The Cosmic Flame

BY VARGO STATTEN

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The Cosmic Flame

By
John Russell Fearn
Writing under the pseudonym *Vargo Statten*.

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CHAPTER ONE

It was in the year 2,000 A.D. when nobody could any longer blame flying saucers on imagination or indigestion. They became apparent in the June of that year in all parts of the world. From the North to South Pole the telecasts and 'phone lines were busy, and news editors were working themselves into the grave welding together the flood of information which poured in from reporters all over the globe.

London, New York, Paris, Moscow, Melbourne, Bombay . . . The saucers had been seen everywhere. Apparently invasion of Earth was imminent. Fleets of the queer, disc-like craft had passed over every principal city, done no damage, and vanished from sight again. Earth's fastest fliers had gone in pursuit, without result. To pursue the saucers into the void was left to the toughest rocket-men Earth possessed—but even in free space, permitting of terrific velocities, it had not been possible to catch up with the saucers. As always, they eluded capture, or, if anybody came too close they were wiped out completely.

Nobody thought of talking about anything except flying saucers and imminent invasion. Stock markets declined; big concerns took preventative measures to safeguard their possessions. Industrial and atomic-product cities tested their defences; country leaders made speeches. Yet it was left to a London policeman to see the first signs of the unusual.

P.C. 567's beat lay along Oxford Street. He had followed it so many times it was sheer monotony—but not on this ill-fated afternoon of June 9th, 2,000. He had just closed up the police 'phone-box, in which he had made his report of progress to headquarters, when it happened.

Suddenly, out of the yellow-blue of the summer sky, there flashed a light of intolerable brightness. It turned dingy London to a fairy city for a few flashing seconds, like an agglomeration of white buildings seen at night for a moment in the blaze of a magnesium flare. What happened after that P.C. 567 was not sure, but it seemed to him that the great buildings around him started to smoke, and then crumble. The heavy stone itself actually seemed to melt; windows tinkled and smashed: the whole mass of the metropolis, bathed in unholy radiance, began to shift and slide like wax under a radiator.

P.C. 567 fell flat on his face as the pavement ruptured beneath him. He was not alone in his fall. In all directions men and women dropped helplessly, and then screamed as molten masonry and bending girders crashed over and down on top of them. Some looked skywards and were forever blinded. Others caught fire. The more fortunate fell into cavities made by fallen girders and escaped the pinning weight of debris which rained on top of them.

For perhaps ten minutes the section of London where P.C. 567 was, lay intermittently flooded with light and unimaginable heat. He, pinned down amidst wreckage, was unhurt, but scared to death. He was perfectly convinced it was an attack by the flying saucers and on an unprecedented scale. He listened to the battering thunder of falling buildings, the screams of men and women, the screech and hoot of traffic. Then very gradually, the frightful disturbance seemed to abate and at last all was quiet. He began shoving and pushing and perhaps fifteen minutes later poked a dust- and sweat-caked face into the normal summer afternoon sunlight.

Astounded, he looked about him. The very heart of London had disappeared. There was nothing but smoking rubble, forlorn and twisted girders, mangled bodies, piled-up traffic, listing standards . . . As far as he could see, in all directions, everything had been razed. Then

came the scream of ambulance and fire sirens, the arrival of rescue workers. He dragged himself entirely free of the debris and stood up, his puzzled gaze on the blank blue sky. Nothing was in sight. No saucer, no blinding glare, no 'plane. Just the soft warmth of June, a devilish mockery amidst such carnage.

There was no police 'phone-box; no headquarters at all, so P.C. 567 began walking unsteadily, holding his aching head. He passed bemused and tattered men and women, looking vaguely around them. Some were severely injured and did not seem to realise it. Others were savagely burned; still others were groping around in darkness, the penalty of having gazed at that searing sky.

Atomic bomb? P.C. 567 considered this and then recalled there had been no blast. In any event, the alarm system round Earth was so perfect that no 'plane or space-ship could have approached within hitting distance without being instantly detected. In fact, the business was a mystery, and P.C. 567 had only one idea in mind. He was an officer of the law and as such had only one duty: to report in detail the terrible cataclysm in which he had been involved.

It was late in the afternoon when at last he staggered wearily to a region on the outskirts of the city centre. Here the buildings were still standing, and the further he walked the more normalcy returned. He gathered he was somewhere in the region of Putney or Wandsworth—which meant that the very heart of London had been totally destroyed . . . He found a police station, stumbled in to make his report, and then collapsed . . .

But his report was the most decisive of any, and the most detailed. With a policeman's eye for facts, he had photographically absorbed everything, and whilst he lay in the hospital undergoing treatment, his statement was transmitted to the Public Bureau of Safety, a newly-created organisation devised solely for the purpose of protecting the citizen in the event of interplanetary war . . . and that war, it seemed, had come, with first blood to the enemy.

At the head of the Bureau of Safety was Captain Grant Englefield, thirty-six years of age, with experience measuring to twice his years. Hardened space-pilot, scientist, and with his finger always on the public pulse, he was admirably fitted for his job as guardian of public safety. But at this moment he was the target for furious protests and declamations from all directions. The lowliest citizen and the highest Government authority was blaming him for the disaster which had struck London during the afternoon—and because he had no answer to the riddle he had to sit in his office and take it.

The bureau stood on the outskirts of London—for which reason it had missed the disaster which had blasted the heart out of the city. To it were linked all the private wires and television and radio stations from which reports were sent, and not one of them had ever even glimpsed invaders over London before disaster had struck.

"I just don't *understand* it!" Englefield declared at last, getting up from the desk and pacing around in the evening sunlight. "Something of inconceivable power struck the metropolis and yet not a soul, not a damned soul, knows a thing about it. The only answer we get is a terrific blaze in the sky. We saw that ourselves, but not full on, and took it for some kind of solar reaction . . . It's a mystery."

Bob Curtis, Englefield's right-hand man and secretary, nodded slowly. He was short, broad-shouldered, sandy, and strong as an ox—a contrast to Englefield's tall, hawklike figure with the black hair and piercing grey eyes.

"My guess is an atom bomb," Bob Curtis said finally, looking through the reports.

"No, Bob. No 'plane could have dropped one. It would have been seen; and certainly no flying saucer could get through the defence ring. Even if it had made itself invisible its mass would still be there to react on the alarm system."

"Why drop the bomb from above? Why not a delayed-action one, buried at some time or other, which exploded when the limit had expired?"

"I'd thought of that, but that policeman's report disproves it. There was that blinding glare in the sky, which certainly could not have come from a ground-bomb, unless there was some kind of atomic current produced between earth and sky." Englefield pondered this point and then shook his head. "I can't credit that, either. I don't believe it *was* an atom-bomb. The effect was too completely disastrous even for an A-bomb. It was something else, but I'll be damned if I know what. I shall probably get a better idea when the investigators have finished probing the ruins."

"There's certainly never been anything like it," Bob Curtis said soberly, looking at the London map on the wall, around an area of which a red circle had been drawn. "Look at that! Everything within an area bordered by Islington, Bow, Canning Town, Greenwich, Peckham and Pimlico has been utterly wiped out. Not one brick on top of another! The death roll at the moment runs close to the million mark, and the injured are in the same number."

"You don't have to tell me! I . . ." Englefield broke off as the intercom buzzed. He snapped it on. "Yes? Englefield speaking."

"The Prime Minister to see you, Captain."

"Oh?" Englefield looked surprised then straightened up. "Yes, I'll see him at once, of course."

In another moment the office door opened and an elderly grey-headed man was admitted. He had the thin features of an aristocrat, and the chin of a man of iron resolve. Thrice-elected as Prime Minister of Britain, Sir Douglas Jaycott was a man to be respected and—at times—feared. He was one who never hesitated over ruthless and unpopular decisions if he thought them necessary for the good of the country.

"A pleasure, Sir Douglas," Englefield said quietly, shaking hands. "Do sit down."

"Thank you." The Prime Minister seated himself at the huge desk and then opened his brief-case. "Half-an-hour ago I received a most extraordinary communication," he said, coming straight to the point as usual. "It was sent direct to my Berkshire home where, fortunately, I have been staying during the summer months, otherwise I'd have been caught in that disaster. However, this is the message."

The Prime Minister handed it over, a transcription from a radio communication on an official Government form:

> *You have seen what has happened to London. It can, and will, happen elsewhere unless you are prepared to convey authority to accredited agents who will be named to you. If you are prepared to come to terms for the transfer of power to ourselves you can signify your willingness by firing an explosive rocket ship at a two-mile height as a signal.*
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Englefield read the message through twice, his thin lips hard. Bob Curtis studied it over his shoulder; then both men looked at Sir Douglas.

"Where that message came from I don't know," he said, shrugging. "It was received by my personal radio station attached to my residence, and since it came on the private waveband nobody else can know anything about it. Somebody knows my private wave, obviously—and the only ones who do, as far as I know, are the members of my Cabinet."

Englefield gave a rather dry smile. "I wouldn't put too much faith in that, Sir Douglas. Expert agents can learn anything they wish, including all about private wavebands . . . What do you intend doing about this message?"

"Ignoring it, of course! No upstart scientist calling himself 'The Cosmic Flame' is going to hold *me* to ransom."

Englefield excused himself as the visiphone buzzed. He picked the instrument up and listened with an expressionless face as a long, detailed report was given to him. He made notes, murmured his thanks, and then switched off.

"Somebody," he said quietly, "is in possession of a vast amount of scientific power. That was the chief of the investigators whom I sent to investigate this mysterious central London business. He tells me that there is no sign whatever of that cataclysm having been created in central London itself. It was handled from a distance, maybe by remote control, possibly from above, but just as possibly from the ground. Yet we know nobody was busy in space in spite of brilliant light in the sky."

The Prime Minister was silent for a while, his bony hands clenching his knees; then he looked up sharply.

"Have you heard what the people are saying, captain?" he asked brusquely.

"About me and my bungling department? Yes, I've heard. But we had no warning and . . ."

"I don't mean that. I mean that, as usual, Mr. and Mrs. John Citizen have formed their own ideas as to what has happened and, following mass psychosis, they all believe it. There are two schools of thought. One says the disaster was the first onslaught from the race of interplanetary beings owning flying saucers; and the other says it could be the work of Professor Clay."

"Clay?" Englefield frowned as he tried to recollect; then he gave a start of remembrance. "Oh, you mean Gideon Clay, whom we put on the job of inventing incendiary apparatus for use against possible invaders?"

"The same." And the Prime Minister's lips tightened significantly.

"But Clay is up in Manchester, or somewhere near it," Bob Curtis exclaimed. "Didn't you send him up there to some rambling old place so he could experiment in peace?"

"We did," Sir Douglas agreed. "And the public has remembered it. Everybody says he is the only man likely to be able to produce a devastating effect with a scientific weapon—and in that I agree. The public know him as a brilliant scientist who has given lectures on the relation of science to power-politics, and that suggests to the mass-mind that Clay *might* be putting some of his ideas into practice!"

"Ridiculous!" Englefield protested. "Clay isn't that sort of a man. I'd stake my reputation on it . . ."

"Listen to me, captain," the Prime Minister interrupted, hunching forward in his chair. "A disaster of unparalleled magnitude has occurred, so vast indeed that we dare not release the full figures of the numbers dead, or the cost in property destroyed. Yet we have to satisfy an outraged public. We have no real lead on the business except one—that Professor Clay is a devotee of power-politics, a scientist engaged on incendiary apparatus, and *might* be the cause of our troubles."

"You think he might have sent that message to you?" Englefield asked, thinking.

"Possibly. He knows my private waveband. To cut it short, captain, I want him arrested on suspicion. Even if we are proven wrong afterwards we will at least have satisfied public opinion, and that we *must* do. The heart cannot be blasted out of the centre of London without us doing *something* about it."

Englefield shrugged. "If you wish him arrested, sir, I shall have to do it, of course, though I think it's crazy. I'll leave for the north to-night with Bob here if you desire it."

"I do desire it, definitely. You have detector apparatus, so surely you might be able to find out if Clay *is* working on incendiary equipment without actually seeing it?"

"Only if the apparatus is in action," Englefield answered, "otherwise our detectors would be dead. However, I'll make reservations for the Climax Hotel in Manchester and . . . Yes?" he asked, as an office messenger entered.

"This sealed message was just delivered, captain. It's for Sir Douglas."

The Prime Minister rose and took the message. He tore the envelope, read the slip through, then glanced up.

"No answer," he said; then when he, Englefield and Curtis were alone again he added: "Another message from our blackmailing friend. Read it."

Englefield read, his brow darkening.

> *Since you received our first message over two hours ago and have ignored it—no signal rocket having been fired—you are warned that Glasgow will, in three hours from now, suffer the same fate as London. Warn the people if you wish. Henceforth, unless you come to terms as prescribed, cities the world over will be attacked with increasing violence and suddenness. To find us is impossible and we mean business.*
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"He—or she—keeps on referring to 'our' and 'us' and yet signs himself 'Cosmic Flame'," Englefield mused. "It leaves us in doubt as to whether we are dealing with just one person or an organisation."

"Get to Glasgow right away," the Prime Minister ordered. "Never mind Manchester and Clay for the moment. Have your detectors ready and see if by any chance you can trace the source of the disturbance. If you can, then we may be able to take a big stride towards the truth."

"We'll fix it right away," Englefield promised, "and report back to you the moment we have anything worthwhile. Bob, make reservations, will you? Not in the city centre but the outskirts. We're not risking being blasted."

"I'll send an emergency call through immediately," the Prime Minister said, picking up one of the six telephones. "Maybe our unknown attacker has over-reached himself this time . . ."

CHAPTER TWO

It took Englefield and Bob Curtis thirty minutes in a faster-than-sound aircraft to reach Glasgow, and the time was half-past six when they touched down at the airport, the sun still high in the summer sky, the evening warm despite this northern latitude. Loaded with their equipment a prearranged taxi whirled them to the Zenith Hotel on the outskirts of the city, and here—if the Cosmic Flame spoke the truth—they would have an hour-and-a-half to prepare themselves before anything happened. They took over the room specially assigned to them, set up their extremely sensitive detectors, and then settled themselves to wait for something to happen. They had only just made their preparation when there was a knock on the door. It was the manager, very earnest and very respectful.

"Gentlemen, we have just received intimation that this city is in extreme danger. It is being evacuated immediately, this hotel included, and I must ask you—"

"You are aware we are from the Bureau of Safety," Englefield reminded him.

"Yes, captain, but . . ."

"We are here for the express purpose of tracing the trouble which is due to hit this city. Just let us alone, please."

"You mean you—you are both prepared to be wiped out, like those unhappy people in London?"

"The assignment is not without risk," Englefield agreed dryly; "However, there it is . . ." and he closed the door firmly.

From then on, for the next twenty minutes, the hotel was full of bumps, cries, and noises. Then it became quiet as not a soul remained. Englefield glanced at his watch: it said 7.30. He moved to the window, lighted his pipe, and gazed pensively upon the silent buildings and empty streets. The city authorities had done their job properly. There was not a soul in sight. Not a 'bus, not a car, not a thing. Glasgow, mighty teeming city of millions, might have been dead.

"Gives you a sort of end-of-the-world feeling," Bob Curtis said, with an uneasy glance around him. "We've had plenty of assignments that were tough, in space and on Earth, but this sitting in the middle of an empty city waiting to be blown up is really tough."

"We're not in the middle," Englefield reminded him quietly. "We're well on the edge of the city centre, and that should save us if the same technique and area as was used in London happens here."

"I still have butterflies in my stomach," Bob growled, and made a final check over the instruments. Then he said: "These detectors are open to anything which can happen within a radius of two hundred and fifty miles, providing the exciting cause is infra-red vibration—so if Professor Clay *is* up to something in the Manchester region these detectors will show it right away."

Englefield nodded absently, his eyes on the sky. It was still sunny, but the sun was low. Then he remembered the fate of those who had been caught looking heavenwards when London had been blasted, so instead he looked down again to the deserted streets. Immediately outside the hotel a lone piece of paper whirled in the evening breeze, the only sign of movement.

Bob Curtis lighted a cigarette, pulled at it jerkily, and kept his gaze on the instruments. Englefield studied his watch. It was 7.45. Not far distant a clock tower confirmed the time in mellow chimes.

"I can't see Clay being mixed up in this," Bob Curtis said presently, shaking his head. "He'd never take such a risk or be so inhuman. It's something bigger, much bigger, and even though we can't see it I have the feeling it's something to do with those flying-saucer merchants."

"Get down to facts, Bob," Englefield advised, glancing at him. "Not even flying saucers can get past our Earth-barriers; they're too sensitive for that. And also don't forget that the flying-saucer people—whoever they may be—have no need to dictate terms by radio. They have enough power to smash everything on Earth at one blow if they wish: their far-reaching scientific knowledge, compared to ours, proves it."

"Maybe you're right," Bob reflected. "And I'd like to know where those saucers hail from, too. Certainly isn't the inner planets because we've explored them all and they're more or less dead."

Englefield did not answer. Everything was very quiet, very still. The sun glimmered on distant windows. The paper in the street was quiescent now. Emptiness. A cloudless sky. He glanced at his watch and it read 7.52.

"Hey, take a look!" Bob Curtis ejaculated suddenly. "The meters are reacting!"

Instantly Englefield hurried from the window and studied the array of portable equipment —in particular the detector-pointer. It was quivering under the action of some excitation and the distance indicator, when coupled in, gave a reading of 220 miles.

"That could be Clay!" Curtis gasped, his eyes wide. "It is about that far to outer Manchester from here. Clay's *using* his incendiary apparatus and . . ."

"Just a minute: don't run away with yourself," Englefield interrupted, his voice taut. "He's using his apparatus, yes, and because of that we get a reaction even at this distance—but we have no guarantee that incendiary beams are pointed in this direction. They could point towards London and we'd *still* get a reaction because this apparatus is sensitive only to an output of X-ray and infra-red vibrations no matter in which direction they are travelling."

"The fact remains, Cap., Clay is at work—and we've about five minutes to go. Conclusive, isn't it?"

Englefield reflected. "Not necessarily. Let's see now, Clay's principle for incendiary defence is to transmit infra-red vibrations over X-ray carriers, which pass through solids, the infra-red excitations producing a molecular vibration sufficiently accelerated to cause fire, chiefly because of the tremendous speed at which electrons, exposed to the exciter beams, start moving. But fire isn't our only trouble. It's veritable blasting and destruction."

He stopped. The clock tower nearby was chiming eight. On his watch the second hand swept round to the 60 mark—and then came the incredible happenings which had smitten London. There was a glare as bright as a dozen noondays, drowning the evening sun in searing brilliance. Englefield and Curtis were flung off their feet as the hotel, on the outer edge of the circle of disaster, rocked and swayed wildly. Part of the ceiling came down and the walls fissured. From outside there was the gulping roar of an earthquake followed by the thunderous concussions of buildings crashing inwards.

For nearly ten minutes the hell lasted, the two men lying flat on the swaying floor, their heads covered with their hands for protection. The window broke and hurricane wind roared inwards. Once, through slitted eyes, Englefield looked in the window's direction and saw a

sky like liquid mercury, inconceivably bright as though the sun's photosphere had suddenly come to within a couple of miles of Earth. There was heat, the smell of burning, smoke rising throughout the hotel. Then, as abruptly as it had commenced the onslaught stopped.

Bob Curtis got up slowly and sniffed in alarm.

"Place is on fire, Cap.! We'd better get out quick!"

He dived for the smashed window, elbowed the remains of the glass out of the way, and then looked outside. For a moment or two he was so stunned he forgot his own danger. As far as he could see, following a rough circle on the edge of which were lop-sided but mainly undamaged buildings, was utter ruin. Smoke, flame, dust, and not a thing standing. Stone itself had flowed into lava. The heart of Glasgow, as had been the case with London, had vanished.

"Start climbing," Englefield said, looking out of the window. "I've been looking at the detectors but the vibration has smashed them. Hurry up, man! Down to the street before the place goes up in hell's fury."

Bob nodded and began to slide down the nearest roof pipe. Englefield had seen the ruin around him but had not commented, chiefly because nothing he could say could make any difference. He dropped down behind Bob Curtis to the empty street and they glanced back at the smoking hotel and shattered buildings about it.

"Now what?" Bob asked. "We can find safety on the city environs if that's what we want."

"What we want is the airport and a 'plane—if we can find either. Since the airport's in the city centre it will probably have been burned to a crisp and the 'planes with it. We can but see, anyway. Come on."

They began moving, and at about the same time those citizens who had been on the outer edge of the city started to return. In a few minutes Englefield and Bob found themselves in the midst of hurrying men and women, ambulances, fire brigades, hurtling cars—all the vehicles that could be found. The city was dead no more: already the inhabitants were at work trying to sort out the disaster.

As Englefield had guessed the airport was blasted flat. It was a brown, smoking area in the dying light of the evening sun and every 'plane and space-machine which had been upon it was burned to ashes or melted to unrecognisable plasma . . . So Englefield used his authority and commandeered a passing car. The driver took him to the next nearest airport at Airdrie and from here he radioed direct to the Prime Minister on the private beam.

"Yes, reports are coming in," came the Prime Minister's troubled voice. "The Cosmic Flame struck at the exact hour and second he said he would. And you say Glasgow's heart is destroyed, captain?"

"Utterly, sir. Not one stone left on another. From my personal observations of the disaster I cannot credit any man with incendiary apparatus being able to execute such well-planned havoc—but the fact does remain that our detectors gave a reading on incendiary apparatus a few minutes before the cataclysm came."

"They did?" The Prime Minister's voice became eager. "What location did they give?"

"Two-twenty miles south, which *could* be outer Manchester and Professor Clay. If you wish it we'll fly there immediately and arrest him on suspicion."

"Most certainly! Everything points to him being involved—and I'll order investigators to leave immediately for Glasgow and report in detail on the catastrophe."

"Very good, sir. We'll deal with Clay immediately."

Englefield switched off, jerked his head to Bob, and together they left the radio department and hurried across the airfield to a fast 'plane. Piloting it themselves they reached the Manchester airport when darkness had fallen, though it was still quite a while to midnight. Using a private car, a Government man driving it—they travelled through the centre of the Northern city and to its southernmost outskirts. They went beyond the residential sections and presently began to follow a quiet road which led by the side of the river Mersey. So, finally, the car stopped in a dark, tree-overhung lane, and the lights were switched off.

"Wait for us," Englefield told the driver, then with Bob Curtis beside him he strode up the lane to the iron gates of an out-of-the-way residence.

It was old-fashioned, remote, specially selected by the Government as an ideal place for Clay, Government scientist, to work on his defence plans in peace. He had not even a servant. His daughter, Dorothy, did everything for him, the one person completely reliable since she was devoted to her father and his research.

"He's at work," Bob commented, nodding towards the newly-built annex, with its lighted ground-glass windows.

Englefield did not answer. He removed the telephone from the gate-pillar's interior—its position only known to those in connection with Clay—and depressed the signal button. After a moment the voice of Dorothy Clay came to him, obviously a little hesitant.

"Yes? Who's speaking?"

"Captain Englefield, Miss Clay—Bureau of Public Safety. I must see the professor immediately. Open up, please."

"Give the identifying signal, captain, please."

"The night is dark, the atom is born," Englefield answered, and the line clicked as the girl switched off.

Then the massive iron gates, actuated by electricity, began to open slowly and the two men passed beyond them to the drive. They reached the house and two huge metal doors opened to admit them. So they gained the hall and the bolts clicked back in place on the main doors. Light came into being and Dorothy Clay stepped out of the little control room which lay inset in the hall wall. She was a slim, keen-featured brunette with intelligent brown eyes. In years she was probably about twenty-five.

"Good evening, captain." She shook hands cordially, and then with Bob Curtis. "I was not expecting visitors, so if you find things untidy just don't look. You can't work in a lab. all day and keep the place straight as well. Do come in."

She led the way into a cosy living-room, the lights glowing warmly on the furniture. Everything was untidy—as she had said—papers and charts lying in all directions, but there was a homeliness about everything just the same.

"Dad will be in in a moment," the girl explained. "I've told him you're here. Please sit down . . ." She brought cigarettes from the table and offered them, then she frowned. "Is something wrong, gentlemen? You look troubled."

Englefield was saved from answering the question as Professor Clay himself came into the room. Immediately the atmosphere changed. Here was a man who was no stoop-shouldered dabbler. He was massive in build, with a great craggy face, lofty forehead, and wild mane of grey-streaked black hair. Fierce intolerance glowed in his deep-set grey eyes; his hand-clasp nearly broke the knuckles of each man in turn. Professor Gideon Clay was a rare combination —a thinker, a dreamer, and a man of action. He had the power of making dreams come true no matter who or what suffered in the process.

"Well, gentlemen, what's wrong?" he asked bluntly. "I'm in the thick of important work and I don't welcome interruptions—even from the Bureau of Safety."

"I'd like a word with you in private, professor," Englefield said.

"Why? There's nothing you can tell me which my daughter can't hear as well. She knows all my secrets—and will continue to do so."

Englefield cleared his throat. That he had known in advance how tough a man Gideon Clay was did not make his task any the more simple.

"I am acting under the direct instructions of the Prime Minister, professor," he explained. "You may be aware of the disasters which have hit London and Glasgow to-day?"

Clay looked puzzled and then glanced at the girl. She raised and lowered her shoulders negatively.

"What disasters?" Clay demanded impatiently. "For heavens' sake, man, what is all this *about*? Here I am up to my eyes in work, just in case there should be invasion, and you start talking in riddles."

"London and Glasgow have been partly destroyed," Englefield said deliberately, then as Clay looked at him blankly he gave the details. The scientist stood brooding for a moment when the narrative had been told; then he gave an enquiring glance.

"Well, there it is! Maybe invasion, maybe some crack-pot scientist with a dangerous weapon . . . What the devil has it to do with *me*?"

"According to our detectors, professor, you switched on your incendiary equipment at seven fifty-two this evening."

"That's right. What's so extraordinary about that? I switch it on at all times of the day and night to make tests."

"Just tests?" Englefield's eyes were sharp.

"Excuse me, captain, but what are you getting at?" Dorothy Clay asked, stepping forward. "Are you trying to tie up these unexplained city onslaughts with my father's apparatus?"

"Personally, no—but I have orders to obey. My instructions are to arrest you, professor, on suspicion."

Clay stared for a moment, then fury swept his rugged face.

"What the devil are you raving about? Great heavens, you don't imagine I'd do a thing like that, do you, and send a lot of blasted schoolboy threats afterwards? I'm a scientist, man, and I respect my profession! I . . ."

"I know just how you feel, professor," Englefield interrupted, his voice quiet, "but I still have to ask you to come along. Better get your hat and coat."

His face nearly purple with anger, Clay stormed out of the room, muttering to himself as he went. Dorothy Clay watched him go, then glanced back at Englefield. Her eyes were bright with indignation.

"I never heard of anything so preposterous!" she declared. "Dad's the soul of honour when it comes to science even if he does sound aggressive. It's—it's lunacy!"

"Afraid it is, Miss Clay," Bob Curtis agreed uncomfortably. "Trouble is, we have to do as we're told."

The girl swung away. "I'll come too," she said. "I can prove dad's innocence up to the hilt."

But she did not find this so easy when the bureau headquarters in London were reached. The assembly of power in the room was frightening too. There was the Prime Minister, several members of his Cabinet, three famous legal men, and a scattering of experts. In the

midst of them Professor Clay was forced to sit, his hair flowing wildly, a look of dogmatic impatience on his powerful features.

"Why don't you people speak the truth and say you're looking for a scapegoat?" he demanded, glaring about him. "Just because I chanced to be working on my incendiary apparatus at the time the Glasgow business happened you think *I* am the nigger in the wood-pile."

"Tell me something, professor," one of the experts said. "How great a range has your incendiary equipment? How far will the infra-red beams reach on their X-ray carriers?"

"Three-hundred miles."

"Which would put London and Glasgow equally within range of your South Manchester laboratory?"

"Anybody can see that!" Clay snorted; then he banged the desk violently. "But I had nothing to do with these upheavals. I didn't even know there had been any until I was told. My daughter and I were busy in the lab. all day, and I've no time for a lot of blather on the radio. You'd better look elsewhere, gentlemen—and quickly!"

"There is nowhere else to look," the Prime Minister said. "You have frequently said in public speeches that you believe science should rule the world. You have apparatus which could produce the effects which befell Glasgow and London. I cannot ignore those coincidences—and until the matter comes to public trial, or is cleared up in some other way, you will stay under arrest."

Clay opened his mouth and then shut it again. Fury just would not let him speak. Englefield, who had been studying the famous scientist in his impersonal way, suddenly got to his feet.

"I would like to put it on record, sir, that I strongly disapprove of arresting the professor," he said bluntly.

The Prime Minister gave him a cold glance. "Why?"

"Because I think, with all respect, that you and the other gentlemen here are jumping to conclusions. You're making use of circumstantial evidence because, in the dilemma, you cannot do anything else to satisfy public demand. The professor is right: he is being used as a scapegoat."

No expression registered on the Prime Minister's face. He looked away from Englefield to Clay again.

"You will be detained, professor, until the trial can be convened. You, Miss Clay, will kindly stay within call at an hotel in the city. That is all."

There followed an awkward few minutes whilst the white-faced girl took leave of her father, then Clay himself was taken out of the big office in the company of two plain-clothes men. Only then did the Prime Minister return his attention to Englefield.

"I don't consider it very wise of you, captain, to disagree with the findings of the Government," he said brusquely.

"I'm sorry, sir, but I stick to my opinion. In this search for a scapegoat the professor has become the victim—but it does not seem to occur to anybody that he is the only living man who might *save* us from further disasters. He is one of the world's greatest living physicists and if this unknown strikes again, as he surely will, we need a man who can deal with the situation. That man is Gideon Clay. He's not a criminal, and never will be."

"Legally, we are satisfied," the Prime Minister said. "In the course of my term of office I have often been compelled to take decisions which seem harsh—but they always proved their

worth afterwards. I abide by that now. As for you, captain, I do not see you can help us much if you are so at variance with our decisions."

"You mean I'm dismissed?" Englefield snapped.

"As from now, yes. The Inter-Bank will forward your salary in lieu of notice. Mr. Curtis will take over in your place."

Bob Curtis, who had been glancing from one to the other, shook his head. He got to his feet, stocky and determined.

"Sorry, Sir Douglas. Where the Cap. goes, I go. I think just as he does: that this is the biggest miscarriage of justice ever. You can send my salary on, too. Our rooms are still standing, as far as I know."

Englefield gave a stiffly formal nod and left the office with Bob behind him. Out in the corridor they looked at each other. Bob gave a shrug.

"I've heard of dying for your principles," he mused. "I s'pose this is something similar?"

Englefield smiled faintly and clapped him on the shoulder.

"Thanks, anyway, for the support, Bob. We'll find some other kind of work somehow. Definitely I won't be a party to that sort of double-dealing . . . We'd better get back home and see what we can think of next."

They headed down the corridor for the elevator, but before they reached it a figure emerged quickly from one of the right-angled passages. It was Dorothy Clay.

"Captain, can you spare a minute?" She caught at his arm urgently. "I really must talk to you privately. I stayed here on the off-chance of catching you."

Englefield shrugged. "I'm afraid that whatever you say to me can't be of much use now, Miss Clay. I am no longer in the Bureau of Safety; nor is Mr. Curtis here. So—"

"You mean you got dismissed?"

"Yes," Bob Curtis growled. "For standing up for your father."

The girl's troubled face changed expression. Her dark eyes became bright.

"That's wonderful!" she exclaimed, and Bob looked at her doubtfully.

"Not to us, Miss Clay. We've got to start all over again somewhere and——"

"I meant it's wonderful because you believe in my father. That makes it essential that I tell you one or two things. Where can we talk privately?"

"There's an all-night restaurant next door," Englefield answered. "Might as well give them some custom. Come on."

He was going to take the girl's elbow but Bob Curtis got there first, so with a resigned smile he followed into the elevator. Five minutes later all three of them were seated in a corner of the cafe with coffee and sandwiches before them.

"Father got so little chance to defend himself, I think I should fill in the blanks," Dorothy said, as the two men looked at her expectantly. "Whoever is doing this dreadful business in attacking cities has already approached dad and tried to win him over to the cause of scientific aggression."

Englefield's expression changed. "Why on earth couldn't he have said so? If it can be proved that somebody has——"

"It can't, unfortunately. That is probably why he kept quiet—but I do know that on two occasions since we went to that house near the Mersey he has been approached—once by telephone and the second time by a stranger. After that, dad fixed those electrically-controlled gates and doors to keep any invaders out. He told me that his life was in danger—that a scientific criminal organisation was trying to get the secret of the incendiary equipment from

him. Whether the secret is wanted for the organisation itself or for sale to an interplanetary agent who may be connected with the flying saucer people I don't know. It seems reasonable to assume that these two recent attacks have been launched by the same organisation."

Englefield clenched his fist. "If only there were some proof of this it might be instrumental in getting your father's release. But without it we're powerless."

"I can't see him staying long under arrest," Bob Curtis said, giving Dorothy an encouraging glance. "Whoever is back of these onslaughts is bound to create some more—and if that happens when Professor Clay is in prison that proves his innocence, doesn't it?"

"Yes, but——" The girl shook her head worriedly. "Surely the thing is to *prevent* more disasters happening? And something else is troubling me, Captain. As long as my father was sealed in his laboratory at home and could control the various electric devices to protect himself he was more or less safe—and his equipment also. But since we left home the machinery is unwatched and the electric guard, which can only be switched on from inside, has been left off. What happens if, in the interval, agents of this organisation have been busy?"

Englefield gave a start and got to his feet quickly. He glanced at his watch.

"Well, I suppose we ought to get some sleep, but there's no time for it. We'd better get back to your place immediately, Miss Clay, if only to safeguard things. I may not be in the Bureau any more, but nobody can stop me working on my own. Let's go."

Englefield paid the bill and hurried from the restaurant. Outside the building he hailed a taxi and it whirled him, Dorothy, and Bob to the temporary airport. From there it was not a long hop to the Manchester area. Englefield brought the plane down in the field at the rear of the lonely old residence and then followed the girl as she led the way through the after-midnight darkness.

The fact that the main gates were swinging open worried her, and she was even more troubled when she had no difficulty in opening the two metal front doors. Somebody had been busy in the interval. Her worst fears were confirmed when, on switching on the light in the laboratory annex, she found herself looking on comparative emptiness. There was not a sign of Clay's valuable equipment anywhere.

"We're—too late," she whispered, glancing back over her shoulder to where Englefield and Bob Curtis were standing.

Englefield came forward slowly, looking about him. There were marks left in the floor where heavy equipment had been bolted down.

"At least this proves your statement to be correct, Miss Clay," Englefield said finally. "Whilst you and your father were away somebody has been busy. Evidently the place was watched night and day for a chance to arise. However, it may be all to the good. If the apparatus is being tested anywhere within two hundred and fifty miles we have detectors which can spot it and give the exact direction."

"You mean we did have," Bob corrected. "We're no longer with the Bureau, remember. We can't do a thing."

"Oh yes we can!" Englefield set his jaw. "I'm not accepting the sack as easily as this: we've learned too much since. Miss Clay, have you a beam radio equipment?"

"Surely—in the corner there." Dorothy nodded towards it.

"Good. I'll contact the P.M. on his private wave and tell him what I've found out . . ."

Englefield crossed over to the equipment and switched it on. After a long pause the voice of the P.M. came through.

“Englefield speaking, sir,” Englefield said. “I thought you ought to know that I’ve returned with Miss Clay to the Manchester area and have found that all Professor Clay’s equipment has been stolen.”

“Stolen!” Sir Douglas sounded startled. “But how on earth could heavy equipment like that be moved? I know exactly how big it was.”

“Obviously the thing was planned, sir. It appears that an organisation was keeping tabs on Professor Clay and——”

“I’ve received another message,” the P.M. interrupted. “I’ll read it to you——”

“Do you think you should, sir?” Englefield gave a dry smile. “I’m no longer an employee of the Bureau, remember.”

“I’m waiving that, Captain. You know too much about this business to leave it. Forget that difference of opinion——”

“I can’t, sir. I still believe Professor Clay is innocent.”

“Very well then: you can have your chance to prove it. I am not going to stand in the way of that. The public is satisfied for the moment with Clay in prison—but listen to this: ‘*First London, then Glasgow, and you still take no notice. In case you think our power is limited we shall strike henceforth at various parts of the British Union, at home and abroad, without warning. When you have had enough you know what to do. Fire the signal rocket. The Cosmic Flame*’.”

“Well, do you need any more proof that Professor Clay is innocent?” Englefield demanded. “He could hardly send that message when he is in prison, could he?”

“I’m not prepared to answer that, Captain. Agents working for him on a prearranged plan could have sent the message. It came on the private waveband—and Clay knows it, of course. Anyhow, I have communicated this warning to the principal cities under British control and the authorities concerned must look out for themselves. Meantime, you had better come back to London and go further into this business.”

“I intend to, sir. I want to get detectors to work and see if I can’t discover where the Professor’s incendiary equipment has gone. The moment it is switched on, if within two hundred and fifty miles, we can trace it . . . I’ll return to London immediately.”

CHAPTER THREE

During the night Melbourne was attacked in the middle of the Australian afternoon. The news was immediately radioed to London and faced Englefield and Bob Curtis when they arrived at the Bureau the following morning to carry on their usual jobs. Dorothy Clay they had fixed up in an out-London hotel where she could be readily on hand if need be.

"Melbourne, eh?" Englefield sat thinking at his desk, his unlighted pipe between his teeth. "That tells us something, Bob. Incendiary equipment if used from this country could never have reached as far as Australia."

"Unless it was carried that far, Cap."

"Why should it be? Be more sensible to attack a town in this country than go to the other side of the world . . . No, I don't believe the incendiary equipment has anything to do with it. By the way, what about detectors?"

"I've got the boys on them, sir. They're working in relay shifts henceforth, night and day, and certainly they would be on the watch during the night. Evidently no reaction or we would have heard about it."

Englefield turned back to the reports on the desk and studied them carefully for a while. Then he said:

"One thing particularly noticeable about these disasters, Bob. Every one involves an area which is identical in every case—a circle with a diameter of approximately six miles. That would seem to suggest that destructive power is limited to a radius of that particular size."

"Which is big enough!" Bob whistled.

"True—but it's interesting. I'm trying to rid my mind of all ideas about incendiary apparatus and think of another angle to account for our troubles. I keep remembering how the sky becomes intolerably brilliant during these onslaughts—and yet we never get a report of invaders having been seen."

Baffled, he sat pondering, then picked up the intercom phone as it buzzed.

"Detectors have located incendiary equipment, sir, a voice told him.

"Right!"

Instantly Englefield jumped up from his chair, jerked his head briefly to Bob as he quickly explained, and then hurried from the office. In a few minutes he and Bob were in the big radio laboratory underneath the main office, looking at the reaction meters as the operator controlled the current.

"Due east, one hundred and twenty miles, sir," the operator said. "We——"

He broke off with a start of alarm, staring at the wall in front of him. It had started to glow mysteriously, deep red colour welling through it. Then sound came from it, similar to the droning of a swarm of bees. Suddenly it began to melt and a wave of searing heat blasted from it.

"Out of here quickly!" Englefield cried, dragging the radio operator from his chair. "This is the work of an incendiary beam deliberately aimed at this building. We can't fight it. Outside, before the place vaporises."

He blundered to the door, calling to the staff as he went. Out in the corridor he pressed the emergency fire bell and then headed for the safety doors as rapidly as he could go, Bob hard on his heels. With little more than thirty seconds to spare the entire staff managed to reach the

outdoors and by that time the entire building, together with those immediately contiguous to it, was glowing brightly with flameless fire. Here was the effect of pure molecular vibration, the ever increasing velocity of electrons causing the dissolution of matter itself and producing furious heat and waves of energy in the process . . . In ten minutes the Bureau of Public Safety was a ruin of crumbled masonry and twisted girders, the immensely valuable equipment which had been within it gone forever.

His lean face grim Englefield surveyed the debris as it became obvious that the distant incendiary beam had been cut off, then he looked at the harassed men and women gathered about him.

"Report to the Labour Authority," he instructed. "You will be advised as to where you may continue work. I am going to see the Prime Minister. Come with me, Bob."

Bob nodded and jumped into the private car nearby in the official parking ground. Fifteen minutes of furious driving brought them to Sir Douglas' country home and they found him in his library going through a maze of reports and correspondence.

"Hello, Captain—Mr. Curtis." He shook hands, his face weary from lack of sleep. "I'm glad you looked in. I've been getting all reports I can to help this terrible business, and I was intending——"

"We have the location of Clay's stolen equipment, sir," Englefield interrupted. "And that equipment has destroyed the Bureau of Safety."

"What!"

Englefield gave the details. "Which doubles our problem," he finished. "This was a plain incendiary equipment attack from a great distance, and nothing else. Somebody knows that we are getting near the truth, so the building was destroyed along with all its records. The effect, incidentally, was quite different from the onslaught which rained on London and Glasgow yesterday. What more proof can you need that Professor Clay is not responsible?"

"I do not believe Clay *is* responsible, Captain, but I have to satisfy public opinion—and apparently Clay is safer under guard than working on his own. Whoever has taken his equipment is certainly not slow in using it and obviously understands science, too. What do you intend doing next? Tracing this equipment's location?"

"Yes, sir—but I want your permission to bomb the spot concerned. That apparatus, now in the wrong hands, is as big a danger as the other mystery-equipment which is laying waste to our cities. It's got to be wiped out."

"I'm not so sure of that." The P.M. reflected, rubbing his lean chin. "It's a wonderful protective weapon in our hands, Captain. To destroy it seems sacrilege. Better to try and capture whoever is operating it."

"Very well, sir, if that is what you want. We'll be on our way immediately. We can be even quicker if we can use one of your private fast planes."

"I'll arrange that immediately," the P.M. agreed, and switched through to the hangars at the rear of his residence. As a result Englefield and Bob Curtis found a fast machine, fully equipped with defensive weapons, at their disposal.

Englefield took the controls, set the flier hurtling into the morning sunlight above the P.M.'s expansive estate, and then turned eastwards. This done he set the automatic pilot and from his pocket pulled the paper on which he had made notes from the detector before the Bureau had been destroyed.

"Here, Bob, work these out," he said. "I've got to watch our flight."

Bob nodded and studied the figures and technical signs; then he began to transcribe them on the chart at his side. After a while he began to frown.

"That's odd!" he exclaimed. "A hundred and twenty miles due east from London brings us in the midst of the North Sea. We fall short of the European coastline by several miles. There just couldn't be anything in the middle of water."

"There could—and probably was. A seaplane, maybe—or even a submarine. Incendiary equipment works just as well through a water barrier as a solid. Which suggests we are looking for something mobile! Fine help that is."

Having the uncomfortable feeling that he was chasing rainbows, Englefield settled at the controls and watched out intently as he streaked the plane over the English coastline. Below lay the grey waters of the North Sea, with the coast of Europe a smudge in the distance. Bob Curtis gave directions over and again, until finally the point given by the detectors had been reached—but there was nothing visible. Even ships on their lawful occasions were remote from the spot at the moment. Only gulls flying low down, the summer sunlight, and the heaving waters.

"Blast!" Englefield muttered. "At this rate the incendiary apparatus and whoever has it will never be in the same place twice. All detection will be useless since the stuff will have been moved on before we can investigate."

"Must be a mighty powerful 'plane or something to carry the equipment," Bob pointed out. "It weighs several tons."

"So do lots of things. Modern planes could carry the load all right. Everything has apparently been worked out to the last detail."

With a sigh Englefield turned to the radio to communicate his failure to the Prime Minister, then he paused as he realised the wall of the cabin was starting to glow gently. It slowly became red—and by that time Englefield was out of his seat.

"An attack!" he cried, strapping on a parachute. "We're in an incendiary beam at this very moment—Jump for it!"

Bob Curtis dived and moved at top speed. Englefield dragged open the cabin door. They both flung themselves out into space, tugging at their rip-cords as the flyer burst into flame, its metal work fusing and melting at the same time. They hit the water a few seconds ahead of blazing debris, then casting off their parachute harnesses they looked about them.

"Could be near, could be far," Bob spluttered. "Obviously we were spotted——"

"Take a look there!" Englefield cried, staring up at the sky, and shaking the water from his eyes Bob gazed above—with some trepidation. A fleet of circular objects were hurtling across the heavens with stupendous velocity.

"Flying saucers!" he yelped. "Maybe we've been barking up the wrong tree all the time. Probably they *are* the cause of our troubles."

Englefield did not answer. He was watching one of the flying saucers in particular. It trailed behind its fellows, slowed down, then seemed to hover. From it there suddenly blasted a beam of pale orange shade, and the ocean boiled and fumed intensely as it was struck. An explosion of terrific violence followed hurling a column of water two hundred feet into the air, out of which vomited pieces of metal and remains of some object.

"What goes on?" Bob demanded, swimming steadily to nowhere in particular. "Did he blow something up?"

"He did. And possibly the source of our incendiary troubles. I do believe," Englefield finished, in amazement, "that saucer is coming to help us."

In a few moments his belief was confirmed. The mighty disc, still moving slowly, turned back on its tracks and began speeding to ocean level. From beneath it floats suddenly sprouted, taking its weight as it descended like a vast metal plate and began to bob up and down on the rollers.

"This *is* something!" Bob gasped. "First time anybody has even got within viewing distance of a saucer. And look at the size of the thing!"

Englefield did not say anything. He had already taken note of the object. It resembled a vast wheel with its main power plant apparently in the hub. The "spokes" connecting to the rim of the wheel were probably tunnels, the outer rim being used for viewing purposes. In any case it was all conjecture, and he watched intently as an airlock opened presently, and a figure became apparent holding a very ordinary looking rope.

Bob struck out and grasped it, and Englefield followed suit a moment or so later. They were both dragged through the water and then helped up to the airlock's rim. They looked at their rescuer but could see little about him which was different from themselves. Certainly he did not look like a man of another planet.

He motioned the two into a narrow metal corridor and, dripping with water, they moved along it. At the end of it a door opened and ahead was a brightly lighted circular walled tunnel which seemed to extend to infinity. It occurred to them that it was probably one of the "spokes" of the flying saucer, and since they had no alternative they walked along it. To their surprise they found that mysteriously generated heat rays had dried their clothes by the time they had gained the door at the tunnel's end. It opened automatically, and they walked into a room tastefully arranged. It looked rather like a cross between a laboratory and a high-class office. A man sat at a big desk, upon which were papers, charts and meaningless diagrams. Behind him was a circular window through which the ocean was visible.

Bob gave Englefield a puzzled glance, but Englefield was not looking. He was gazing in silence at the man at the desk. Nobody could have looked more earthly. He had well-brushed grey hair, a finely developed forehead and sharply cut features. Presently he looked up and smiled.

"Please sit down," he said, in perfect English, and motioned to normal-looking chairs beside the desk.

Englefield and Bob obeyed, their brows knitted. The man at the desk smiled even more widely.

"I felt it necessary to break our usual habit of evasion to explain a few matters to you," he said. "First I must introduce myself. I am Adam Charteris."

"Oh," Englefield responded, rather woodenly. Having been to other worlds he had expected a fantastic name. "It sounds quite—er—normal."

"No reason why it should not, Captain Englefield. I was born in London. Dammit, man, don't look so thunderstruck. I'm not a being from far out in the cosmos. I'm an Earthman, same as you and Mr. Curtis."

"But you're on a flying saucer—and apparently have some position of standing."

"I am the master of this ship—and of all the others. But excuse me a moment." Adam Charteris turned to the equipment at his elbow and pressed a switch. "Get under way at cruising speed," he ordered. "We do not wish to attract attention. Use the usual process if we are pursued."

"Just what," Englefield asked deliberately, "is all this about? What are you doing aboard a fantastic craft like this? Don't you realise that for some time—years, in fact—flying saucers

have been feared as investigating other-world craft?"

"Yes, I am aware of it. Flying saucers have been noted down singly and in groups for as long as a century. In the year 1950 I was one of the men who pursued one of them in a faster-than-sound airplane and I was never seen again."

Englefield sat up a little. "Why, yes! I thought the name sounded familiar. I have seen it in the records. You were an ace pilot fifty years ago. But that's ridiculous. You can't be much more than forty-five now!"

"By normal standards I am eighty-six," Charteris said, and his face crinkled with amusement.

Englefield gave Bob Curtis a look of bewilderment. Outside the big window there was only the high cirrus of the summer sky. Without a sound or sense of motion the flying saucer had climbed to 80,000 feet and was moving at tremendous velocity.

"The matter is not so baffling as it would appear," Charteris said, "and I am explaining it because it seems most of the folks on Earth believe we are partly or wholly responsible for a series of cataclysms which have befallen you. We are not. I disavow all connection with such happenings . . . However, to explain matters: The flying saucer which I pursued in 1950 was a solitary one. I found my plane anchored to it by attractor beams, and before I could do anything I was dragged from it, through an airlock and into the machine. My own plane was cast free and presumably fell to earth. I was not heard of again . . ."

Charteris gave a reminiscent smile. "Frankly, I was scared to death! Yet the beings running the ship seemed friendly enough. They talked to me by telepathy and were obviously of a high order of intelligence. They looked rather like us, but were taller and more dome-shaped in the heads. However, to cut a long story short they took me to a synthetic planet lying sixty million miles beyond Pluto—right out in the depths of outer space. A tenth planet has often been suspected, as you know, and Marinax—the name of the planet—is the reason. It is all metal, very non-reflective to keep its position a secret, and everything is kept inside it. Within is a perfect city and all scientific amenities."

Englefield sat listening, realising how far he had drifted by now from his original objective. All thought of the attacks on Earth and incendiary equipment had been banished for the moment by this unfolding of a fascinating tale. And Charteris told it with the easy air of a man thoroughly familiar with every detail.

"It seemed that this scientific race had come from a point unnamed in the cosmos and built themselves a synthetic planet near to a world possessing intelligent life—Earth, that is. They had searched everywhere and not found the type of life they wanted—oxygen breathers like ourselves, of a fair order of intelligence. As you know, Mars' race is dead, and Venus has only the troglodyte types. So Earth was selected for their happy hunting ground. They were a dying race, Captain—only about two hundred of them still being alive fifty years ago. No females had been born for generations and therefore no newcomers had been born. The wish of these scientific people was to perpetuate their genius by proxy—select certain types and confer on them scientific gifts to enable them to carry on the race. They had free choice. If they didn't relish the idea they could be returned to Earth: otherwise they would stay inside Marinax."

"And then?" Englefield prompted, as there was a long pause.

"In this highly scientific civilisation I met many people who had vanished mysteriously from Earth in past years. I could mention many famous names. Sometimes I came across over a hundred men and women connected with ships which had mysteriously vanished without trace. You know how long the list of missing people is: I found most of them in Marinax. All

of them were content to stay. They had married, had their lives doubled in length by scientific means and were—and are—content to be the foundations of a new, specialised race.

"Because I happened to have considerable scientific knowledge I was named by the Master as the future ruler. I took over that position five years ago when the last of the super race died. I am now looking for suitable men and women to increase the race, which accounts for our periodic visits to Earth. There are three thousand men and women in Marinax, and we need as many more. We shall continue to appear over Earth until we have removed all the men and women we need. Certainly we don't intend to invade Earth for that would kill our own objective. What we do propose to do when the race is skilled enough is suggest a union of all the internal and external planets in the System. But that is in the distant future and won't come in my lifetime, though it may be in that of my son's."

"You mean you just snatch men and women away whether they like it or not?" Bob Curtis asked. "Sounds a bit ruthless to me."

"It is," Charteris admitted, "but we have to do it that way to avoid giving away too many secrets to those who chase us. The person or persons removed can always return to Earth if they prefer it—but so far none have wished to. We select only those with no particular responsibilities to a family or the country. We take them from any part of the world. Frankly, I would not return to Earth with its badly handled politics and power-crazy people for all the gold you could give me. Marinax is the perfect planet, populated by happy people who have sane, sensible laws. I rule it—though I have never quite appreciated what a responsibility it is."

Englefield gave a slight smile. "We set out to solve one mystery—the situation of cosmic incendiary beams—and solve the flying saucer problem instead. Incidentally, I did not thank you for saving our lives."

"I did it for one reason, Captain, because you are the type we need in Marinax, and so are you, Mr. Curtis. You will notice we know your names? For a long time you have been noted down as two very possible 'converts.' Neither of you have any family ties and you are both good scientists. We also know that you are healthy. We have instruments which can prove it. Unknown to you—and hundreds of other people—you have been photographed, analysed, and metaphorically taken apart . . . Why not come back to Marinax with us and see for yourselves?"

Englefield shook his head. "I have work to do, Mr. Charteris. It may even amount to saving Earth from destruction. You are aware, I suppose, of what has been happening?"

"Yes, I am aware." Charteris nodded slowly. "Cities are being blasted—and Professor Clay is suspect. He may be responsible or he may not: I wouldn't know. My only concern with Earth is that I find on it the people I require."

"You may not if this onslaught continues. The whole planet may be laid waste."

"Even in the wastes there are survivors. You cannot kill human life that easily, my friend. Grass grows over the ruins, remember."

Englefield looked puzzled. "From the way you talk, one would think you are not interested in these onslaughts."

"I am not. Earthlings are always fighters among themselves and I have no intention of interfering. I gave orders for that submarine emitting incendiary rays to be wiped out because I hoped you would join us. I am sorry you have declined."

"So it was a submarine?" Bob Curtis asked, thinking. "We were wondering about that."

"You will find no traces of it. It was utterly disintegrated by protonic beams, and everything within it."

"Which means the incendiary equipment has been wiped out, too," Englefield commented. "The P.M.'s going to like that quite a lot."

For a moment or two there was silence, then Englefield got to his feet and crossed to the outlook window. The landscape far below was unfamiliar, flooded with sunlight. In perfect silence the flying saucer was cruising close to the stratosphere limit, its fellow vessels not very far distant and keeping pace.

"Where are we?" Englefield asked, turning.

"Over Africa at the moment, but you can be returned to Britain any time you wish."

"The sooner the better," Englefield requested. "I have a lot to do."

Charteris switched on his phone instrument and gave brief instructions. In response the disc turned from its fellows and went through an enormous arc before commencing the return journey.

"On this trip we have picked up two dozen more likely men and women," Charteris said. "The other vessels will now begin the return journey to Marinax. I can't persuade you to change your mind?"

Englefield came back from the window. "No—even though it sounds enticing. I must get to the bottom of these onslaughts on Earth. Then, one day maybe, I'll be willing to come . . . How about you, Bob?"

"Earth's good enough for me," Bob grinned. "Besides, I have a girl friend there whom I hope to see a good deal more of. That attracts me more than a perfect world."

"Girl?" Englefield repeated in surprise. "What girl? I never knew you were even interested."

"I wasn't—until Dorothy Clay came in the picture."

Englefield's expression changed a little but he did not comment on the matter. Instead he asked a question.

"Tell me something, Mr. Charteris: You have been up and down space quite a deal in your search for the right people. Have you seen anything which could account for our troubles on Earth?"

"Certainly I have. I know exactly what is causing the disasters, but I have not interfered—nor shall I—because we never take part in the disputes and power-politics of other planets."

"Then the trouble is in space, not on Earth?" Englefield asked sharply.

"You are a keen man, Captain. You tricked me into admitting that much . . ."

"I can't understand your lethargy in dealing with the situation."

"It is perfectly simple. If we take up the cudgels for one side or the other, bring our powers to bear to destroy the force which is attacking Earth, we shall automatically have taken sides. We are not going to do so. Only by neutrality can we preserve our dignity, and our ideals."

"I see." Englefield studied the young-old face for a moment. "Then help me in one particular, Mr. Charteris. What is the exact location of this 'something' we're looking for?"

"I'm sorry, Captain. You cannot oblige me when I need you for our race, so I cannot oblige you."

"Not a question of being obliging!" Bob Curtis protested. "We want to know so as to save further destruction."

"I am aware of it—but I am afraid you must fight your own battles."

And Charteris was not to be moved. He hardly spoke again until the flying saucer touched down in an empty field some five miles from the outskirts of London. He accompanied Englefield and Bob as far as the airlock and then shook hands.

"I hope, one day, you'll change your minds, gentlemen. You are both the kind of men we need—especially you, Captain."

"Suppose," Englefield asked, "I do have a change of heart one day. How do I get in touch with you?"

"You will have no need to. We shall watch you constantly, and when you are ready so shall we be. We know much more about you, Captain, than you think."

Englefield said no more. He stepped down to the grass with Bob beside him; then in silence they watched the airlock close. There was a brief pause—then with a backdraft of superheated air the flying saucer's mighty bulk darted upwards with inconceivable speed and lightness, rapidly becoming a speck in the blue of the afternoon sky. In a matter of seconds it had gone.

Englefield picked himself up slowly from where the blast had thrown him. He looked at Bob Curtis.

"Makes you wonder if we dreamed it," Bob muttered, rubbing his eyes.

"We didn't dream it, Bob." Englefield had a faraway look. "My only regret is I couldn't go back with Charteris . . ." He became suddenly practical again. "However, we've things to do. We'd better get on our way to London and send a message to the P.M. from the nearest radio station."

CHAPTER FOUR

That evening the Prime Minister convened a special conference in his own home, chiefly because he was reasonably certain that it could not become involved in any disaster which might again afflict London. To the conference he called all his Cabinet, Englefield, Curtis, and everybody likely to be connected with the trouble afflicting Earth. The meeting was strictly informal, the men gathered in the immense lounge, and the supply of wine and drink was plentiful.

"Gentlemen, we have come to the stage where we have got to have some definite action," the Prime Minister said. "We all know that London, Glasgow and Melbourne have been savagely battered, and we are pretty certain from the last message received from this unknown attacker that worse is to come. The public is up-in-arms, demanding to know what we are going to do. Captain Englefield here, though his views and mine do not always coincide, is still working on the problem and has one or two things to say."

"Definitely," Englefield agreed, looking about him. "This morning Mr. Curtis and I traced incendiary apparatus into the North Sea, and we might have got near enough to discover who was operating it only a flying saucer intervened . . ."

Seeing the looks of surprise he went into full details. There was a general air of doubt when he had finished.

"I don't expect you to believe the story Charteris told me," he said, shrugging. "In any case it doesn't signify. The main thing is that he told me our trouble lies in *space*, and it is there that it must be sought."

"Which means you discount the incendiary equipment entirely?" the P.M. inquired.

"I never did believe it was our main source of trouble. It caused minor interruptions, certainly—but it won't do that any more. It has been blasted to pieces, and those who stole it from Clay and then operated it. It's my firm belief," Englefield continued, "that we should release Professor Clay from prison and seek his opinion. His innocence has been entirely proven, gentlemen."

Judge Billings, the famous legal authority, pursed his lips and glanced up.

"In what way, Captain?"

"By the fact that destruction goes on and messages are still received whilst Clay is in prison."

"That is not conclusive," Billings replied. "Anything so stupendous as these attacks on Earth must be in the hands of a powerful organisation—and there is no reason why Clay should not be at the head of that organisation, which is carrying on whilst he is under arrest. Candidly, Captain, we dare not let Clay go without definite reason. Public opinion is already at boiling point. He can only be released if, after trial, the evidence won't stand up."

"With that," the P.M. said, "I agree."

Englefield sighed. "I confess I cannot see why you are so afraid of public opinion," he said. "Anyhow, I have my own plan to work out—and I think I should go into space and see if I can locate our trouble."

"Space covers a vast area," one of the astronomers reminded him. "Where do you propose to look?"

"I have worked out a theory, gentlemen. In the first place we know that the area of destruction is always the same in extent: in the second place these cataclysms always happen in the daytime. Never at night. In the third place, the sky itself becomes so blinding bright that sight is destroyed if one is unlucky enough to glance heavenwards. Those things add up to one scientific fact. A cosmic condensor."

The Prime Minister looked surprised. "A what?"

"I mean something which condenses the sun's heat and light waves to a focus, and everything within that focus is utterly liquified. As a boy I used to burn my name on trees with a magnifying glass. I think we have a big boy up there with power-crazy notions who is trying to burn his name on Earth, using a titanic condensor to do it."

"But, man alive, it's impossible!" the astronomer exclaimed, laughing incredulously. "Have you stopped to think that a condensor big enough to destroy the centre of London by solar radiation concentration would be *miles* in extent? And it would also have to be flawlessly ground to bring the radiations to a focus. No—I don't credit that angle for a moment."

"Well, I do!" Englefield set his jaw obstinately. "And I want Professor Clay's opinion on my theory. You can't deny him permission to speak on something which may prove his innocence."

"If such an object as you have hypothesised does exist, Captain, there is still the possibility that Clay might be responsible for it—with an organisation to help him," the Prime Minister pointed out.

Englefield got restlessly to his feet. He began pacing, looking at the faces around him.

"I never saw any gathering so adamant, so sublimely sure of themselves!" His voice had a bite in it. "Not one chance will you give to the one man who can probably help us."

"He can speak if he wishes," the Prime Minister said. "I can arrange a television pick-up with the prison."

He turned to the instruments on his desk and gave instructions. After a matter of perhaps five minutes Clay's rugged face appeared on the screen. Seeing the gathering reflected in his own screen in the prison main office he gave a sour smile.

"I observe the wolves are congregated," he commented. "What do you want now?"

"Professor, I have a theory," Englefield told him earnestly. "You are scientist enough to say if it is feasible. I hope it is because I am doing my utmost to clear your name."

Englefield outlined his hypothesis, and Gideon Clay remained in the screen, his heavy brows drawn down, big jaw out-thrust.

"Certainly it's possible," he agreed. "In fact it's the only damned idea that will hold water. I'd already worked out such a possibility and was going to submit it to you, Sir Douglas, if I'd been given the chance. Englefield has hit the nail on the head. I suspect a mass of natural material equipoised between Earth and Sun, which is condensing solar rays."

"Did you say natural material?" the Prime Minister asked.

"Certainly. We haven't a science skilled enough to construct a condensor lens big enough to inflict disaster on an area some six to ten miles in diameter. It must be a natural condensor, probably with a metallic ingredient."

"Metallic?" Englefield queried.

"That's what I said. How else can it be moved about? If it has a metallic content it only needs powerful magnetic beams, such as our science possesses, to move it to any position. With a little careful calculation men of criminal intent and scientific knowledge could very

easily handle such a mass in outer space, particularly if it be balanced between Earthian and solar fields. That, I believe, is just what *is* happening. The fact that the attacks only happen when daylight—and therefore sunlight—is directed towards the Earth's surface seems to make it conclusive."

"A metallic object cannot concentrate light and heat," the astronomer objected, and was rewarded by a fierce glare from Gideon Clay's image.

"I said a metallic *ingredient*!" Clay barked. "It might only be fifteen per cent, or less, of the whole mass. It would be enough for magnetic beams to act upon. The rest of the mass could be transparent mineral substance, possibly even the remains of an exploded planet through which remains Earth is travelling in her orbit. If a single raindrop can turn into a magnifying glass and start a fire, as has sometimes happened, a mineral substance in space on a giant scale and acting like a raindrop is not impossible."

"Thank you, Professor," Englefield said quietly. "I'm going to take a look for myself."

"Whilst I sit here and rot, I suppose?"

"I cannot grant your release until your innocence is proved to the hilt, Professor," Sir Douglas insisted. "I'm sorry, but there it is."

He switched off, and the image faded from the screen. With a thoughtful glance about him he added: "I have the feeling that Professor Clay has added to his guilt by what he has just said."

Englefield gave an amazed glance, and Bob Curtis rubbed the back of his head.

"I mean," Sir Douglas explained, "that he has the details so beautifully worked out it is hard to credit it is merely a theory. If such an object *does* exist Clay will find it tough to explain in court when he is not supposed to have even seen the—er—condensor."

"With all due respect, sir," Englefield said, "it sounds to me as though you are ready to jump at any chance to nail down the Professor and, if possible, get him branded as the greatest criminal who ever lived. Anyway, I'm setting off into space in the next hour to look for myself. I'll get what records I can. If there is anything there we must organise a fleet to attack and destroy the thing."

"Agreed," the P.M. assented calmly. "And good luck, Captain."

"There is one thing puzzles me," put in the astronomer, and his voice halted Englefield and Bob Curtis as they reached the door. "How is it, if such a thing does exist, that the space travellers from Earth to the inner planets have never mentioned it? Surely they would see it?"

"I doubt it," Englefield replied. "Such an object must be almost transparent, like a lens. Earth does not reflect as much light as it receives, of course, which makes the sun the main luminary *behind* the giant lens. It would never be noticed in the absolute dark of space. You only see anything glass-like by reflection, and there wouldn't be any in this case."

"You are an able scientist, Captain," the astronomer smiled. "Yes, of course, your explanation is quite logical. And it will make it difficult for you to spot this object."

"Not with a black-light detector," Englefield replied. "It will pick up dark star locations by their mass-field, so it will locate a massive invisible lens just as easily. I am assuming that if spaceships control this lens they will be near to it and black painted with platinum-dust dye, making them totally invisible against spatial backdrop. Detectors will find *them* too."

"You know what it means if they see you approaching?" the Prime Minister asked gravely.

"I shall work out a plan, sir. I'll find out something, somehow."

Englefield took his departure, Bob Curtis following close behind him. They were in their official 'plane speeding back towards ruined London before Bob spoke thoughtfully.

"Queer, the way the P.M. is so down on Clay, Cap. I don't quite understand it."

"Prestige," Englefield growled. "The only thing any public figure ever thinks about. The P.M.'s scared of public reaction, that's all."

"And our own plans? What happens? Seems to me we're going to stick out our necks a mile. If we're spotted approaching through space——"

"We shan't be. We're making a vast detour. I've got it all worked out, and I'll show you my plan when we get back to our rooms. I also think we should tell Dorothy Clay what we're up to. She must be worried sick about her father."

"Any excuse to see Dorothy is all right with me," Bob grinned, and the prospect made him hum a tune to himself as he gazed out on the soft darkness of the summer night.

"Things seem quiet from our incendiary friend at the moment," Englefield commented after a while, as the lights of outer London began to float in view below. "He's probably waiting to see if the Prime Minister breaks down and does something to kow-tow. Which he never will. It's comforting to realise that the night is a protection."

He said no more as he began to set his course for the temporary airport. Once he had landed a staff car whirled him and Bob Curtis to Dorothy Clay's hotel, and she greeted them warmly on arrival.

"It's wonderful to see you both again," she exclaimed, her dark eyes bright with questions as she motioned them to be seated in the small lounge. "I've been wondering how things were going."

"Both well and badly," Englefield replied, taking the drink she handed across to him and Bob. "On the one hand we are on the track of something which might help to prove your father's innocence and destroy this menace to Earth. On the other we have the Prime Minister's unrelenting attitude towards your father. It's puzzling, and I can only ascribe it to Sir Douglas's fear of public opinion."

Dorothy waited, half huddled in the armchair, listening as Englefield went on explaining. With help from Bob Curtis he related everything to date, including the experience with the flying saucers.

"And you actually mean you gave up the chance of perhaps living in an Utopian planet for the sake of clearing my father?" Dorothy asked in amazement.

"Let's say I've a job to finish," Englefield smiled.

"For myself I don't want any Utopia," Bob added. "I could be happy on Earth, with this menace removed, and the—the right person to live with."

Dorothy's only reaction was a faint smile, then she looked again at Englefield's lean, resolute features.

"So you propose going out into space to look for trouble, is that it?"

"That's it, Miss Clay. But I have a plan. It is well known by space pilots that if you are travelling with the sun against you it is impossible to see anything ahead. Instruments have to be used. Naturally, as you will know, the glare of the sun in outer space is overpowering. So my idea is to approach the approximate position of this hypothetical condenser with the sun behind me: that will completely blind any guardian spaceships which might be near it. And it will also make it possible for the mineral-lens to show up by reflecting the sun, which in turn will enable us to take photographs."

"Yes—very well worked out," the girl agreed, nodding slowly. "But it will mean an awfully wide detour, will it not?"

"I intend to fly out as far as the asteroids, then turn in a half circle, thus returning in the direction of Earth with the sun behind me. It's the only way to avoid possible attack, and even at that it isn't foolproof."

"It seems strange that this unknown organisation has not attacked and destroyed spaceships on their way to Mars and Venus."

"Not altogether. To destroy a few spaceships would not be much use. What this unknown wants is mastery of the Earth, and everything is bent towards that end. The spacelanes are left unmolested as long as the vessels do not seem inquisitive. Anyhow, I propose leaving within forty minutes, so I'd better be on my way. I thought you'd wish to know how things were."

Englefield rose to his feet, Bob beside him. The girl rose too, her intelligent face pensive.

"Is there any law which says I cannot come too?" she asked.

"Well—technically, no. But I'd rather you stayed here. It is possible your father may be brought to trial whilst we are away, and you'll wish to attend that."

"Whatever trial there is will have to be adjourned until you can make a report, Captain: you know that. I'm not the kind of woman who can sit down day after day, night after night, waiting and wondering. Since you are setting out to prove my father's innocence I want to help. It's as much my concern as yours. I'll not be a burden, you know. I'm a trained scientist with an A certificate for space navigation."

"What more do we want?" Bob asked, shrugging, as Englefield demurred. "One more will be a great help."

"I'm thinking of the danger, Bob."

"Isn't there just as much here if a second blasting is attempted?" Dorothy asked, and that decided Englefield.

"Very well, come with us. But I must notify the Prime Minister in case you are needed."

He picked up the visiphone and contacted radio headquarters. They in turn switched the phone through on to the selector band, and he tuned in the private waveband frequency. The face of Sir Douglas's private secretary appeared and then the Prime Minister himself.

He listened with what seemed impatience to Englefield's words and then interrupted:

"Yes, yes, very well—as you wish. Captain, I've just had more bad news. Bombay, Hong Kong, and Constantinople have all been attacked within the last two hours! One after the other."

"They have?" Englefield bit his lip. "All on the sunward side of the globe, I notice."

"Yes, but that isn't the point. The carnage is terrible and the destruction beyond computation. Since there was no warning this time the death roll will be tremendous in such thickly populated areas. And do you notice something? The attacker is not confining himself to the British Union any more; he's attacking all and sundry. There's only one answer. I shall have to consult other country governments and see if they won't agree to our coming to terms with this—this infernal organisation."

"Terms!" Englefield laughed shortly. "There won't be any, Sir Douglas. It's plain from the warnings that you hand not only your own authority, but everybody else's into the clutches of this unknown. Do that, and we're finished. Naturally you still think Clay is back of it?"

"I haven't had any evidence to show he's not."

"I'll get it somehow," Englefield snapped. "I'm heading out into space right now."

He switched off and explained the circumstances briefly to the set-faced girl. She did not comment. Turning away she went into her bedroom, returning after a minute or two in the slacks and blouse of a space-aviatrix. Englefield opened the door for her, and Bob came up in

the rear. In ten minutes they had reached the temporary spaceport on London's outskirts and climbed through the airlock of one of the fastest and most well-equipped machines.

"I'll take the controls," Englefield said, as the airlock was closed and sealed itself. "You take over navigation, Bob; and you, Miss Clay, handle the radio and outside meters."

Bob and the girl nodded and settled themselves in the pressure racks. Englefield sounded the warning to those outside and then put in the power. The rocket-jets blasted, and with an ever-mounting scream the vessel began its upward leap to the darkness of the night, trailing behind it a fiery lane of exhaust sparks.

Faster and faster in that breathtaking acceleration which was essential to throw off the initial inertia. Taut and strained, weighted as heaviest lead, all three endured the tortures of the damned as pressure upon pressure loaded itself upon them. They could not move, the springs under them flattened to capacity. Then as they felt that their eyes would burst and that the flesh would rip from their bones, the awful strain began to relax and the automatic controls took over.

Through the porthole the mighty rim of Earth was visible in grey against the utter black of space. They had cleared the last remnant of atmosphere and were travelling at a speed commensurate with normal gravity. Getting up from the pressure racks they took up positions in sprung seats at the control board.

"We'll need to turn in a big arc from this point onwards," Englefield said, looking outside. "The sun is behind the Earth since we came from the night side. We head out to the asteroids and then turn in from there. Figure it out, Bob."

"Right, Cap. On with it now."

Dorothy consulted her instruments and gave the technical details and readings.

"Fuel consumption, 0-five," she said. "Spaceward strain twenty seven per cent. Solar and Earth quadrant registering five two six in the double-field."

"You know your job, Miss Clay," Englefield approved.

"With a father like I have, Captain, it would be fatal if I didn't."

Recalling the fierce individuality of Gideon Clay, Englefield gave a smile and said no more. There was little time to talk of irrelevancies. The machine had to be controlled and all the dangerous radiation currents of space circumvented. A series of shifts was arranged which resulted in one or other of the trio always being on the watch—and so, gradually, the space flier left Earth behind, crossed the orbit of Mars and headed thereafter in the direction of the asteroid belt. They did not actually come within range of it because that minefield of hurtling dead rocks was too dangerous to negotiate. The Belt was always avoided on outer-space trips, machines heading far above or below its length.

The curve inwards began, back towards the shrunken sun, heading for an imaginary line with Earth, far distant now, as the focal point. According to the chronometer, the trip had taken several Earth-days, and would yet take several more.

Sleeping—waiting—watching. There was nothing else to do in space; then gradually the sun came round to the rear of the flier and Earth, remote and green, with the smaller whiteness of the Moon beside it, loomed straight ahead.

"From here on," Englefield said, "we've got to watch our step. Somewhere on this invisible line we're following we ought to catch sight of our quarry. Better switch on the black-light reflectors, Miss Clay."

Her slender fingers snapped the switches, and the screens operating on the radar principle came to life. She glanced up, her intelligent face half smiling.

"Wouldn't 'Dorothy' be easier?" she asked. "You two boys have treated me with tremendous deference since we started, and I appreciate it—but surely we can break down a little?"

"We're doing it right now, Dorothy," Bob Curtis assured her, grinning—but Englefield said nothing. Lean-jawed, his eyes sharp, he was staring into the depths of space. Dorothy gave a shrug and turned back to the screens.

"No reaction here, Captain," she said.

"Keep on watching, Dorothy. Anything can happen."

She gave a momentary glance of surprise. Evidently he had heard her invitation to use her Christian name and had taken it as matter-of-factly as he took everything else. She gave Bob a look, and he shrugged.

The machine had been cruising for perhaps a further thirty minutes, in which time it lapped up tens of thousands of miles, when Dorothy gave an exclamation.

"Reaction!" she cried. "Take a look, Captain!"

Englefield snapped on the automatic pilot and moved across to the screens. Upon them two converging bars of light were centring over each other, the sure sign that the recoil wave being sent out ahead of the vessel had reflected from something.

"Maybe Earth itself," Englefield said. "Let's get a distance reading."

He pressed a button. Delicate equipment began to function and a pointer needle swung gently. It stopped on the 180,000 mile mark.

"Not Earth, Cap," Bob said urgently, glancing at him. "It isn't the Moon either because our beam isn't trained in that direction. It's dead ahead, between us and Earth."

"And is probably *it*!" Englefield's eyes were gleaming. "We will have to go dead carefully from here on. Keep watching the screens, Dorothy. Bob, get the space-cameras focused in case we spot anything."

"Okay." Bob began moving. "And I hope they don't spot us or it's the finish."

"Why should it be?" Englefield asked impatiently, "or haven't you properly weighed up this plan of approach? We are more or less certain by now that some kind of spatial lens is being used and that means it can only operate with the sun *behind* it. At the moment the sun is behind *us*, so obviously its rays can't be concentrated upon us. The only attack we might get is from space machines, and we'll be ready for it."

"You certainly worked out this plan very nicely, Captain," Dorothy complimented him. "Approaching in the eye of the sun, and the sun can't be used to attack us——"

"Something else can, though," Bob interrupted quickly, gazing through the window. "Take a look ahead, Cap. Have I got a liver attack or are those specks space machines headed this way?"

Immediately Dorothy and Englefield joined him at the port, gazing fixedly. Against, the total dark of space with its eternal blazoning of stars four bright specks were moving. They were certainly not stars else they would have been stationary. Englefield reached out and snapped on the telescopic window—actually a powerful lens device which swung in over the porthole and shortened the visionary distance by three quarters. The four specks had become pin sharp: space machines painted dead black and almost invisible. The brightness was coming from the trail of rocket exhausts they were emitting which showed they were moving at high speed.

"Man the guns," Englefield ordered, and he moved to the controls. "I'll drive: you two fire as often as you like. Four to one is going to be tough, but we'll do what we can."

He settled himself firmly in the sprung seat and kept his eyes on the specks as they rapidly grew in size. Dorothy and Bob, crouched before the protonic-guns, watched the ships loom into the hair-sights. Then Englefield spoke.

"Don't fire yet, you two. We don't know for certain there are attackers in these machines. Let them take the first bite. If they do let them have it with everything you've got."

The loudspeaker, always left in open circuit whilst in space, suddenly reacted. A man's clipped voice spoke.

"Captain Englefield, you are ordered to halt your machine or have it destroyed. Take your choice. You have sixty seconds in which to decide."

Englefield switched on the microphone. "Who is giving the order?"

"The Cosmic Flame. Fifteen seconds have elapsed."

Bob twisted his head round sharply from the protonic-gun.

"Cap, we've found it! Your guess—and the Professor's—was right! I'm sailing into these murdering swines this very moment——"

"Hold it!" Englefield snapped. "You'll do as you're told while I'm in command, Bob. I said open up when they do—and not until. I want to find who's at the back of all this and if we liquify those spaceships we'll never manage it. I'll tell you when."

Bob sighed and waited, his eyes on the sights. The girl was motionless beside him, her slim body tensed, the controls of the frightful weapon waiting for the pressure of her fingers. If it became necessary to fire it would hurl a stream of protons into the invaders, the stream being generated from the atom-power plant. Bob's gun was similar, but with a more concentrated, and therefore more devastating, focus.

"Sixty seconds!" the voice rapped in the speaker. "I await your answer, Captain Englefield."

"It's the same as it was a minute ago," Englefield replied laconically and then he darted the machine suddenly to one side, so rapidly it looked to Bob and Dorothy as though space had turned a somersault. Then, recognising evasion tactics, they did their best to keep their position, the shell of the vessel swinging round the gyroscopically level cabin.

But the oncoming vessels did not fire—so, to his chagrin, Bob had to sit helplessly and wait. Englefield, busy with the controls, noticed after a while that he was losing freedom of movement. He was being dragged inevitably inwards towards where the four machines were now no more than twenty miles distant.

"They've got attractor beams on us, Captain," Dorothy said, glancing over her shoulder. "What do we do? Blast ourselves free?"

"No. Let them carry on."

"Have a heart, Cap!" Bob protested. "In a few more minutes we'll be chained to them, and after that anything can happen."

"I know what I'm doing." Englefield's face was sternly resolved. "If we wipe out these ships we'll have to fly away into space to escape the consequences, and be further away than ever from finding who is behind this cosmic mirror business. As it is we might get to know something."

"And die for our trouble," Bob growled. "You don't suppose they'll offer us tea and sandwiches and turn us loose, do you?"

Englefield did not answer. He was in no mood for levity. Fixedly he sat watching as, his own power plant now no longer of avail, the vessel moved in to the four captors. At last there

was a slight bump as the two space machines anchored. Around them flew the remaining three vessels.

"You will consider yourselves prisoners," announced the voice in the speaker.

"He's telling us!" Bob got up in disgust from before the protonic-gun. "Range is too steep to do any firing now, Cap. We're sunk from here on."

"Stop growling and keep your eyes open," Englefield told him. "We may learn plenty. My only regret is I had to drag you into this, Dorothy."

"You don't have to worry about me. I knew what I was taking on when I came."

Englefield said no more. He was watching through the window. The anchoring space machine and its fellows were on the move again, gathering speed through the void—and at the high velocity with which they moved they rapidly covered the distance to an area wherein, momentarily, something caught the light of the sun.

"Great heavens, that's it!" Bob cried hoarsely. "Did you ever see anything like it?"

He, Dorothy and Englefield forgot everything else for the moment in their study of the object hanging in space. It was roughly circular, and had a diameter of perhaps ten or fifteen miles. From its rough, quartz-like edges it was obviously a natural phenomenon, quite possibly a piece from a planetoid which, by the whim of cosmic currents, had drifted into this position. The surface of the thing turned sunwards was covered completely by an enormous rivetted circle of metal, painted black. Stray reflections here and there escaped with a diamond brightness where the sun caught them. In the distance, at the further side of the mighty natural lens, four more space machines were at anchor, hovering in the mass-field of the stupendous mineral planetoid.

"Yes, it's a work of Nature all right," Englefield said at last, as the movement of the captive vessel dragged his own machine across the underside of the lens. "Almost perfectly transparent—or would be with the shield removed. Evidently that cap arrangement is slipped aside by magnetic beams when it becomes necessary to allow the sun to stream through."

He was not able to say more for the four space machines at anchor had now been reached. Slowly the captor vessels came to a halt, likewise held by the gravity of the lens.

"You will put on spacesuits and enter the lock of the vessel third away from you," said the voice in the speaker.

Englefield obeyed, and much more reluctantly Bob and Dorothy did likewise. In a matter of minutes, using a pull line, they had crossed depthless space to the machine which had been named, and stepped through the twin airlocks. They were in a big control-room. Beyond it were metal doors leading to other departments in the big vessel.

"Take off your suits," ordered the same voice, this time speaking through a ceiling speaker and hearable through the suits' audiophones.

Englefield, Bob and Dorothy glanced at each other as they removed their helmets and allowed the rubber mesh of their suits to sag to the floor. Then one of the doors opened and a man appeared. It seemed queer, out in space, for him to be attired in a well-cut lounge suit. Even more queer was the fact that as he came into the circle of the ceiling light he stood fully revealed. . . .

He was Sir Douglas Jaycott, the Prime Minister.

CHAPTER FIVE

There was a long silence as the trio absorbed the amazing fact that they were looking at the head of the British Union. His cadaverous face was smiling a little, but the smile was crooked and the eyes were cynical.

"Why not put your thoughts into words, my friends? You just can't believe it! It is true, nonetheless."

"But—but this is impossible!" Dorothy cried. "You can't mean that *you* are mixed up in this ghastly business, sir!"

"I am not only mixed up in it, Miss Clay: I organised it. You will find seats by the wall there. Please sit down. Even if you are prisoners who are shortly to die you may as well know the facts. You have been so—er—persistent in trying to learn them."

One by one, Dorothy, Bob, and then Englefield, sat down. The P.M. half leaned against the control board, his arms folded, the same frozen smile on his face.

"Stated baldly, I am at the head of the greatest scientific organisation ever known," he explained. "I have only come into the open now because no further purpose can be served by keeping my plans a secret—as far as you three are concerned, anyway. Having achieved my objective I can speak freely."

"Objective?" Englefield repeated, his face harsh with rage. "*What* objective?"

"Control of Earth, Captain. To just be the head of the British Union, and put there by a lot of fools who didn't know their own minds, was by no means enough for me. I desired world-power, and the only way to get it was to make use of a cosmic accident which happily came my way."

"Meaning that lens?" Bob asked curtly.

"Exactly. It is a strange thing, but a politician is not supposed to be much of a scientist. I myself have studied science since I was a youth, though I have never advertised the fact, preferring politics as my chosen profession. However, when space pilots reported to me that there was an object in space which seemed to possess the property of bringing the sun's rays to a focus, I decided to have a look for myself. Out of that original investigation came the lens which has wreaked such havoc on Earth. I gathered together certain men whom I knew I could trust—chiefly because of the hold I have over them—and I set about bringing my dream of world domination to fruition. I have succeeded. Little more than a few hours ago every Government head on Earth, including myself, agreed to hand over power to the 'Cosmic Flame.' Which is just a roundabout way of saying all power has been handed to me. Nobody knows the truth; nobody even suspects it. That I have disappeared from the Earthly scene will be taken as meaning I have somehow been disposed of."

"So you betray the people's trust by destroying them?" Englefield asked in contempt.

"People, as such, have never interested me, Captain. There are too many of them anyway and weeding out will do no harm. In the mass they are disgusting. I have had no qualms over destroying so many of them. Maybe the Earth will be purer for being rid of them."

"Which sounds like the raving of a madman to me!" Dorothy declared hotly, and the P.M. glanced at her.

"If a man does something original he is always assumed to be mad," he responded. "I am not that. I know exactly what I am doing. For many successive terms of office I have been

elected the head of the British Union Government—and above all things I wish the British Union to control the rest of the world. I tried for years by normal channels and bloodless war to bring such a happening about—and failed. When Nature put a giant lens in my hand I threw scruples overboard and invented a menace. I *forced* the issue. As yet nobody knows that the British Union will now take over Earth, but that is what it amounts to. I will announce my intention at a later date, and reveal that I am the Cosmic Flame."

"And start the mightiest war in history!" Bob Curtis cried.

"No, Mr. Curtis. This lens in space assures me of victory every time. Any country which dares to rise when the truth is given out will be destroyed forthwith. You will notice how completely I disarmed everybody by making London the first point of attack? That made the rest of the world sure that the British Union was a victim, not an attacker. All part of a well laid plan. Behind me now on Earth are many bewildered members of my Cabinet, who—though they agreed we should come to terms with the aggressor, with the rest of the world—are now probably wondering what has become of me. The crews of these space machines here, and those who control the lens, know the truth of course, but they will never speak."

"Fool that I've been not to see all this before!" Englefield cried. "Your convenient stay at your country home when the onslaught on London descended; the mysterious messages over so-called private radio beams; your determination to pin the blame on Clay; your resolution not to give in. You've betrayed the world and yourself, Sir Douglas."

"Conquest in these days of 2,000, Captain Englefield, has a different flavour to that of fifty years ago. The bloodless war and propaganda technique has given way to the scientific infiltration method. I am merely claiming the world, not for myself, but in the name of the Union to which I am devoted. I expect to go down in history as a fiend, but others will remember that I conquered the world in the name of the British Union. That will have made the effort worthwhile."

"What surprises me," Dorothy said, "is that you have let us come this far and told us everything. You could have wiped us out long ago—even on Earth by some well-timed 'accident'."

"True, but that might have drawn unwelcome attention to my many Earth agents who would have disposed of you. To my Cabinet and the other men and women who rendered outside aid, I had to appear utterly impartial—so I allowed you to continue with your plans. I tried once to dismiss you and so eliminate you, and failed. However, you are here now and you have the facts. I shall allow a little while to elapse whilst Earth peoples absorb the fact that they have sold their freedom; then I will announce that Earth has been mastered—by conquest—and that the British Union is the only known authority. . . ."

Sir Douglas straightened and glanced through window on the depths of space. "After that," he finished, musing, "who knows? I have a mighty weapon. Mars and Venus can fall under it. Mars will be simple with its Earth colonists: Venus has uneducated races who can soon be brought to heel. As Napoleon once set out to conquer the world, so I see before me the fight to conquer the System. And I shall because I believe that is my destiny."

Englefield gave a bitter smile. "Jengis Khan, Napoleon, Kaiser Wilhelm, Hitler, and now Jaycott! Wherever there are men with power and unconfined ambition there will always be the goal of domination. All I can say, Sir Douglas, is remember what happened to your predecessors."

"They had not science on a giant scale to aid them—nor the fortune of an amazing accident of Nature." The Prime Minister jabbed a lean hand towards the window. "Out there,

my friends, is the weapon which will give me all the authority I need. Only a fool would ignore it."

There was silence for a moment, then amidst it Dorothy asked a question:

"And my father. What has happened to him?"

"He is still the scapegoat, and I have so arranged it that the law believes he deliberately arranged the destruction of his incendiary apparatus at sea so that nobody could use it as evidence against him. Actually I would have preferred to retain that apparatus as a secondary weapon, but that cannot be. . . ." Sir Douglas turned and smiled. "So I am without opposition. The only serious threat could have come from the race you encountered, Captain—those possessing the flying saucers. But you blithely put my mind at rest by telling me they refuse to mix with the controversies of Earthlings."

"If you ever challenge *them* you'll be wiped out of the Universe!" Englefield declared.

"I know. I shall endeavour to co-operate with them instead. I think they might be amenable. . . . However, to revert to more personal matters. I do not wish you to remain here now you know so much, nor do I wish you to return to Earth to tell everything. Later it will not matter. At the moment it might be difficult for me, until all my agents are thoroughly briefed as to what they must do, to take over control. So that leaves only one course."

"Kill us," Bob said sourly. "It doesn't take much guessing."

Sir Douglas stiffened a little. "I would thank you, Mr. Curtis, to remember that I am the head of a world-Government, and not any back alley criminal desirous of putting a victim to death. I was born an aristocrat and, thank God, I shall remain one. I abhor bloodshed and murder, as such, though I will not hesitate to destroy to gain an end. Long ago I could have had Professor Clay killed, but I refrained because deliberate murder is repugnant to me. If he is given the lethal probe after his trial, that is the law—not my doing. For you three, therefore, I wish something which will bring about your demise without my being the actual cause of it. You understand?"

"No!" Englefield answered coldly. "It's murder whichever way you look at it—and don't start trying to tell us that a man who'll massacre millions with a solar beam is really a sentimentalist at heart!"

"Apparently I cannot convince you," the Prime Minister sighed. "Well, no matter. What I have decided to do is return you to Earth—but unfortunately you will arrive with such stupendous violence that there will be no point in looking for your remains. You will have enough fuel for your initial thrust when leaving this area, after which you will coast freely in space. When you come within the range of Earth's full gravity field—which is weakly noticeable even here—you know what will happen."

"Which, by some obscure process of reasoning, you don't call murder," Dorothy Clay said acidly.

"I don't—for one reason, Miss Clay. Some unexpected thing might even save your lives. Space is full of the unusual. If that should happen, all the better for you—but I am banking on the fact that it is a million to one against. So, having explained, kindly re-don your suits and return to your space machine."

The three rose silently, clambered back into their protective coverings and helmets and then made the journey back across the abysmal void to their own machine. This done they stood and watched as two guards came in and began to get to work on the power plant, to remove its copper block supply of fuel.

Then things happened. Abruptly Bob Curtis flung himself forward in savage fury. The enormous gloved hands of his space-suit closed round the throat of one of the men, and he bore him back against the wall, throttling him with all his ox-like strength. Instantly Englefield slammed round his own gloved fist and knocked the other man spinning in the ridiculous gravity. Two more men, just about to enter the airlock by the pull-line, received savage blows from the gloved fists of Dorothy Clay; then she slammed the airlock in their faces and spun the screws.

Englefield leapt to the control-board and pushed the speed lever across, at the same time switching power to the rockets. The effect of so suddenly applying terrific recoil was almost disastrous. The machine vomited into space with stupendous velocity, streaking up to thousands of miles in a matter of seconds. The acceleration flung Englefield hard against the control-board and would have stove in his whole body but for his suit. Even as it was he was fighting for breath and consciousness and losing both. Through intolerably aching eyes he saw Dorothy flatten to the floor, her space-suit becoming elongated as unbearable strain crushed it down.

Bob staggered and dropped, his victim on top of him. The remaining man was stretched out motionless, his suit slowly compressing. Faster the ship went, and faster still, streaking with inconceivable velocity through empty space. Already the space ships and the giant lens comprised only a speck on the face of infinity. Certainly no pursuer could ever catch up.

Faster, and yet faster. The velocity indicators were a mere haze. Englefield felt himself drowning in darkness. He was crushed lower and lower, into extinction—or so it seemed.

For an unspecified time the space machine was flung through the void by the force of disintegrating copper controlling the rockets, achieving an acceleration not only equalling that of light but exceeding it. Until at last the copper block came to the end of its life and acceleration ceased. Constant velocity had been achieved and with it came the lightness of near-zero gravity.

Lungs began to draw breath, sucking at nearly vanished air from the space-suit canisters. During unconsciousness, only a trickle of air had been drawn, which had conserved supply. Hearts began to beat strongly again. Blood circulated in maddening pins and needles. Dazed, Englefield began to move. He staggered to his feet at last, his heavy space boots holding him down. He looked around him, the light still being on, and saw signs of movement amongst the others.

Going to the air-plant he adjusted it; then when pressure read as normal he pulled off his heavy suit and helped Bob and Dorothy out of theirs. The two men who had come too were assisted purely as a matter of duty, then they looked around them sheepishly.

"You're safe enough," Englefield told them coldly. "I know you were only obeying orders in trying to ruin our power plant. It just so happened that Bob Curtis here had the sense to seize the chance of escape. But I'm still not sure what happened. We'd better check up."

He motioned the still bemused Dorothy and Bob to him, and they began a technical study of the instruments, each working out the necessary mathematics. When they had finished they looked at one another in wonder.

"It *can't* be!" Bob declared. "We're falling into error because the chronometer stopped when the power-plant ceased to operate it. That means we don't know how long we were unconscious or what distance we covered."

He looked out of the port, his forehead furrowed. Englefield looked also, and then the girl. Again they checked their figures, working on the known maximum speed of the space machine under full atomic current. The results left them stunned.

"I'm afraid we've got to swallow the truth, astounding though it is," Englefield said at last. "We've travelled faster than light and reached the stupendous velocity of 744,000 miles a second, which is *four times* the speed of light. . . ."

"Which means we're utterly lost," Dorothy said bleakly. "We're in unknown space, further —infinitely further—than any man ever went before!"

Englefield got slowly to his feet, floated a little, then peered again through the port. Only the fixed stars seemed motionless. Others, at nearer distances, were apparently moving, so stupendous was the vessel's speed. The most amazing thing of all was that half of space to the rear was totally, frighteningly black, whereas in front it was blazoned with nebulae, cosmic sluices and systems.

"That we're moving faster than light is self evident," Englefield said. "The light waves from the stars behind us are not visible because we're moving four times faster than they can reach us."

"What the devil are you talking about?" demanded one of the two men who were unwilling passengers. "What's happened? You don't mean we're in this infernal crate and can't get back?"

"Perhaps I do mean that." Englefield looked at him levelly. "Your best course is to accept the situation and keep quiet. What are your names?"

"I'm Nick Crawford."

"And I'm Walter Hargraves," said the second man.

"All right. Remember that both of you are here on sufferance, and if anybody is to blame for our predicament it's Sir Douglas Jaycott. Best thing you two can do is fix a meal for all of us. We need steadying before we try and work things out."

The two men did not demur. They knew they were beaten and under orders. Apparently they were of fair education, however, to judge from their voices and manners. Whatever criminal streaks might be in them—for which reason Jaycott had selected them for his unholy organisation—they were definitely not brutes. They even had looks, of sorts.

"It is hard to realise," Englefield said, as they ate under difficulties with the ridiculous gravity, "that though we seem to be motionless we are travelling four times faster than light. The fact that we have lost gravity, except for the ship's mass, also proves our velocity is constant and acceleration has ceased. Normally we would have died under the acceleration, but the space-suits saved us."

"Perhaps it would have been better if we *had* died," Dorothy remarked, looking up from her notes, which she had been computing between mouthfuls of food. "According to my figures. Captain, we must be somewhere about ten times further away from Earth than the North Star."

"What!" Bob Curtis ejaculated, and nearly choked over the liquid he was taking through a straw, the only way he could deal with it with absent gravity.

"Yes, that will be about right," Englefield admitted, absorbed in mental calculation.

"And you sit there like a blasted Sphinx!" Crawford shouted. "Don't you realise what it means? We can't ever get back!"

"Panic won't do you any good," Englefield replied levelly.

Crawford drew the back of his hand over his moist forehead. Englefield's rocklike calm in the midst of crisis could not have shown more to advantage than it did now. As the commander of the vessel everything devolved on him, and no commander could have been up against a tougher proposition.

"Crawford's right, you know," Dorothy said, her face drawn. "Even if we *could* get back it would take the rest of our lives, and longer, to do it. Moving at a speed we could stand, I mean."

Englefield did not answer. He sat lost in thought, eating absently at intervals, or taking a drink. Finally he rose and drew himself up to the control-board. He studied the instruments for nearly fifteen minutes before he returned to the table. The others looked at him listlessly.

"Our batteries won't last much longer," he announced. "They have only the power plant to keep them charged, and when that stops they slowly exhaust themselves, just as the chronometer stopped when power stopped flowing. In twelve hours, or less, we'll be in the dark. Now, what other points are there?"

He turned his sheaf of notes as calmly as if he were in his office and then continued: "We have disproved the law of Fitzgerald, which limits all known velocities to that of light. It is supposed that a body moving faster than light becomes minus-zero and ceases to exist. Obviously that is a misnomer. I never could see why the velocity of a body in free space should obey the same law as a non-material radiation like a light-wave."

"What *is* all this?" demanded Hargraves, in near hysteria. "Who cares about the speed of light, Fitzgerald, or anything else? How do we get back?"

"As things are, we don't!" Englefield's face was grim. "We have no spare fuel since that copper bar was quite enough for a dozen lifetimes of ordinary space flight. We are hurtling into unknown space, helpless, and if any heavy mass swings us towards it we'll crash into it and vanish from the scheme of things. So far we've escaped, but I can't see that sort of luck holding indefinitely."

Silence. The total silence of space, and a slight wavering of the battery-generated light casting on the five haggard faces.

"Suppose," Dorothy said presently, "we pooled every scrap of copper in the ship and wore space-suits to stand the awful acceleration of a return trip, could we——"

"No, Dorothy." Englefield gave her a quiet look. "I worked that out. We have only about nine ounces of copper we can use, and that's hopeless. We need a block weighing seven pounds to get back where we started."

"I suppose we're beyond range of anything those folks in Marinax could do?" Bob Curtis asked.

"Marinax?" Englefield frowned; then he remembered. "Oh, you mean Charteris? I imagine we're utterly beyond their instruments. The distance back to our own Solar System is inconceivable, and with every hour that passes at our present velocity we are adding two hundred and sixty seven million miles to the distance."

"Plus eight hundred and forty thousand," Dorothy added, with a tired smile.

Silence again—the silence of utter defeat. At last Dorothy got up and dragged herself to the window. She looked out on space—black to the rear, ablaze with stars ahead. Yet so unimaginably empty was it all there seemed little chance that the hurtling flier would ever be dragged aside. In that case it would go on—and on—and on.

"Even the Universe has an end," she said, thinking on these things.

"We're not on a universal tour, Dorothy," Bob Curtis told her, getting up and putting an arm about her shoulders. "We want to find a way to reverse our movement. If we only had enough for *that*. Our velocity would remain more or less constant, but we'd travel in the opposite direction."

"The chances of our hitting anything are remote," Dorothy commented. "I think it was Eddington who once said that in outer space the chance of being drawn to any solid object was as likely as hitting a fly dead on with a bullet in the midst of St. Paul's cathedral. Space is so utterly empty, and yet so full. The mind reels before it."

"Reverse our movement," Englefield said slowly, repeating Bob's words; then suddenly he brought his fist down on the table. "Dammit, that's it!" he exclaimed, his eyes bright.

Immediately the others looked at him in hope. He stood plunged in thought for a moment.

"Nine ounces," he mused. "At full current that's a burst of about six minutes. It might be enough to permit of a diagonal thrust which would swing us round in an arc. We'd lose velocity because of the inertia of turning, but we'd still be skipping at the devil of a lick—in the right direction we hope. If we ever got within range of our own System I'd hope for rescue—maybe from our friend Charteris who might be able to pick us up and see our predicament. We——"

Englefield stopped, looking up sharply. There was no doubt of one thing: the vessel was beginning to shift from its course. The pressure against the feet was the surest sign, and with the seconds it increased.

"Something pulling us!" Bob Curtis gasped. "Just as we said we were not likely to hit anything!"

He looked intently through the window but failed to detect anything to account for the sideways drag. Englefield switched on the black-light detector and almost instantly the twin bars, faint because they were operating on the emergency battery circuit, lay parallel over each other. The distance needle fluttered uneasily round and stopped on the hundred-million mark.

"Something there," Englefield said tautly. "A planet of extremely heavy matter, judging from the terrific pull it is exerting even at this distance. No signs of a sun, so it is not a planet in a system. Might be a dead sun: they abound in space——"

"In thirty minutes, at our present speed, we're going to hit it, Cap," Bob said curtly. "Looks like we'll have to think fast."

There was a momentary silence, Englefield's face a hard mask of thought.

"We have one chance," he said. "When this happened I was just on the point of saying we'd use nine ounces of copper to swing us round: we can't do that now with this drag upon us. All we can do is get that copper in the matrix and then use it as a cushioning jet when we're about to strike whatever is pulling us. It may save us being smashed to powder."

"And uses up our last bit of fuel," Dorothy pointed out.

"We can't fight this field, Dorothy," Englefield snapped. "If we can only preserve our lives maybe we'll be able to think further. Quickly—all of us—we want every bit of copper we can get."

He began moving swiftly, and around him the others did not lose a second in tearing free every scrap of copper they could find. Light fittings, contact points, switch blades—everything possible was sacrificed and tossed into the jaws of the power plant. The whole mass would fuse when the contact-electrodes were brought together and thereafter the brief outflow of atomic energy would be given off.

In twenty minutes the job had been done. Englefield mopped his face and looked through the port. Now that the control room was in darkness he could see the cause of the gravity-field distinctly. It was a planet of sorts, nearly as black as space but not quite, reflecting the light of the stars and a far distant blue-white sun.

"That world isn't much bigger than Mars," Bob said in wonder, "yet it has a pull like Jupiter. Its mass must be stupendous."

"Heavy matter does exist here and there in space," Englefield replied briefly. "Electronic collapse packing the material with terrific density. We've only about seven minutes to go. I'd better start using our forward thrust if we're to survive. Get to your places, all of you. This is going to be hell. I have to check the terrific speed in a matter of minutes."

There were movements in the darkness and hard breathing.

"Okay," Bob Curtis said hoarsely. "Let it rip, Cap."

Englefield settled himself firmly in the sprung seat and then snapped on the power. The atomic plant glowed, already starting to use its precious copper. Every scrap of the energy was used for the rockets. The lights were off, the clocks stopped, the battery-chargers dead. Englefield moved up the power notch and the sensation was appalling as inertia came back. To each and every one of them came the feeling that their feet were pushing upwards through their legs. Violent nausea gripped them. Internal organs were shoved out of position, circulation was forced back. Dazed, desperately sick, each one in the control-room wondered if an infinite crash would not be preferable.

Englefield watched the small but densely heavy world come whizzing up out of infinity to meet him. With a desperate effort he kept his senses and closed the switches. In one terrific reeling movement the rocket-machine veered out of its perpendicular drop, rockets flaring to the limit, and instead became parallel with the dead world's surface.

"We made it!" he cried huskily, as the feeling of dropping to pieces was checked. "I swung her just at the right second. We're flying over the landscape, getting lower and lower. If our fuel will hold out we can make a pancake landing instead of a head-on nosedive. . . ." For once he was so excited the words fell over themselves. "That ghastly sensation was caused by braking down millions of miles a second into thousands. If we'd have had an atmosphere we'd have vanished in a flash of flame. . . ."

The rockets still going full blast, and driven on even now by a stupendous momentum, the machine hurtled over the planet's dead, inimical surface. In a matter of minutes the planet had been circled five times, but on each occasion the altitude was lower as, with superb navigation, Englefield used his parallel flight to counter the gravitation. It was a trick with centrifugal force which meant stunning death if there was a fraction's miscalculation.

But there was not—Englefield was too good a pilot for that.

On the eighth circuit he was down to five thousand miles an hour, gravity using its braking effect. The ninth, and the speed was three thousand—then on the tenth circuit the power failed. Instantly the machine dipped—and crashed.

There was a vast and crushing shock, the rending of tortured metal plates, a mighty flash as metal struck edgewise on queer half metallic rockery, and then everything was still.

In the darkness there was only hard breathing.

CHAPTER SIX

"Nice work, Cap," Bob Curtis said at last. "We've arrived—but God knows where!"

There were movements, and very gradually faces came into the dim light of the stars showing through the portholes. They were white yet interested faces.

"Apparently we didn't smash our plates even though it sounded like it," remarked Crawford. "Our air supply doesn't seem to be going down. But do you notice something? Our *weight*?"

Englefield had noticed it and was thinking it out. The gravity pull was so tremendous it was difficult to stand upright. One leg could only be pulled after the other by means of huge, muscle-cracking effort.

"A few hours stuck here and we'll be dead," Dorothy said at length, her voice thoughtful. "The gravity is so strong it hardly permits blood to reach our brains. That will cause fainting from which we can't revive. Maybe we'd better lie down while we think and give ourselves a better chance."

She suited the action to the word and settled on her back on the pressure rack. Crawford and Hargraves did likewise, but Bob Curtis remained by the switchboard. He could see Englefield working rapidly in the gloom.

"What are you doing, Cap?" he asked finally.

"Fixing an emergency plastic lamp socket. The battery will give a little light. I want to read the instruments and particularly the analyser and see where we are."

It was a task which Englefield found difficult. When he raised his arms it felt as though he had a couple of buckets of water fastened to them, so heavy were they. Then, finally, there was a click, and dim yellow radiance came into being from the slowly extinguishing batteries. Since all power had been in the rockets in the plunge which had just ended no charging had passed to the dynamos.

"Now—let's see." Englefield sat in the control seat with a twang of springs. Bob stooped to ease the strain on his back. In the gloom beyond Dorothy, Crawford and Hargraves lay horizontal and watched.

"I'm thinking of that flash we got when we struck down," Englefield said. "Ordinary rock, unless it has a high quartz or flint percentage, shouldn't produce that. It may be something interesting. We'll see."

He pressed the switch which operated the automatic electric scoop. Normally, the scoop would have ejected outside the ship, chipped off pieces of the ground and withdrawn the result for analysis through a vacuum-trap, but nothing happened. Englefield muttered to himself.

"Damn! I forgot the power-plant's dead. I'll have to go out and see for myself—if I can even move in a space suit!" He peered at the external thermometer, and the ethane column read -273 degrees Centigrade.

"Absolute zero," Bob said. "Not a trace of warmth or air. We're on a totally dead hulk—and if you're going out there I'm coming with you."

They began moving. Dorothy half rose from her pressure bed, then held her forehead and lay back.

"Afraid I can't make it," she said. "I'm dizzy."

"Then stay as you are," Englefield instructed. "You two men—get into space-suits. You're not lounging there whilst we do the hard work. You may be needed."

Crawford and Hargraves grumbled but obeyed. In a few minutes all four men were fully space-suited and equipped with tools. To drag their weighted boots on the floor was nearly like trying to raise themselves by their own bootlaces. Englefield stepped out into the emergency lock and closed the inner lock behind him. Then air whistled out of the main exterior lock as he opened it upon the craggy, merciless landscape of this utter outpost of the universe.

Though their audiophones were linked up none of the men spoke. It took them all their time to move and suck air from their containers. In painful procession, roped together—and a tie-guide line back to the vessel—they began moving on the black plateau on which the vessel had dropped. Overhead was a wilderness of unfamiliar stars and constellations, and—so far away as to be little better than second magnitude star—hung what was presumably the sun of this dead system. In one direction was a low grown range of hills.

Rock—rock—rock. Everywhere. Black, and yet having a queer reflective quality. When Englefield accidentally caught the toe of his boot against a spur it flashed like a flint struck by metal.

"Time we had a look at this stuff," he said. "Then we'd better get back and lie down. I'm all in."

He went down on his knees, and with the other men to help him a sample of the rock was gradually moved from its native bed. Picks made no impression on it: it took a flame gun to blast the stuff away, and even then a piece of it perhaps six inches square weighed as much as a hundredweight.

"Right," Englefield wheezed, as they all held the stuff in their gloved hands between them. "Cart it back."

In ten minutes they had done so. Back in the control room again they pulled off their heavy suits and, weighed though they still felt they could at least breathe and move a little more freely.

"Any luck?" Dorothy asked, forcing herself up from the pressure-rack and coming unsteadily across the control room.

"Of sorts," Englefield answered briefly. "I want to analyse this stuff."

He settled in the control chair and went to work with the instruments. He would have preferred the automatic equipment, but without the power-plant that was impossible—so he used scales, reaction agents, and catalysts, all of which the girl handed him as he asked for them. Bob and the remaining two men were silent in the background, watching intently. The intensity of the situation had obliterated all distinction between friend and enemy.

"It begins to look," Englefield said presently, his eyes gleaming as he glanced up, "as though we've struck something really hopeful!"

"Copper? For fuel?" Dorothy asked urgently.

"No; stuff which may be even better. This is oxide of iron—magnetic oxide—under exceptionally powerful pressure. Continuous strain on this world has produced an exceptionally heavy form of matter. Pressure, as you know, can produce the same effect as X-rays—or the collision going on inside a star. Almost bare nuclei are left with the heavier atoms retaining a few of the closest electrons. That creates a tremendous weight because 'empty space' between molecular clusters is so reduced. Anyway, that is purely physics. What interests me is that magnetic oxide might make a perfect fuel because of its compressed state.

It should, by all laws, be infinitely more powerful and long-lasting than any other metal we've ever encountered."

"We can but try it," Bob said urgently.

"There's just one thing," Englefield said, with a level glance about him. "If I should be wrong and there are unexpected impurities in this mineral-rock, it might produce a short circuit which will wreck the power-plant beyond repair. If that should happen it will be the finish."

"If we don't try it's the finish anyway," Dorothy said, shrugging. "I think we should try."

The others nodded so Englefield carried the heavy chunk to the plant's matrix and clamped it in the jaws. This done, he returned to the bench and examined his figures.

"If this stuff is what I hope it is, there is more than enough to get us back to our own System," he said. "At the moment we don't know in which direction our System lies, and we may fly into outer space *away* from it. Our only hope is to take a chance. As we flew towards this planet I took the positions of the unfamiliar constellations in this part of the Universe so they should act as signposts in infinity. Just let me glimpse one of them, and I think a course can be set. It's our last gamble," he finished seriously. "It's that—or death."

"I'll go out and grab off some more of this stuff," Bob volunteered. "We don't know how much we need if we fly the wrong way—so we can't have too much."

Englefield nodded, and Bob jerked his head to Crawford and Hargraves. Willing enough to help him now a chance of survival had arrived, they followed him through the airlocks, and for the next hour time was spent in the exhausting task of hacking off and bringing aboard great chunks of the black, gleaming metal and putting it in the storage hold. Until at last there was enough.

Englefield gave instructions for a meal to be eaten so that they could steady themselves as far as possible, then all but he settled down on the pressure-racks. For a moment there was silence, the dim, wavering glow of the battery light nearly fading out.

"If everything works right our lights will come back," Englefield said, in the control chair. "I've reconnected all the instruments and dynamos. I'll see first what happens. If the stuff functions we'll put on space-suits to protect us on the long journey home—at four times the speed of light! Now, get ready!"

The others settled themselves as comfortably as possible on the sprung racks; then Englefield switched on the electrodes and waited tensely. A thrill went through him as he saw the meters react with a tremendous surge of power. Certainly no short-circuit was in evidence.

"Here we go," he said, "and remember that the drag of pulling free of this stupendous gravity will be far worse than anything we ever had on Earth."

He slid in the power lever and listened anxiously. There was a momentary faint splutter, a gleam of bright light from the electrodes at either side of the magnetic-oxide, then with a mighty blast the jets started to function. In fact they functioned too well and too abruptly. Englefield was not prepared for it.

Since the vessel had landed on its belly and was not standing with its nose to the sky it took off in a sudden mighty diagonal leap. The jolt flung Englefield backwards into his chair and nearly crushed the life out of him. Half dazed, he still had wits enough to operate the controls. He swung the gyroscope wheel through a half-circle, and in consequence the outer shell projected nose first to the sky, leaving the control-room in the normal position.

Lifted with stupendous power the rocket screamed into the star-powdered heavens, tearing with irresistible force against the massive gravity field. Almost instantly Dorothy succumbed

to the accelerative strain, her face hideously twisted and her limbs twitching. Blood began to trickle from her nostrils. Crawford and Hargraves fought savagely to keep their senses, but their glaring eyes and bared teeth showed what they were enduring. At last their hearts could not take it, and they flattened out, unconscious. Bob beat his fists on his bed as he was flattened to the limit, then even his great strength gave way.

Only Englefield was left, blood pounding through his ears and eyes, his heart feeling as though it would smash through his ribs. Somehow he had got to remain conscious. If he did not the vessel would continue to rip into space with an ever-mounting speed which would bring death during unconsciousness. On the other hand, if he cut down the speed the vessel would fall back to the planet. . . .

So he set his teeth and gazed at the instruments around him through a blur. By a convulsive effort he could draw breath every now and again. His limbs were dead, his head aching as though it would burst.

He forgot these things for a moment as the lights slowly began to return, the batteries fully charged with the generator. Stiffly he turned his head. Everybody else was flat out in a coma, the springs of the pressure-racks pushed down to the limit.

He gulped, clutched at his throat, then heard the click of the automatic pilot. Instantly weight vanished, and he sat back dizzily in his chair, his head spinning like a top. On the pressure racks the springs expanded to normal—and more so. Those lying upon them began to float a little into the air.

Moving like a feather Englefield staggered up and peered through the outlook window. The dreadful world of excess weight was dropping away into the gulf, and ahead were the stars and measureless infinity. With a sigh of thankfulness he crossed over to Dorothy and lifted her thistledown weight in his arms. Gently he set her on her feet, stroking her dark hair and shaking her back into wakefulness.

"You're okay now," he murmured, wiping the blood streaks from her nostrils. "We made it."

She was silent for a moment as though she enjoyed his powerful grip about her; then suddenly remembering he was the impartial commander, he released her and shook Bob back to life. Crawford and Hargraves he dug in the ribs until they stirred. Finally, when they were all blinking and looking at him expectantly he said:

"I've set the course for home. Outside are some of the 'signpost' constellations I spoke about—and by all the laws of spacecraft and mathematics we ought to return to somewhere within our own system. That fuel we are using is infinitely more powerful than copper, as I had expected it would be. We have only used up the barest fraction of it so far in making our escape from that hell planet. What I am doing is setting the automatic pilot to function at intervals which will give us a chance to recover, check up, and then fade out again. We will all wear space-suits and the acceleration will build up as before, to quadruple the speed of light. Get yourselves ready."

The others nodded, accepting Englefield's curtness as the manner of a man with a lot on his mind. Partly they were right; but Englefield was also using his brusqueness to disguise his feelings, particularly towards Dorothy. It would never do for him to show that he had any affection for her. The commander of a space machine was not entitled to be that human.

"All right, here we go," he said, when they were all fully protected. "To home and beauty —I hope!"

He opened up the power circuit and then set the automatic pilot. Staggering under the load of mounting speed he reached a pressure bed and sank on it. Faster the ship moved, and faster still—hurtling through infinity with inconceivable velocity. By degrees the five passed into unconsciousness. Only the automatic pilot held sway as the pinpoint on the face of the abyss reached quadruple the speed of light and moved so fast it was invisible to any exterior observer.

So it went on, the quintet recovering at intervals to make a survey, and then relapsing again—until at last Englefield saw a vision through his bloodshot eyes which made him pull off his helmet in excitement.

"We've made it!" he cried. "Look! Look for yourselves! There's Saturn—and Jupiter. And way back there are the Earth and moon beside it!"

Bearded, his eyes shining, he gazed through the porthole. Dorothy and Bob looked with him, Crawford and Hargraves looking over his shoulder. None of them spoke for a moment. The emotional reaction of having come back from the uttermost depths of the Universe was nearly too much for them.

"We owe it to you, Captain," Dorothy said, with a serious glance. "You took a desperate chance, and it came off. Without your courage we wouldn't have made it."

"Just necessity," he answered, shrugging.

"And now what happens?" Bob asked, his voice grim. "We have come back to reality—and also to Jaycott and his damned space mirror. In the time we've been away anything can have happened. In fact if he spots us we'll probably be blown right out of the Universe, anyway. The sun's in front of us this time which gives him a good chance."

"Unlikely he'll be watching for us," Dorothy commented. "He must think us dead by now. My chief concern is for my father and what may have happened to him."

"If we return to Earth," Englefield said, thinking, "we shall walk right into trouble. The Prime Minister said he would deal with Earth first—and that will take some time—and the other planets afterwards. I think our best course is to head for Venus. That will keep us sunward all the time and blind Jaycott or any of his observers to our progress. The essential thing is for us not to let him know we're still alive. Then when we can spring a surprise we will. As to your father, we may be able to learn something if we keep the radio full on. Surely we'll gather information from news bulletins."

Dorothy gave an anxious nod and switched on the instrument. Music came forth.

"Be news in a while," Englefield said, settling at the controls again. "Keep it going."

He swung the space machine through an arc, setting it on a totally different course and then headed sunwards. At the tremendous speed at which the vessel travelled the millions of miles to Venus were soon covered, and the five experienced but little ill-effect from the acceleration after the deadly strains they had already endured. It was as the cloud-banked planet loomed to the size of a melon in the void ahead that the radio, giving forth news, concentrated on an item of interest:

"In accordance with a decree of the Supreme Interplanetary Court, presiding under Judge Harrigan, the sentence upon Professor Clay was to-day commuted to indefinite imprisonment, dependent upon the pleasure of The Supreme Minister. . . . That concludes the noon news bulletin for this day of October 7th, 2,000."

Dorothy gave a startled glance about her, then looked at Englefield.

"A lot's been happening," she said abruptly. "For one thing it's over three months since we departed; for another, my father has had his trial and was evidently condemned to death and then given life imprisonment—or its equivalent. And this 'Supreme Minister' is a new authority altogether."

"It's Jaycott," Bob said, his mouth tight. "We can gamble on that. And, naturally, if he has admitted he was back of all the dirty work he hardly could have your father put away on account of it."

"Imprisonment during the Minister's pleasure," Dorothy said hopelessly. "That might be for years—or a lifetime! Captain, we've got to rescue him somehow!"

"We will, Dorothy, but not just now." Englefield smiled through his beard as he patted her arm. "Take heart from the fact that he isn't dead. As long as he is in prison he's still safe. We'll deal with him later; for the moment we must consider our own safety and decide on our next plans."

"Is landing on Venus such a good idea, Cap?" Bob demanded. "The Prime Minister will have agents in all the principal cities and we'll be seen and recognised. Then what?"

"We're not going anywhere near a city, Bob. I propose to land in the Hotlands, the jungles, where there isn't one chance in ten million of us being located. We need somewhere quiet to think out an airtight scheme."

More than that he did not say at that moment. Returning his attention to the controls he guided the vessel ever closer to Venus' blindingly white cloudbanks; then he switched on the X-ray screens to determine the landscape which lay below the obscurity. By this means it was simple enough to find those wild, unexplored regions of torrid Venus where, so far, the science of the inner planets had not reached.

Lower he sent the space machine, and lower, driving through blank mist which condensed on the portholes—until ultimately he came below the clouds and skimmed over a mighty forest similar to that of Earth's Carboniferous Period. When at last he had sighted a large clearing he slowed speed, swung the outer casing jet downward, and began to lower. With hardly a bump he brought the machine to rest and heaved a sigh as the power plant ceased.

"The first touch down since we left the hell-planet," he said. "And it's been some trip. Unfriendly and super-tropical though Venus may be it's home compared to what we had."

Dorothy moved to the airlock and opened it. The air which came in was enervating, stifling in its warmth, and filled with a myriad sickly odours from the forest. Venus, soaking in cloud-masked sunlight for 720 hours, and with an equal period of night, was a world of intense heat and primeval conditions.

"We have enough food supplies for a while," Englefield said, after inspecting the storage hold. "And we have an enormous amount of fuel. In all the journey we've made we have not used above half our original piece of magnetic oxide. And we also have a storage hold full of it. . . ." He moved to the open airlock and sniffed the laden breeze appreciatively. "The sooner we get outside into reasonably fresh air to discuss, the better," he added.

The others followed him as he stepped out to the undergrowth, and though the heat was stifling there was the freedom of a world about them, a blessed thing after numberless hours in the artificial air of a space machine. At the edge of the clearing Englefield sank thankfully in the rank grass, Dorothy settling on one side of him and Bob on the other. A little distance off Crawford and Hargraves reclined in the foliage, within earshot but distinct from the party.

"I have a plan," Englefield said at length, musing, "and it seems to me it is the only one which can possibly work. We have to destroy that spacial lens, the one weapon by which

Jaycott is able to maintain supreme mastery. As long as he controls that, he rules the world."

"We can't even get within seeing distance of it without being nabbed," Bob objected. "Unless we could strike from the sunward side, as we did before."

Englefield shook his head. "That would not work a second time. Jaycott has to be more on guard than ever before, and since he has obviously got control over Earth—and the space lanes from it—we can be pretty sure he'll have guards everywhere, watching for anybody approaching against the sun or behind it. No—that isn't my idea at all. I'm thinking of all that magnetic oxide we have. Our journey from infinite space, using the stuff as fuel, has satisfied me that it is the most powerful explosive ever known to science. Atomic force is not in the same field with it for violence, chiefly because it is a substance with atoms packed with extreme tightness, whereas in normal matter there are wide spaces. The violence of explosion is therefore about six times stronger than anything ever previously encountered. Even the stubbing of a boot against the stuff partly releases energy."

"I hope you're not over-estimating the stuff," Dorothy put in. "Don't forget the force with which we struck it when we landed on the hell-planet. Even so, it didn't actually explode."

"It won't explode by concussion, Dorothy—but it will by electric current: of that I'm sure. Get even a few ounces of the stuff and put an electric current straight through it and I'll wager it would blow a couple of good-sized buildings to powder. Imagine, then, all that stuff we have in the hold, wired up to fire itself at the moment it strikes that spacial mirror! The thing would simply cease to exist—and anything near it would be blown clean into outer space by the blast."

More out of respect for his superior than anything else, Bob tried to look interested, but he failed dismally. He was completely bewildered, and showed it.

"How do we get the stuff to the lens?" Dorothy asked, point blank.

"That is a matter of mathematics. We load the nose of the rocket with magnetic oxide and wire it up to the switchboard. We leave in the oxide which is used for fuel. We reconvert the switchboard so it can be radio controlled, removing the radio equipment and redesigning it for the purpose. That would not be a difficult task. The hardest part would be exactly figuring out in mathematics where the space mirror is. Once we have done that we fire the spaceship into the void, unmanned, and guide it by preconceived radio-directionals to the lens. And there it is."

"And the magnetic oxide would get the current through it upon arrival at the lens?" Bob asked.

"Exactly. Timed to the split second."

"Yes—it might be done," Dorothy admitted, thinking.

"It would strand us here, of course."

"Which doesn't signify. We could make our way to a city and get a space machine there. The main thing is to destroy Jaycott's most vital weapon. After that he'll have no power left and probably will be destroyed in the uprising which will inevitably follow. Then——"

Englefield broke off, surprised for the moment by an unexpected sound. It was the roaring of rocket jets. He looked about him in alarm.

"Crawford! Hargraves!" he cried. "They've gone!"

He had hardly uttered the words before there followed a tremendous blast of hot air, vegetation flattening and some of it catching fire before the exhaust of rocket jets. With a scream which nearly split their ear-drums the three watched dazedly as their space machine

hurtled with devastating speed to the cloudbanks, and was gone. Slowly the screech of the jets died away and the silence of the torrid forest returned.

"I'll be thrice damned!" Bob declared blankly, more amazed than angry.

"It's our own fault," Dorothy said at last, her face bitter. "We should have kept our eye on those two. We were too busy with our heads together discussing—we never bothered to notice what they were doing. . . . They must have heard all about our plan, too. They were within earshot."

Englefield looked about him, his eyes grim.

"This has opened the door wide for us to be captured again," he said. "Those two will pass on everything they know the moment they get back to Jaycott—unless by some chance they get shot to bits in mistake for us. Anyway, that doesn't help us any. We're stranded and daren't show up in a city. No provisions, either, and most of the fruit around here is deadly poison."

"And our magnetic oxide gone and our master plan blown sky high—literally," Bob sighed. "Everything happens to us."

Dorothy looked around her and then said: "Some fruits are edible, so the sooner we find them the better. We need fresh water, too. This heat makes it essential. Suppose we see what we can find? If finally we land in a city and get caught— Well, we'll worry about that when we come to it."

She began moving, Englefield at her side and Bob coming up in the rear.

"Can you identify edible fruit if you see it?" Englefield asked her, as they pushed aside the eight-foot high fern fronds.

"Certainly. I told you I had an A-certificate for space navigation. You have to know all those things."

"In fact there isn't much you don't know, Dorothy. I've been very much surprised—agreeably—at the way you've survived everything so far. No panic, no screaming, no hysterics. Pity there aren't more women like you."

Dorothy gave him a glance but passed no comment. They were moving deeper into the jungle with every moment, the vast vegetation looming all around them, motionless in the overpowering heat.

"There's some barunta," Dorothy said abruptly. "Sort of apple with a taste like an orange. Quite harmless."

She began to move towards it and then hesitated, listening. Bob and Englefield heard the sounds at the same moment, and their hands dropped automatically to the butts of their flame-guns. There was a crashing in the undergrowth from somewhere nearby which meant the possibility of Venusian wild life springing in upon them. But instead three grimy, sweat-sodden white men came in view, sun-helmets on the backs of their heads.

"Drop your guns!" the centremost ordered harshly, as for a fatal moment Englefield hesitated over what he ought to do.

Englefield obeyed, raising his hands. Bob did likewise, his face dark with fury. Dorothy took two paces backwards so she came within range of Englefield's protection—as far as he could do anything with guns trained on him.

"Thanks for making so much noise; it helped a lot," the leading man said cynically. "And if you want to know how we found you, it was with detectors—the kind that react to human life and nothing else. Your rocket ship was seen entering the cloudbanks. It was first sighted from the observatory maintained near the Cosmic Lens, and they radioed us, telling us to find

you. Since the Supreme Minister has banned space flying for the time being, you *could* only be interlopers. Simple, isn't it?"

"And you've come from the nearest city?" Englefield asked, as unmoved as usual.

"By 'plane from Imperial City—to the north. You'd better get on the move. I'm sure the Supreme Minister will be glad to know the identities of his captives. I recognise you, Captain Englefield—and you, Mr. Curtis—despite your beards. As for Miss Clay . . ." The guard shrugged. "You were thought to be dead after your escape. I imagine that will be rectified very quickly. Get on the move!"

There was no other course, and perhaps fifteen minutes later a helicoplane was reached in a small clearing. The three were forced to enter it, and thereafter sat in grim silence as two of the men kept their guns levelled and the third man drove the machine. In a matter of thirty minutes they had left the dense Venusian jungle behind and were speeding over the rock plateau which terminated in one of the seven cities situated at various points of the torrid planet. Since it had been designed and built by Earth architects and engineers there was nothing unusual about it—unless it was its whiteness, designed to reflect the terrific rays of the sun on those rare occasions when it peeped through the eternal clouds.

Englefield knew the city headquarters well enough; he had been there many a time on space trips, and to this edifice he, Bob and the girl were taken, finishing their journey in a big fan-cooled room.

"You'll stay here, under guard, until the Supreme Minister has been informed," the spokesman said briefly. "He will either fly here to see you or will instruct me as to what must be done with you."

The trio did not answer. For the moment they were only too glad to sit in the soft chairs in the artificial coolness. The only drawback to relaxation was the guard who remained by the door, intent and watchful.

In time, since they did not choose to converse with the guard listening, the three began to doze, and finally fell asleep entirely. They were awakened again to discover that artificial lighting had replaced the intense whiteness of day, so evidently the 720-hour night had arrived. Looking about them they beheld Sir Douglas Jaycott a few yards away, regarding them coldly.

CHAPTER SEVEN

"I never thought," Jaycott said, after a long pause, "that any of you would have been foolish enough to return so blatantly as to draw attention to yourselves. From my point of view, of course, I am glad you did—but I am afraid you are going to regret it. I suppose it would be useless for me to ask where you have been in the past months?"

Englefield got to his feet. "Quite useless. We've no intention of explaining our activities. You probably know all about them as it is."

Jaycott shrugged. "Why should I?"

"Haven't those two——" Englefield stopped himself.

He was going to ask if Crawford and Hargraves had not given the whole story, but it seemed from Jaycott's manner that he had not even seen the two men. It left Englefield wondering why.

"You were saying?" Jaycott asked, coming forward.

"Nothing. It doesn't signify."

Jaycott looked from one to the other. "Very well, if you wish it that way. You will have gathered, all of you, that in the time you have been absent I have succeeded in assuming supreme mastery of Earth, and I also have virtual control of the inner planets as well. My word is absolute law, in the name of the British Union."

"Why besmirch the British Union to further a filthy scheme like yours?" Bob Curtis asked sourly.

"I can afford to ignore that remark, Curtis, and I shall. In case you, Miss Clay, are anxious about your father, I think I should tell you he——"

"Has been reprieved from death and given indefinite imprisonment. I know all about that from the radio."

"I think," Jaycott said, musing, "that his imprisonment is liable to be overlooked. Such things do happen. A Minister loses a document from his file so that it never comes before him for consideration."

"Which means you intend to let Professor Clay lie in jail and rot?" Englefield demanded.

"Professor Clay is dangerous, Englefield, therefore he is better—er—overlooked. As for you three, you are just as dangerous, and I fully believed I had rid myself of you. Since I was mistaken I must make sure. It is not generally known that you have returned, so your disappearance can make no difference one way or the other. I can't send you into space, as I had originally planned, without attracting attention, so I will choose another method."

"Ray guns, of course," Dorothy said.

"No, Miss Clay. As I mentioned earlier, I am not an advocate of straight murder. You shall have a chance—slim though it will prove. Did you ever hear of the Venusian Forest of Dreams?"

"I've heard it mentioned," Englefield responded, "but I don't know much about it."

"You will shortly—all of you. In the meantime I can enlighten you a little. The Forest of Dreams is situated about ten miles south of here, quite close to Central Mountains. It is an area of primeval forest loaded with exotic plants which give forth a perfume in the form of gas. It is not unpleasant to inhale, I understand, but it has a strange effect on the nervous system. It might produce superb ecstasy and brief genius, or it might produce madness or

death. In a word it destroys the normal balance and makes the victim liable to do almost anything. Many unfortunates have died there; others have survived but have been 'peculiar' ever since. That," Jaycott finished, "is where *you* are going. And it may as well be now. The fact that none of you have eaten recently will make you all the more susceptible to the gas."

Jaycott did not waste any more time. He signalled to his guards and in consequence Englefield, Bob and the girl found themselves led from the room and out into the softy, misty gloom of the Venusian night. They were taken to an airplane, forced to enter it and thereafter sat in silence as they were whirled through darkness and mist towards an objective only visible on the instruments. The night of Venus, though there was no moon to the planet, always possessed a curious pearly glow, due mainly to starlight refraction from the cloudbanks. It meant that total darkness, as such, did not exist. Even the forest had a faint illumination all its own.

"This is it," the man at the controls said, as the vessel landed in a clearing. "Kick 'em out!"

The cabin door was opened quickly and Englefield was the first to be thrust out. Bob fell on top of him, and then came Dorothy. Between them they helped her up and watched the dark bulk of the 'plane taking off into the mist. Then they were alone, surrounded by gigantic trees, strange perfumes wafting on the faint breeze.

"So this is the Forest of Dreams?" Bob commented.

"Its area can't be infinite in extent, anyway," Englefield answered. "We'd better start moving. And we must keep our mouths and noses covered."

He put up his hand to his face and began to blunder through the gloom, helping Dorothy beside him. They tripped and stumbled over coarse grass clumps and dangerous roots, and time and again they only just managed to avoid a carnivorous tree as its avid branches lashed, octopus-like, in their direction. But rapidly though they tried to move, and in spite of the fact that they kept their faces covered as much as possible, the insidious, mephitic vapours given off by the weird vegetation began to take a hold—first in the form of dizziness.

Dorothy tripped abruptly and fell on her knees. Englefield pulled her up beside him, holding her tightly about the waist.

"I—I can't go on!" Her voice was a chattering jumble of words which she just could not control. "I'm frightened! If I go any further I'll die. I know I will!"

"No you won't," Englefield said quietly. "And we're going on. Hang on to me."

"Just a minute, you!" Bob Curtis blundered forward in the gloom. "Let Dorothy alone, Cap! You think I haven't seen what you've been up to ever since the three of us got thrown together. You're in love with her! But so am I! And she's mine! You hear? *Mine!*"

"Take it easy, Bob." Englefield turned to face him. "Don't let the gas do the talking for you——"

"Easy be damned!" Bob's fist lashed out with stunning violence and, being unprepared for it, Englefield crashed over on his back in the vegetation. Bob kicked at him savagely, then caught the bemused girl by the arm and forced her onwards through the undergrowth. Some shaft of reason blasted through the confusion of her mind.

"Bob, you can't leave the Cap. back there. He may die!"

"Let him. He can't take what belongs to me. Come on—we can't dawdle in this filthy place——"

Dorothy tore free. "Bob, listen to me! It's the gas that has got you. You must——"

He did not listen to any more. Diving forward he heaved the girl onto his shoulder, and though she kicked and battered at him in a vain endeavour to restore his normal reason it was useless effort. He went staggering on dizzily, his arm about the back of her knees, her hands thumping into the small of his back.

Englefield, meanwhile, was reeling to his feet, coughing a little in the midst of the glorious but deadly perfume. He could still hear the crashing of Bob in the distance as he ploughed through undergrowth, so he began to follow him urgently. With every step he took he felt an overmastering desire to kill Bob when he found him, tear him to pieces with his own bare hands; then, recognising the homicidal symptoms as being caused by the gas, he took a strong hold over himself and—for a while at least—conquered.

In a matter of minutes he had caught up with Bob, the girl now hanging limply over his shoulder, all the fight gone out of her, her brain too confused to think straight. Bob twirled round in the near-darkness and dropped the girl to the ground heavily. He clenched his fist, then gasped as a pile-driver punch under the jaw flattened him hard against the bole of a mighty tree. Yet another blow spun him sideways, and a final uppercut dropped him on his back.

"Sorry," Englefield said briefly. "Seems to be the only way to knock sense into you."

Bob got up slowly, rubbing his face in the greyness. Englefield stooped and lifted Dorothy up beside him, his arm about her shoulders. She stirred a little.

"Bob—you ought to go back——" she whispered.

"He doesn't need to; I'm right here," Englefield said. "Take it easy. Dorothy—we'll be out of this area before long. Get moving, Bob, ahead of us."

"I'll be damned if I will. Cap! I'll——"

"I said get moving!" There was something in Englefield's icy command which made Bob obey. Holding his head as though it ached intolerably he began lurching ahead, then he stopped with a cry of pain as he blundered into something of enormous hardness. In a matter of seconds Englefield and the girl had caught up. They were confronted with something which, for the moment, cleared the brains of the miasma.

The object into which Bob had blundered reared up into the grey-black abyss of tree tops and cloudy sky. It was solid metal, on a slant, its great tubes sunken deep in the ground.

"It's our space machine!" Dorothy cried, reason returning to her with the realisation.

Englefield neither confirmed nor denied the fact. Still holding the girl tightly he made his way round to the airlock, and found it solidly sealed on the inside. At that moment Bob reached him. Either the sight of the vessel, or else the punching he had received, had knocked sense into him. Whatever the reason he was more rational.

"I can get in by the emergency lock," he said.

"Do that," Englefield ordered and kept his hold on Dorothy.

Bob moved through the undergrowth until he found a bracket on the half-buried jet-tubes where he could gain a hold, then he began to haul himself up out of sight. There was a very long interval, during which Dorothy had started to weep and shiver with reaction, then the airlock swung wide open and Bob became faintly visible.

Englefield moved forward, handed the girl up, and Bob helped her into the lighted control room. Englefield followed and shut the door; then he stood looking at the dead figures in the control room—one at the control board with a look of frozen horror on his face, and the other sprawled on the floor with his head smashed in by the wall.

There was silence for a moment or two, then as the sealed door shut off the alien vapours of the forest and normal air took over Bob began to look sheepish.

"I—I think I said things out there, Cap— I acted like one gone mad."

"We all did," Englefield answered briefly and changed the subject. "Looks as though these two here have smashed themselves to pieces—which explains why they never reached Jaycott to tell him anything, and it also explains why the detectors, trained to find human life, did not find *them*. Dead bodies have no electrical energy that can be noticed."

Dorothy put a hand to her forehead and tried to think straight.

"What do you think caused them to drop the machine back to Venus? It's certainly a marvellous stroke of luck for us."

"I think the cause of them crashing was the fuel they were using," Englefield replied, thinking. "It took me by surprise the first time I set it under current, and it probably took these two off-guard as well. I had empty space in which to manoeuvre, but these two were chained by Venus's gravity, and the vessel probably got out of control before they even got to the upper atmosphere. Down they came—good and hard."

Englefield was silent for a moment, his face grim, and then he added: "We'd better move them outside."

He and Bob did the job between them and then closed the airlock. Dorothy looked at them expectantly each in turn.

"Do you still intend to follow your original plan, Captain, and direct this vessel to the space-lens, loaded with magnetic oxide?"

"I certainly do; it's the only possible scheme which will work, and we have a decided advantage now that the night has come. What I must do, though, is move this machine to a different part of the jungle, well away from the Forest of Dreams, otherwise we'll be left amidst these dangerous vapours when we fire off the machine. I've also got to make sure how much this projectile is damaged."

He moved to the control chair and sat down, switching on the current which had automatically stopped when the crash had come. Power surged into the jets and after a brief hesitation the machine tore free of encumbering undergrowth, smashed its way through tree branches, and sailed into the upper air. In a matter of seconds it was hurtling through cloudbanks.

Englefield altered the course so the machine came parallel with the ground. He bore eastwards, by the compass, for fifty miles, and then began to descend again. The night-screens showed the jungle was still present—but at least it was understandable jungle without the mind-corroding horror of the Forest of Dreams.

With a jolt the vessel landed, belly downwards, in the midst of a clearing, and the hum of the power-plant ceased. Englefield got up from the chair and switched on the external searchlights. The glare fell on the weird trees of the forest, interlaced with dense vineries. He nodded to himself as he switched off.

"A good enough place for us to stay for the time being," he decided. "The first thing we'd better do is get a meal, rest, and then go to work. We've much to do."

His suggestion was followed out, and at the end of an hour all three of them were feeling a good deal better and in far higher spirits. Only Bob was still looking discomfited.

"I don't know what you thought of me back in the forest, Cap," he ventured. "I—I sort of went to pieces. I didn't mean a word of it."

"Sure?" Englefield, asked, with a wry smile through his beard.

"Well—not *all* of it. I——"

"I think," Dorothy interrupted, "we're wasting time sitting here talking. Let's get busy. What comes first, Captain?"

"The radio." He got up and joined her. "We want it dismantled, then we have to re-convert it."

He gave the necessary directions, and it commenced a task which was obviously not going to be finished in a few hours. So they each took it in turns to sleep, that meaning that one man or the other was always with Dorothy to instruct her in the more complicated side issues connected with transforming the equipment into a remote-controlled unit. It was during Englefield's turn to help her that he asked a question.

"There's something I'd like to get straight, Dorothy," he said, twisting a piece of wire in his powerful fingers.

"Such as?" Dorothy was surprised to hear his tone so human for once.

"I'm not a man who is given to expressing his emotions: it doesn't do in a commander—but there is something I want to ask you. If we ever get out of this mess and wipe out the Prime Minister's hold over the Earth—by destroying the lens—would you think the chief of the Bureau of Safety worthwhile as a husband?"

Dorothy laughed a little. "What a long way round you go to propose!"

Englefield stopped twisting the wire and looked at her directly.

"I mean it, Dorothy. I've been impressed by your intelligence and courage ever since we were forced into such close company with one another. I can promise you no woman ever affected me like that before. Would you marry me, if we can get away from this tangle?"

"Why ask now? Wouldn't it be better to wait and see if we *do* get free?"

"Not in my case. I like to plan ahead—be it a space journey or a marriage. You know the kind of man I am, and I shall never change. I know Bob is in the running, but it may be just his fancy. With me there's no doubt about it: I want you to be my wife."

Dorothy smiled slowly and put her hand on Englefield's arm.

"Sorry, Captain," she answered, her voice quiet. "I admire you immensely: I think you're the nearest thing to a human rock I've ever struck—but you're right out of the picture as a prospective husband. You'd soon get tired of the idea: your place is doing things, exploring, always moving on. No, it wouldn't work out."

"Which is another way of telling me Bob is the one you really love?"

"Perhaps."

"Take this wire," Englefield instructed, as though the matter of marriage had never even been discussed. "Fasten it to that terminal there and carry it over this transformer—that's it."

And he went on giving instructions at intervals, working all the time on the radio reconstruction and seemed to have completely forgotten the girl had turned him down. Such was his nature, he showed no signs of hurt even if he had received any.

It was four days later by Earth-time—and the long Venusian night was still persisting—before Englefield had the apparatus to his liking. Half of the control bench had been converted, and most of the radio equipment itself was being used as a roughly constructed remote-control transmitter, its power derived from atomic batteries.

"The thing to do now," Englefield said, when he had made a final check-over, "is to see if the method works. You two stay in here and keep an eye on the switches whilst I take this gadget outside and operate it."

He opened the airlock and stepped outside into the misty quietness of the night. The searchlights' blaze revealed him in the clearing setting up the apparatus. He switched on the power, and after a moment or two the switches on the board began to move of their own accord. Bob watched in amazed delight and then hurried to the airlock.

"Okay, Cap, it works! It's a masterpiece."

Englefield nodded in the glare, left the apparatus where it was, then came back to the vessel.

"That settles it then," he said, as he came into the control room. "You two load up the magnetic oxide into the nose of the ship whilst I work out the mathematics to put this thing on its right course. We can wire up the magnetic oxide quickly enough when you've fixed it up."

For the next half hour Dorothy and Bob were completely preoccupied with their task, leaving Englefield working at the bench, using the automatic calculator at intervals to check his figures. The more he worked on his equations the more troubled he became. Finally he sat staring absently in front of him.

"Anything wrong, Cap?" Bob asked him.

"A good deal." Englefield came to himself with a start. "I can't seem to work out the trajectory for this confounded thing. Every course I plot out goes wrong."

Bob frowned. "That's queer. Every trajectory can be worked out in figures, Cap, no matter how complicated. Taking the known position of Venus as our main factor we——"

"Yes, yes, I know the equations we need," Englefield interrupted, "but it still doesn't work out. . . . Tell you what you might do," he added, after another spell of thought. "Go outside and operate A and E controls on that transmitter, and you, Dorothy, move in the pointer lever to the sixth gradient. I want to see if a new mathematical setup I have in mind will do the trick."

"Right," Bob agreed promptly. "Let's go, sweetheart."

He took the girl's arm and helped her outside. Englefield watched them in the glare of the searchlights, then he deliberately went to the airlock and closed it. They saw his action, and their hands started waving excitedly in the brilliance. What they said he could not, of course, hear—until he switched on the external pick-up.

"——idea of locking us out, Cap?"

Englefield switched on the microphone which, through the external amplifier, carried his voice to the exterior.

"Sorry, you two. I'm not playing you a dirty trick: I'm just making sure you don't try to help me with a job I've got to do. The fact is there *is* no possible trajectory which can be devised to get this confounded thing to the space-lens. We can't get the hair-breadth timing which is necessary. So that leaves only one way: one of us must *drive* the projectile there, dodging whatever opposition there is, and crashing the ship straight into the lens."

"Cap, you can't do it!" Bob came running forward in the glare, waving his arms frantically. "It means certain death! Even if you *do* get as far as the lens you'll blow yourself to pieces when you hit it!"

"I can't see that matters so much," Englefield replied quietly. "I knew all this would happen when you knew the facts: I also pictured you, or even Dorothy, volunteering to make the trip with me. Only I've other ideas. You two have a lot to live for: I have only myself now Dorothy doesn't feel like sharing her life with me. I'm queer that way. All or nothing."

"Captain, you can't do this thing!" Dorothy cried hoarsely. "When I said what I did I was only trying to gain time before making up my mind, and I——"

"No use, Dorothy," Englefield broke in. "You meant every word of it—and I don't blame you. The pair of you can live indefinitely in the jungle until you find out whether or not Jaycott has lost his grip on things—as he surely will if I carry out my objective. I shall have to leave it to you to find your father. My job is smashing that lens, and I mean to do it. Now stand clear of the jets."

"Cap!" Bob yelled desperately. "Cap, don't be such an idiot! *Cap*——"

The scream of the jets as Englefield pushed in the power-lever drowned out the remainder of Bob's shouts. He started to run for it, clutching Dorothy, as the projectile quivered on the ground and then shot upwards diagonally from its level position. It skimmed the treetops, then turned jet downwards, commencing that hurtling, terrifying climb into the clouds.

"The lunatic! The crazy lunatic!" Bob shouted, emerging from the vegetation as the screeching died away. "That flower gas must have affected him a lot more than we thought."

Dorothy shook her head in the dim light. "It hardly affected him at all, Bob. He's the kind of man who does things properly, even if his own life is involved. It's myself I blame for giving him such a blunt refusal when he asked me to marry him."

"That," Bob said slowly, "is the part I can't understand. The Cap has never expressed any real interest in women. That was why I thought he was just—just sort of playing around with you. That was why, when I was gassed, everything I thought came out in a rush. I just can't believe that he'd kill himself because a girl said no."

Dorothy looked at the opaqueness above. "He's thinking more of destroying Jaycott than my turning him down—I hope. Since he's gone, the only thing we can do is get as near to a city as possible without showing ourselves and see what news we can pick up. Come on. . . ."

Englefield had forgotten one thing in his mighty outward leap from Venus. In his resolve to outdistance any possible pursuers he gave the magnetic oxide fuel nearly full current—and fell into the same error as Crawford and Hargraves. Almost before he knew it the colossal acceleration was pinning him flat in his seat and the projectile was flashing through the last traces of Venusian atmosphere.

Outwards into the void. Englefield fought desperately to reach the power lever, which would operate either by radio control or manual movement, but the effort was too much for him—and the strain was becoming greater. Venus was falling away into the void, shrinking with the seconds, so tremendous was his speed.

He put his arm under his left hand and tried to take its huge weight, but even so he could not cut out the power. He just had not the strength. Gasping, he fell back in his chair, the springs creaking. He could feel his eyes starting from his head and the awful pressures building up in his skull. This time the automatic pilot was not set to function, so he got no help in that direction either. The result was inevitable: he fainted.

When he came to himself again it was with a feeling of extreme lightness, as though he were floating through the air. He opened his eyes and looked at the circular metal ceiling, trying to fathom where he was. For some reason he was not in the control chair any more, but lying on a pressure rack. The fact that he was strapped to it showed everything had become weightless, which meant constant velocity.

But how had he got here? He half sat up, felt his head swirl, and promptly lay back again.

"Lucky I caught up with you, Captain," a voice said. "And luckier still it wasn't anybody else but me."

Englefield turned his head and looked straight at the rugged visage of Gideon Clay. He was still in a space-suit, but the helmet was removed. Traces of a beard clung to his jaw; apparently he had roughly shaved himself.

"Naturally you're surprised?" he asked, with a grim smile.

"The thing's a miracle!" Englefield declared, feeling steadier and rising on one elbow. "How the devil did you ever overtake me? I was going at the most frightful lick——"

"I didn't overtake: I saw you coming towards me, moving like all hell. I knew there must be something wrong. No pilot in his right senses would drive at that diabolical speed amongst the inner planets: too much chance of being dragged aside and smashed to powder. So I used the old formula—I blew off your jets. That stopped your acceleration, but you still had a constant velocity. So I tailed you back until you came near the Moon's orbit. That automatically swung you aside, but in swinging you brought inertia back again and slowed down. That gave me my chance. Knowing which direction you were falling I cut diagonally across your path and gave you a series of blasts from my force-beams. That checked your fall. Another four blasts got you under control and forced you back into space away from the lunar pull. I brought my own machine alongside, anchored it, and came in through the safety lock on the roof. That's all there is."

"And now where are we?" Englefield asked, looking towards the port.

"At the moment we're about a million miles from Earth and heading towards Venus at a leisurely ten thousand miles an hour."

Englefield got up from the rack, put on his weighted boots, then grasped Clay by the hand.

"Naturally, Professor, I couldn't wish for anything better than to see you—but I'm utterly confused. Last I heard of you you were in prison on Earth, awaiting release by the Supreme Minister."

"You mean the Cosmic Flame! Jaycott!"

"Same thing. How did you get free?"

"I don't—quite know." Clay's massive face became pensive. "It just sort of happened. Maybe friends on the outside, or something. I awoke from sleep one night to find the cell door unfastened and the guard dead. So I crept out, managed to get a space machine, and took off. I was pursued by space police patrolling the Heaviside Layer but managed to blast them down, so I don't think news of my escape into space will have been radioed to that skunk Jaycott. Then I ran into you. I didn't know it was you at the time, of course, so can only be thankful for the extraordinary coincidence."

"Yes," Englefield mused. "If coincidence it is."

"Couldn't be anything else, could it?"

Englefield did not answer. Instead he asked: "And now you are heading for Venus? Why?"

"For what other reason than to deal with Jaycott? I'm willing to fight all and sundry just as long as I get at him."

"How do you know he's there?" Englefield asked quietly, and Clay gave a start and rubbed his mane of hair.

"Matter of fact I don't—not for certain. I just seem to kind of know he's there."

"As a matter of fact he is. . . ." Englefield told his own side of the story and then finished: "I don't believe one bit of this is coincidence, professor. I think the whole thing has been deliberately planned—by the science of Marinax, the planet whence come the flying saucers."

"Marinax? Flying saucers? What in blazes do you mean, man?"

Englefield gave the details, then he added:

"Adam Charteris said he would keep an unseen watch on me, and I believe he is doing it —and keeping a watch on you as well. I'll gamble anything I have that it was through his agency that your prison was found unlocked, and I'll also gamble that long distance telepathy accounts for your knowing so surely that Jaycott is on Venus." Englefield gave a faint smile. "It is nice to know supreme power works with us as well as against us sometimes."

"But—but why do these people of Marinax only *half* do the job?" Clay demanded. "It doesn't make sense."

"Yes, it does. Charteris told me that it is our job to fight our own battles—which we are doing, and are going to do to the end. I'm resolved on one thing—to smash that lens to fragments. You for your part are determined to find Jaycott and destroy him. We both have big missions to fulfil, Professor."

Clay looked out of the port absently, upon his own vessel anchored by mass-attraction, then towards distant Venus. At last he turned, annoyance on his powerful face.

"My daughter's a fool," he said bluntly. "What in cosmos does she mean by turning down a man like you for a youngster like Bob Curtis?"

"She has the free choice," Englefield smiled. "Let's forget it, Professor."

"But I can't! Dammit, you're a valuable man, and I can't let you go smashing yourself to pieces."

"If you don't, Jaycott will retain power. As long as that lens is there Earth and the inner planets are utterly subjected. Better one dies and so free millions, than that slavery to Jaycott should be indefinite."

"It won't be. I'm determined to wipe him out—and I'll do it."

"I've no doubt of it—but the lens is the most important thing. If other men take it over when Jaycott is dead the position will not be improved. No, Professor, it works out in only one way from here on. I'll destroy the lens and you'll destroy Jaycott. Agreed?"

Clay hesitated, then he shook hands. "I suppose it has to be," he muttered. "You have a rugged courage, Captain."

"I know my duty. Let's leave it at that. Since my jets are shattered I shall have to rely on you to give a mass-pull as far as the lens, or at least to within five thousand miles of it, then its mass will start pulling me. We may never make it, since it will be closely guarded, but that is one of the risks. If we do—you carry on to Venus. You should find your daughter and Bob Curtis there—and Jaycott, too."

Clay said no more. He put on his helmet, screwed the collar into position and then climbed the ladder which led to the emergency-lock. Englefield, watching through the port, saw the scientist a moment or two later, hauling himself by the pull-line through the airlock of his own vessel. He gave a wave of his air-bloated arm and then the airlock closed. His vessel began moving, and in consequence Englefield's moved too, much as a car might be towed by another, except that in this case mass alone was the "tow-rope."

Clay built up speed gradually and Englefield remained at the control board, his face set, his eyes fixed on the magnetic oxide. He meant doing this at the very gulf ahead. Space teemed to alter position quite a deal as Clay struck his course for the lens; then when he had at last found it he increased speed tremendously, finally giving his vessel a burst of rocket-fire which flung it to one side and allowed Englefield's vessel to sail onwards, broken free of the mass attraction. He was on his own, his only attraction that of the distant lens itself—visible in the telescopic screens, but not to the naked eye.

CHAPTER EIGHT

In a matter of seconds Clay's machine became remote. Englefield sat watching it for a while, finding it hard to realise he had had his last contact with living beings. Ahead of him there was only destruction, and death—but if he succeeded there would be a glorious emancipation for the enslaved peoples of Earth. This gave him a little more inner happiness. He settled more firmly in the control seat, his hands on the useless switches. With no rocket-tubes he was powerless to save himself from crashing. The business was completely inevitable.

The telescopic screen presently showed him that four machines grouped near the mighty lens were on their way to investigate his nearness, which was no more than he had expected. He went to the protonic gun and settled at the sights, his fingers on the button. These at least would function, and he was ready to blast hell out of anything which got in his way.

So great was his speed as the mass of the lens began to draw him even faster, the investigating ships seemed to leap out of infinity towards him—no longer invisible to the naked eye but taking definite shape, especially in the gun sights. As one became exactly dead-centred Englefield pressed the button and that frightful stream of protonic power blasted the nearest vessel amidships. It's metal boiled and crumbled under the onslaught and the two halves broke apart, spewing bloated bodies and power plant into the void, in which everything floated as though in water, gradually drawing together by mass attraction.

The remaining three machines promptly took evading action and there was nothing Englefield could do about this since his own machine was hurtling onwards in a straight line. All he could do was keep his eyes on the sights and fingers on the button. A few seconds later he had a lucky break as one of the machines floated over his line of vision—and the vessel received a blast which shattered its nose. Since the machine rocked and swayed thereafter the possible answer was that all air had escaped from it and killed the occupants.

Englefield hurtled on. He heard protonic beams rattle his own plates, but his immense speed helped him to avoid a direct hit. Behind him, the two remaining vessels swung round to give chase but his velocity kept him at a fair distance from them. And straight ahead was his goal, that mighty lens, visible as a grey circle on the blackness of space, several miles in diameter.

Getting up, Englefield went over to the nose of the vessel and gave a final check-over of the magnetic oxide. It was heaped up in a solid mass, just as Dorothy and Bob had left it, but at the moment the electrode system which would explode it was not in position. Englefield calculated how much time he had in hand and then quickly went to work on the job.

By the time he had finished the lens was filling most of the void in front of him. In the far distance to its right another fleet of space machines was heading to stop him, but at the speed they were making he would hit the lens long before they could get within beam range—and when the magnetic oxide exploded it would blow them hundreds of miles away into space.

Englefield settled again in the control chair. His hand was on the switch which would throw the current through last second. Until then he could only watch that enormous natural formation coming ever closer and closer.

Nearer—and nearer still. It had swallowed up all space. The vast metallic shield behind it was visible now through the crystalline formation of the lens itself. Englefield set his teeth.

There were only minutes left now.

The chronometer second hand flicked round, second by second. The invading fleet of space machines was still far away. The miles between the lens and the hurtling projectile were decreasing at high speed.

200—150—100——

Englefield tightened his hold on the switch. He flashed a glance at the instruments.

75—70—65—60——

A sudden sound above made him glance up in surprise. It was repeated, and a pair of feet in space boots became visible descending from the emergency lock. Englefield gazed blankly as the space-suited man dropped to the floor.

40—30—20——

"Quickly! Outside!" the man snapped, and Englefield realised that the face behind the helmet-visor was that of Adam Charteris of Marinax.

"But—but——"

"Don't argue," Charteris ordered. "You can stand the void for a moment without a suit. A vacuum is an insulator— Quick!"

Dazed, Englefield blundered to the ladder and up it towards the utter cold and emptiness of space. Charteris glanced at the controls and closed the time-switch on the apparatus connected to the electrodes.

12—11—10—9—— He hurtled for the ladder, grabbed the half-fainting Englefield as he reached the total void, and then leapt outwards into space. His thrusting action carried him to a pull line stretched out like a rod at the horizontal. Englefield was a featherweight in these conditions, the only pull coming from the lens.

The vessel hurtled down on its last few miles. Then it struck the lens, and the result was cataclysmic, the magnetic oxide receiving its current a split second before the impact. Space seemed to buckle and warp under a blinding glare. Waves of energy surged around Charteris as he clung frantically to the pull line he was gripping. Englefield, his nose looking queer with frozen blood upon it, was motionless, held in Charteris's vice-like grip—-

Then the pull-line began to retract quickly and into the belly of a hovering flying saucer. The trap closed quickly once both men had been dragged into the pressure-compartment. Slowly Englefield began to revive. He was not particularly hurt, beyond the attack of nose bleeding which soon ceased. In space, as Charteris had said, a body cannot explode if there is no breath in it, because the pressure is the same inside the body as outside it. Nor could it freeze because space itself is a natural insulator which permits of body heat escaping at only a limited rate.

So, still dazed, Englefield staggered into the enormous control room of the flying saucer. He was too confused to ask questions, but he did realise he was being led to the main window. In silence he looked on the already distant shattered remains of the lens. It had been blasted into tens of thousands of glittering shards, shining like diamond dust on the infinite.

"You are a very brave man, Captain," Charteris said, emerging from his space-suit. "Far too brave indeed to throw yourself away. That is why I came to your aid. I'm sorry I left it rather late but I was not sure until you had nearly reached that lens just what you intended doing. Apparently I set the time-switch correctly. The explosion happened at just the right second."

Englefield still looked out of the window, recovering himself. Thousands of miles were already making the shattered lens remote, and without a sound the flying saucer was flashing

onwards into the depths of space.

"I still don't understand what happened," he confessed, turning.

"It's very simple." Charteris motioned to screwed-down chairs. "I have kept a watch on you—just as I said I would. I lost you for a while when you got beyond the range of our instruments, but I picked you up again on your return. Since then your every action, your words, your aims, have been clear to me, but I could not quite credit you would willingly sacrifice your life to destroy that lens and save Earth people from Jaycott's domination. I had a 'saucer' keep on your tail, however, and we flashed into action when we realised you meant to carry your plan through. After that— Well, I entered by the emergency lock and you know the rest. It was a clever idea to explode magnetic oxide, Captain. We have a similar fuel for our flying saucers, only it is much more refined."

Englefield was silent. He did not quite know what to think. He had been so steeled for death it was hard for him to appreciate he was still alive and among friends.

"And what happens now?"

"I am hoping that you will reconsider your earlier decision and come back to Marinax with me. We need men like you in a race which is still but young. You declined before because you had a job to finish. Now you have done it."

"Partly, yes. I don't consider the business is ended until I know Jaycott is completely beaten. I don't know if you are aware of it, or not, but Professor Clay is now on his way to Venus to deal with Jaycott—if he can. He may even have got to the planet by now."

Charteris smiled. "You have very little grasp of the extent of Marinax's science, Captain. We have Professor Clay in our sights all the time, as I will shortly prove to you. We arranged his release from prison through Earth agents. As I said earlier, whilst we take no part in squabbles between the peoples of a planet we do, nevertheless, make our influence felt over and again if we feel the domination of one person is liable to upset our own arrangements. So we—shall I say—smoothed the path for yourself and Professor Clay whilst still allowing you to work things out in your own way."

"Do I understand from that that you planted in Clay's mind the idea of going to Venus to look for Jaycott?"

"Yes. Long distance telepathic waves, which also embodies hypnosis. . . ." Charteris got to his feet and strolled to the window. The flying saucer had by now moved so far from the area of the smashed cosmic lens the scene had been swallowed up in infinity. Instead the huge, silent machine was crossing the orbit of Mars and still moving onwards to the outer deeps.

"If you will come with me, Captain," Charter's said, motioning, "we will have a meal whilst we watch—and hear—what Professor Clay is up to."

Englefield did not question how this miracle was to be accomplished: he had seen enough of the high-powered science of Marinax to realise it *could* be done, so he left it at that and followed Charteris from the control room into a beautifully furnished private room wherein a table was already laid with a meal for two. The smooth efficiency of everything was a constant eye-opener to Englefield. Even more did he wonder how the gravity stabilisers worked which kept everything at normal weight.

"Now," Charteris said, settling at the table, "let us watch." He pressed a button on the table edge and into a concealed microphone said: "Tune in Professor Clay to my private room, please."

Englefield looked about him in wonder, waiting for what would happen next. Meanwhile Charteris served him with the finest food Marinax could offer, together with a brilliant

emerald-coloured wine. Then the lighting dimmed very slightly and all one wall opposite the table began to glow—and became a screen. Upon it there appeared a view of one of Venus's principal cities. Almost immediately sound was added from concealed speakers—the sound of a city at work.

"Miraculous," Englefield murmured, fascinated.

"The science of light-wave trapping and audiophonics brought to the ultimate degree," Charteris responded, smiling. "Now you know how we are able to study Earth people so intimately and get to understand all their queer little foibles— Ah, there is our rugged friend!"

The view of the city had changed and given place to a section of the Venusian jungle. In the grey gloom of the Venusian night Professor Clay was visible, ray gun in his hand, his clothes torn and dirty. The speakers carried the crackle of the undergrowth as he moved slowly, looking about him.

"Apparently lost," Charteris commented, after a while. "It is time he was given some help. . . ."

He switched on his microphone again: "Locate Jaycott and inform Clay by telepathy where he is," he said. "Inform our Venusian agents that they are to give Clay every facility for carrying out his objective. Also locate his daughter and Mr. Curtis and inform them where they can locate the Professor. Notify me when that has been done."

Smiling, he broke the contact and continued with his meal as the wall blanked out. Englefield ate perfunctorily, too astonished by the science of the new-born race to pass much comment. After a while Charteris gave him an inquiring glance.

"You are an intelligent man, Captain, and—as things go—a good scientist. I trust the few examples you have seen will make living with us seem a worthwhile project."

"Yes, you've won me over," Englefield admitted. "I might just as well. I've nothing left on Earth that really interests me, in any case."

Charteris considered his drink and then commented: "There is a woman in Marinax I would like you to meet. She's a scientist, and I think she will appeal to you, and you to her. It may soften the bruise left by Miss Clay."

"Nothing escapes you, does it?" Englefield asked, smiling.

"Nothing, Captain."

Silence fell and the meal proceeded to its close. Some little time after it when the two men were engaged in more or less casual conversation, a buzzer signalled. Charteris pressed a button and immediately the wallscreen came into operation. Professor Clay was visible, ray-guns in his hands, surveying a huge private office in which only one man was seated. Sound came floating through the speakers.

"How the devil did you get in here?" Jaycott demanded, jumping up from the desk. "What are the guards doing to let you in?"

"There were no guards, my friend," Clay replied coldly. "I can't explain their absence, but I do know I had a clear field. I've waited a long time for this, Jaycott. You are a minus quantity anyway with your devilish lens smashed, thanks to Captain Englefield's unforgettable courage—but as long as you live to plot and plan there is still danger. I mean to eradicate that —now! I've come all the way from Earth to do it!"

"You'd be such a fool as to commit murder?" Jaycott demanded, clenching his fists. "You'll never get away with it, Professor. You'll be caught before——"

"Where is my daughter?" Clay interrupted.

"I—I haven't the least idea."

"Don't lie to me, Jaycott! You sent her into the Forest of Dreams to die. I happen to know all about it."

Jaycott gave a little start of surprise and then smiled cynically.

"All right, since you know all about it, why ask me?"

"I just wanted to satisfy myself if you're as big a liar as I think you are. Now I know. You're rotten, Jaycott—a low down, worthless killer hiding behind high office, and a mighty union to further your own ends. To kill you won't be murder; it will be justice!"

Jaycott made a lunge forward and then stopped in his tracks as both ray-guns blazed at him relentlessly. Smoking holes appeared across his chest. His face twisted in anguish for a moment then he fell flat upon it, his arms sprawled. Clay stood looking down on him then gave a glance around him. His ray-guns still in his hands, he began to move towards the door.

He had only just reached it when it opened suddenly. Instantly he was on the defensive, then relaxed with a cry of thankfulness as he saw Dorothy and Bob Curtis standing there. They were dirty and obviously bewildered, but not in the least harmed.

"Dad!" Dorothy cried, hugging him. "My guess was right!"

"Guess?" Clay held her from him and frowned. "What guess? What are you talking about, child?"

"I—I don't really know. I suddenly got a feeling that if I came to this building I'd find you—and once that notion took hold of me nothing would satisfy me but that I risk everything and come. Bob and I were on the city outskirts, anyway. It was just as though I were—directed."

"Perhaps you were," Clay mused. "The spirit of Englefield, maybe. There never was a braver man. You both know what he did?"

"We knew of his intentions, sir," Bob Curtis replied. "I gather he succeeded in smashing that space-lens?"

"He did. I heard the fact over the city radio speakers as I came here to find Jaycott."

"But how did you *get* here?" Dorothy demanded.

"Well, in the first place——"

The view faded and the sound blurred. Quietness returned to the great private room aboard the space flier as the dimmed lights were restored. Charteris glanced across at Englefield.

"I imagine, Captain, that the reign of Jaycott is over—and I should not be surprised if a monument isn't erected to your memory. How would you feel about that?"

"Flattered—even though it doesn't mean anything. At least I am satisfied that everything has worked out as we planned. Jaycott wiped out, the space lens smashed, and Dorothy has Bob Curtis— He's a good fellow. He'll make her a good husband. As for a new Prime Minister, I think they couldn't do better than elect Clay himself."

"They will—if you mean the people. We will transmit the necessary mental suggestion to bring that about." Charteris rose to his feet. "If you are interested, Captain, you can now see Marinax approaching in the void."

"Already?" Englefield crossed the chamber to the outlook port and gazed out upon space. To his surprise the orbits of Jupiter, Saturn and Uranus had been left behind. The flying saucer was hurtling onwards with unbelievable velocity into the remoter deeps.

"There," Charteris said, pointing—and Englefield saw a dim world lying out beyond Pluto, a world which was slowly becoming larger. "Non-reflective as a rule, as I told you, but specially illuminated when a traveller is returning so as to facilitate navigation. In a matter of about an hour we shall be there."

Thereafter Englefield remained by the port, watching the mystery world coming ever closer. The orbit of Pluto, outermost world of the System, was left behind and the man-made world of the departed scientists of Marinax slowly began to fill all space. The millions of miles flashed by and were gone in the flying saucer's smooth onrush.

At last the metal globe filled all space. One of the plates of which it was composed opened and, its speed now greatly reduced, the flying saucer flashed through the opening and into the lighted wilderness beyond. The plates closed again, and Englefield had the feeling that he was shut off forever from the world and the people he had known since birth.

Then when he saw the immensity of the city below him, lighted by atomic fire which gave both illumination and heat, he knew it didn't matter if he never saw Earth again. Here was a city replete, a city of majesty and power and tremendous area, obviously planned by scientists to obtain the best possible conditions for the community living in it.

The flying saucer began to lower, dropping down towards a landing field. It halted amidst perhaps another fifty of its fellows. Englefield stood at the window, looking out upon the towering buildings so skilfully erected.

"Beautiful," he commented at length. "There is poetry in the architecture, Charteris."

"There is poetry everywhere," Charteris answered. "You will see. The people here live because they *enjoy* living, not because they have to scratch out an existence to enable them to reach an indeterminate future. They have no worry, no responsibilities—except to their families—and science has cured them of all the ills that might befall them. You will enjoy being amongst us, and for a celebration I wish you to be a guest of honour at a dinner I am holding to-night."

"Guest of honour?" Englefield shook his head. "Why should I, just an Earthman like the rest of the men here, be given such high praise? I haven't your genius or scientific knowledge, so I——"

"You have courage, Captain. That is what builds races."

So Englefield became the guest of honour as requested, and when he met the people around him he knew he wanted to stay—forever. It was his introduction to Myra Kenyon, scientist, which finally decided him.

By the time the dinner had ended he could not imagine life without Myra Kenyon at his side.

THE END

[The end of *The Cosmic Flame* by John Russell Fearn (as Vargo Statten)]