimmed as he spoke. And then, amazingly, it was as if the entire enclosure had vanished from sight. Before those who watched was the pit of the rosy mists, dim-lit and ghastly with the blood that spattered its walls. Four bodies were lying sprawled there, bodies of men and twelve animals, twisted and broken—their jikiris, with open packs spilling their contents. It was a marvelous demonstration of television—and something besides.

Bingord's wild yell clove the night air and the floodlights came abruptly to full brilliance. Aghast, the bandit stood there staring. "They're gone," he shrieked, "Imps of the canals! Some have escaped it. To arms, men, to arms. Make ready to repel——"

And then he had swung about and faced the little party by the gate. A flame pistol was in his hand as by magic and, crackling spitefully, it spouted incandescence. But, quick as he had been, Bob Coleman was quicker. And his own searing ray had severed the bandit's pistol hand at the wrist ere that other flame found its mark. Dropping to the ground, he fired again and Bingord crumpled and fell as his right leg was blasted away at the knee. Screaming horribly, the bandit chief called upon his men to avenge him.

Pandemonium reigned amongst the revellers. Many of them were helpless, and many others in so advanced a state of intoxication as to be unable to raise their weapons. But a dozen white flames flicked out from across the rectangle and young Donaldson cried out chokingly and then lay still, a charred and smouldering heap. Bob's men were on their faces now, firing rapidly into the howling bandit crew. And each spouting flame carried its message of certain death to a bandit.

"Give 'em a torpedo, Danny," grunted Bob, crawling out ahead.

Unslinging his projector, Dan Matthews rose to his knees. The violent detonation of the ultranite torpedo across the court came almost simultaneously with the spang of its

propelling ray. Mangled bodies hurtled skyward over there. Stones, débris, and twisted steel girders that flung upward and rained down over the area. And the low building crumpled in a mass of ruins.

No more crackling flame darted out at the attackers, for the few surviving bandits were utterly demoralized; they were shrieking in horrible fear of the Terrestrial high explosive, scrambling for cover and making desperate efforts to scale their own wall. Only a few escaped that way, however, as the yelling Americans, with Zeranu, an avenging demon, in their midst charged them with flame pistols roaring.

Seeing that his men were well able to finish the job without him, Bob ran to the grid where Gordon was bound. The younger man's head had dropped to his chest and he was all but unconscious as Bob slashed away the straps that held him fast to the glowing latticework.

"What has he done to you, boy?" asked Bob, unmindful of the stabbing pains the grid's weird energy sent through his body, "If he has killed you I'll burn him to a cinder on his own torture rack."

"I'll be all right." Gordon smiled weakly as he slipped to the ground with the loosing of the final bond. "But it was a tough time. The energy of the grid—for hours, and the mental torture. Bob, the images on the wall were only projections on a cloud of vapor—but this other thing—that cap on his head. Mental images sent out from his vile mind. Monsters in the air that I had to fight. I knew they were

unreal but I couldn't help fighting.* In another moment I'd have been a raving maniac. That's what he wanted. But we licked him. Bob ... you licked him ... I ..."

* This was accomplished by Bingord's use of a further development of the sound-vision projectors. By picking up the electrical impulses from the thinking cells of the brain and amplifying them before they were passed to the projectors, it was possible to produce an uncannily lifelike representation of the *thoughts* of the operator of the mechanism. He needed merely to concentrate on some real or imagined scene and it would be reproduced in realistic action and color with all the accompanying sounds as conceived in the mind of the operator. In this case the regular mechanisms of the television were replaced by the thought impulse apparatus.

Gordon Coleman could speak no more; he had fainted. Bob saw that the bandage had been torn from his head, showing a recently stitched wound across cheek and scalp—an ugly wound.

"How'd he get this?" he demanded of Bingord, who lay moaning close by, "You did it, I suppose."

The bandit compressed his lips and even the moaning stopped. An implacable hatred was in his yellow eyes.

"Him did it, yes." Zeranu had come from the last of the fighting and he spurned the huge bulk of the bandit with his foot. "Him start try kill Gordon in Tos-tanor. Before you come. But the young Gordon beat him so he run away. Have

not his men that time—Bingord not. That why he come back. Why he hate the young Gordon."

"Yeah? Leave him alone, Zeranu." Bob lowered his brother's dark head gently to the ground and turned savagely on the bandit.

"All right, you!" he grated, yanking him upright and flinging his maimed body toward the glowing grid, "You're going to get a taste of your own medicine."

Bingord struck out with his one good arm and kicked mightily with the remaining leg. But he was helpless in the powerful arms of the earthman. In a trice he was bound securely where Gordon had been and he squirmed and shrieked as the energies of his own devilish mechanism shot him through and through.

Bob had snatched the metal cap from his head and now examined it curiously. The cables, he saw, entered a control box that was set on a small pedestal. From thence they were connected to the metal grid. A rheostat was in the box, its lever set in mid-position. Experimentally, Bob moved the arm forward. Bingord screamed frightfully as the glow from the latticework brightened.

"Ha! Don't like it so well yourself, do you?" Bob grinned as he increased the power by another notch. From somewhere underneath his feet there was the whining protest of a generator as it took the additional load.

Danny Matthews and the others had gathered round and were watching the procedure. Bingord was begging now, cravenly, and bloody sweat oozed from his pores.

Bob adjusted the metal cap over his own head and examined the levers in the control box once more. He opened a switch and the floodlights dimmed.

Bingord shrieked anew.

"Afraid of this mental torture of yours, eh?" Bob sneered, "The terror of the drylands is a coward, at heart."

He set his mind to the picturing of his own dream of the roadway across the barren lands. And the wall of the stronghold dissolved away before them. Out there on the lava beds was a gleaming stretch of tower-supported roadway, extending to the horizon in the one direction and disappearing through a rift in the hills in the other. Many speeding ronsals were passing along its length in both directions. A prosperous village rose up as by magic from the lava beds. Water flowed in the fissures and the bright purple of luxurious vegetation carpeted the streets of the village and children played before the doorsteps of neat dwellings. A pleasing vision of the future.

"That's what you've been fighting, Bingord," Bob exulted, "But you've lost. You're through—understand? Even if I let you live, you're through. Licked."

"Hrrgh—this not torture," Zeranu rasped, "Let Martian show you."

He snatched the cap from Bob's head and fitted it to his own.

"Let him do it," begged Danny as the vision of the roadways vanished and Bob sprang at the outcast, "He'll do it right."

"Not a bad idea at that." Bob Coleman subsided.

The vengeful Martian leaped at the bandit, striking his drooping head with the flat of his hand. "You see now," he yelled, "Even if shut eyes brain see. Remember Zeranu. Remember Cleda."

Once more the fortress wall seemed to melt away in the night. By the glow of the torture grid they could see the fierce glitter in the beady eyes of Zeranu, as he thrust his withered face close to Bingord's red-streaked beard.

And then there was enacted before them the tragedy of a generation ago—a scene materialized out of the past. On the outskirts of a canal city there stood a neat cottage before which a slender and remarkably beautiful, golden-skinned Martian woman stood. Her eyes were alight with expectation as she shaded them with her hand and looked down the pathway as if expecting the coming of a dear one.

"Remember Cleda, Bingord!" Zeranu's voice was awful as it came out of the shadows. "She waiting for me, then."

The bandit gurgled stark gibberish in his terror. There was the sharp sound of the blow as Zeranu struck him again.

And in the scene pictured so vividly out of the memory of Zeranu, as his mental impulses were converted into light images by the machine, there appeared a group of riders. Coming in from the drylands, they were, and at their head was a great bearded half breed, this same Bingord, a mere youth then but as evil of countenance as now.

The woman cried out in alarm and ran for the door of the house. But the bandit chief had slipped from his jikiri and intercepted her. She was in his arms then, beating at his broad chest with puny fists. And the Bingord of the past laughed raucously, a miniature of the titanic guffaw of his amplifiers of the present. Once, when her clothing was almost torn from her gleaming body, the woman broke free and a stone from the path was in her hands. She flung it with all her strength and it caught the bandit fairly between the eyes, momentarily stunning him and cutting a gash in his forehead. With a bellow of rage he rushed upon her, forgetting his lust in the fury that came to replace it. A knife rose flashing and fell. Again and again until the woman was a pitiful, bleeding corpse at his feet.

"Cleda!" The Americans were aghast at the horror of the thing as the vision melted away and Zeranu's voice came out of the darkness. The old Martian had switched from the Solido and was now screeching fluently in his own tongue. "It was thus you slew her, monster of the drylands. And so it is that Zeranu will avenge Cleda. Now!"

Bob reached for the switch in the control box and the floodlights flashed on blindingly.

At the torture grid Zeranu was a towering god of vengeance. Years seemed to have slipped from him as if by the magic of Bingord's machine. His right arm rose and fell as Bingord screamed. A curved blade that was in his hand, bright only when it flashed the first time, was dripping red now. With monotonous regularity it swung aloft and drove down long after the bandit's cries had ceased.

Presently the outcast, exhausted by his emotions, had dropped to his knees, spreading his scrawny arms wide and raising his face to the heavens, giving thanks to the ancient gods of Mars.

"And that," whispered Bob in awed tones, "is that."

Gordon Coleman, roused by the commotion, sat erect with an effort.

Instantly Bob was at his side, supporting him in his strong arms. "How do you feel now, boy?" he demanded anxiously, "Think you'll be all right again?"

"Surest thing." The game youngster lurched groggily to his feet and stood there tottering. But his color was returning and new strength slowly suffused his being. "Just give me a day or two and I'll be as good as new."

By the flashing courage of the black eyes Bob knew that he had spoken the truth. And the strong pulse under his exploring finger gave him double assurance.

Gordon turned to view the scene at the torture grid. Without feeling he regarded the bloody corpse that dangled

there. But his gaze was one of understanding and approbation as it rested on the kneeling figure of Zeranu.

"Glad the old boy got him at last," he muttered.

"I guess that goes for me too," Bob admitted.

"And Bob." Gordon was suddenly enthusiastic. "Bob, we can start back for Tos-tanor tomorrow. The extension can go right ahead. We'll begin surveying as soon as we're there. There's nothing to hinder us now. We'll——"

Gordon's head nodded jerkily. He was falling asleep on his feet.

"Yeah, we'll do all those things. But first off you need some rest—and some care." Bob spoke softly at the last, seeing that Morpheus had definitely claimed the exhausted youngster. He lowered him gently to the ground and padded his own coat under his head.

Watching the two, Danny Matthews grinned broadly. They had won the game.

THE END

[The end of *Roadways of Mars* by Harl Vincent]