

WORLDS of WONDER

**Captain
W.E.
JOHNS**

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WORLDS OF WONDER

More adventures in Space

BY
CAPTAIN W. E. JOHNS



HODDER AND STOUGHTON

THE CHARACTERS IN THIS BOOK ARE
ENTIRELY IMAGINARY AND BEAR NO
RELATION TO ANY LIVING PERSON

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FOREWORD

THIS is the ninth of a series of space exploration books in which the leading characters are Professor Lucius Brane, Group-Captain “Tiger” Clinton, his son Rex and Squadron-Leader (medical) “Toby” Paul, one time of the R.A.F. Also one Vargo Lentos an officer of the Martian Remote Survey Fleet, who, with his spacecraft named *Tavona*, has made the voyages possible.

The books appeared in the following order:

1. Kings of Space
2. Return to Mars
3. Now to the Stars
4. To Outer Space
5. The Edge of Beyond
6. The Death Rays of Ardilla
7. To Worlds Unknown
8. The Quest for the Perfect Planet.

However remarkable, or even fantastic, some of these adventures may seem, it is safe to predict that when men of Earth have succeeded in sending space ships into outer space (as they will) the discoveries made by the crews will be even harder to believe. This has always been the case with voyages of discovery, even on Earth. Remember how the medieval navigators were laughed to scorn when they brought home stories of fish that could fly, and fish that could climb trees, to mention only two examples.

At the time of writing a space ship with a human freight may be launched any day, and by the time these words appear in print Lunar Flight may have been achieved. We now see the truth of the remark made many years ago by the celebrated French author of “fantasy” stories, Jules Verne. He said: “*What one man can imagine other men will be able to do.*” Actually, the scientific advancement which he foresaw, and which to most people seemed impossible, fell short of the mark. Not even he could imagine the incredible invention called Television.

Again, as the Professor has sometimes said in the books named above: “The impossible on Earth is not necessarily impossible on other planets. Once this is accepted, anything becomes possible.”

New readers should understand precisely the meaning of the following terms in astronomy.

STAR. A star is a body that shines with its own fire. Our Sun is a star.

PLANET. A body which has no fire of its own but shines with reflected light.

PLANETOIDS. The name given to a swarm of minor planets which have orbits in our Solar System. None has a greater diameter than 500 miles, but that would be large enough to have catastrophic results should two come into collision.

CONSTELLATION. A group of fixed stars or planets.

GALAXY. A luminous band of innumerable stars and planets too distant to be seen separately with the naked eye. The so-called Milky Way is a galaxy. Earth, and its Solar System, is part of it.

SATELLITE. A secondary body revolving round a greater one, known as the Primary. Thus, our Moon is a satellite of Earth. The diameter of known satellites vary between 5 miles (as in the case of Deimos, a moon of Mars) and 3,550 miles (as Titan, a moon of Saturn). Jupiter has 11 satellites, Saturn 10 and Uranus 5. These are permanent, and have nothing whatever to do with the so-called artificial satellites (rockets) put in orbit round Earth.

THE UNIVERSE. The whole system of stars, planets, etc. existing in space. This comprises hundreds of millions of galaxies, each containing millions of constellations and solar systems. Our own Solar System (Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, Pluto, their satellites and the planetoids) with the Sun in the centre, is a microscopic part of the whole. How far the Universe extends, or if it has an end, is not known, and probably never will be known.

NOVA. This is the name given to a new or temporary star, or a star which suddenly becomes visible having previously been invisible. These occur in a tremendous burst of brilliancy which slowly fades. The cause is not known definitely, but one theory is that a Nova is an exploding star, or a star which has blown off its outer layers in an immense explosion. Another theory is that the explosion is caused by two stars in collision. These were once thought to happen rarely, but as more powerful telescopes are developed they are observed more frequently. More than seventy have been seen in the present century. The awful fury of these conflagrations may be judged from the fact that a normal one gives off 50,000 times more light and heat than our Sun. One was seen to send flames shooting towards our Solar System at a speed of 1,000 miles a second. Our largest man-made

bomb explodes in a second of time. With a Nova the explosion may occupy several days, becoming larger all the time, before it begins to subside.

CHAPTER I

MELANCHOLY REFLECTIONS

“You may not realize it, Rex, but you’re a very lucky fellow.”

The speaker was Professor Lucius Brane, wealthy scientist-engineer and Space explorer, and the scene was the library of Glensalich Castle, his home in the remote Highlands of Scotland. Apart from Rex Clinton there were two others present, his father, Group-Captain “Tiger” Clinton (Retired) and Squadron-Leader “Toby” Paul, one time of the R.A.F. Medical Service.

“In what way do you mean I’m so lucky?” asked Rex.

“You’re living at the peak of civilization on Earth and will probably die before it collapses, in due course to disappear as other civilizations have done before it. There have been a lot of complaints about the behaviour of young people recently, but I am beginning to suspect that some of them can see more clearly than their parents what the future holds.”

“What does it hold?”

“Possibly nothing. Perhaps obliteration.”

“That’s a nice thought to go on with,” put in Tiger, cynically.

“It’s true, and unless you are one of these people who refuse to see what is staring them in the face, you must know it.”

“What is staring us in the face?”

“The end of civilization on Earth as we have known it.”

“And how do you arrive at that melancholy conclusion?” inquired Toby.

“It is quite obvious that the troubles that beset the world today, in Africa and elsewhere, are merely the rumblings of an explosion which, when it comes, will engulf the majority of people living on this planet. The next war, should one come—which heaven forbid—will be a war of races—white, black, brown, yellow. The seeds of hatred have been sown and they are now beginning to germinate. Which people will ultimately survive I wouldn’t care to say, but whoever they are they may end up living in caves like our distant ancestors, afraid to put their noses outside. The leaders of the white nations, instead of preparing to tear each other to pieces, would do better to get together in readiness for the storm that will break when the orient bursts its boundaries and Africa is again a black continent.”

“Can nothing prevent this frightful calamity?” questioned Rex anxiously.

“There are one or two things that might bring people to their senses.”

“Such as?”

The Professor looked over his glasses. “An overwhelming disaster, for instance; or the threat of one. In the face of dire catastrophe likely to affect everyone nations might realize that mutual assistance would serve them better than the present hostility.”

“What sort of disaster have you in mind? A plague? A pestilence?”

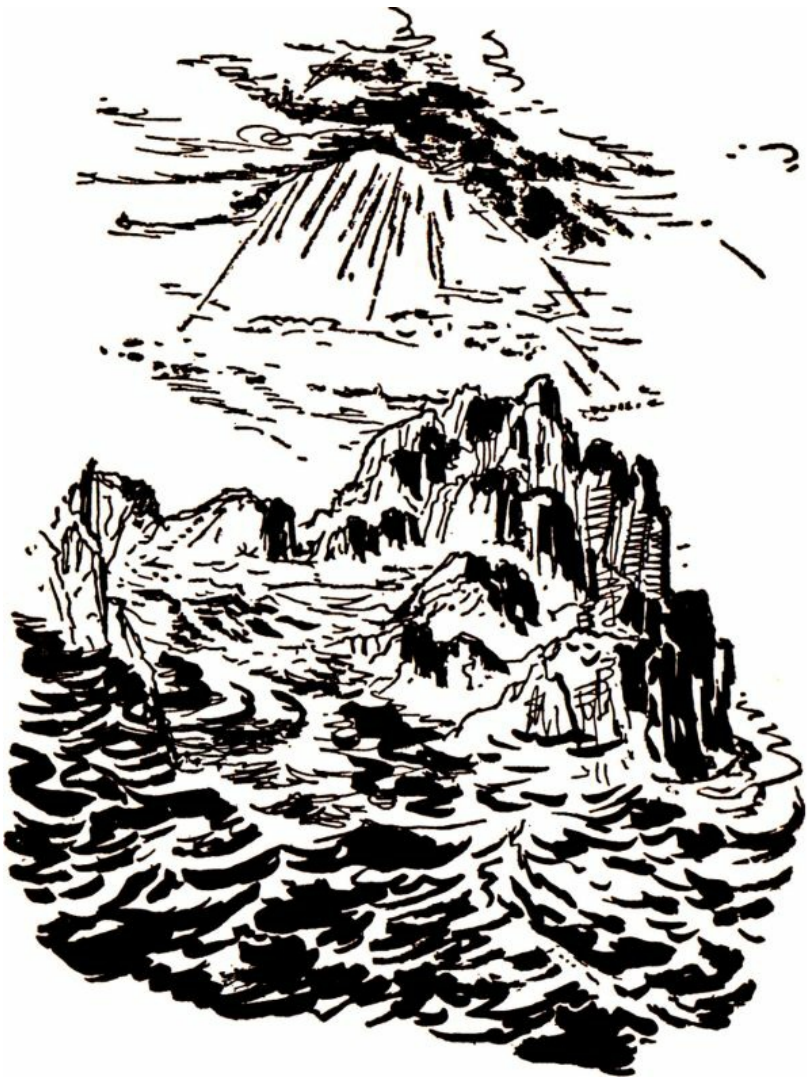
“That might do it. If an infectious disease such as the Black Death got out of hand, as it did in the fourteenth century, in the overcrowded conditions of our civilization the result would be too dreadful. It has been estimated that in England alone nearly half the population died. In the East something like 37,000,000 people perished. It is worth noting that the contagion was thought to have been brought on by unusual weather conditions. But I was thinking more of a physical upheaval of the world on which we live.”

“We have seen something in our travels of what can happen,” said Rex.

“Yes, and it would be wishful thinking to say that nothing of the sort could happen here. Of course it could. Earth is an ordinary planet and is just as liable to convulsions as any other. It must have happened more than once in the past and I see no reason why it shouldn’t happen again. The stories we read in the Old Testament of the Bible, of floods beyond imagination, of fire raining from the sky, and of long periods of utter darkness, are not fiction. These things happened. There is ample proof of ice ages, when the polar ice spread as far as Equatorial Africa. It would take very little to produce such conditions. Earth would only have to move a few degrees on its axis, perhaps as a result of a planetoid passing near. If, for the same reason, Earth was moved a little nearer to the Sun, it would become a cinder. Moved farther away it would become a ball of ice. In ancient times these horrors were thought to be the wrath of the gods. Today we know better.”

“What a terrifying thought.”

“It’s the truth, and nothing is to be gained by shutting our eyes to it. Try to imagine, if you can, a whole continent disappearing under water, as did lost Atlantis. Again, imagine, if you can, an earthquake that could thrust up out of the sea a range of mountains like the Andes. We know that happened because sea shells are found on the peaks.” The Professor smiled bleakly. “But still, if the human race should destroy itself, it would only be in the nature of retribution for what it has done.”



Toby looked surprised. “How do you make that out?”

“Well, man hasn’t hesitated to destroy anything that stood in his way, in however small a degree. He seems to take the view that everything on Earth was created for his particular benefit. He is not prepared to share with anything, and the punishment for interference is death. Even the harmless rabbit, because it ate grass, of which one would think there was plenty, must be exterminated. Man knows no mercy. The tree that stands in his path must be cut down. To all things he is the great enemy. Everything is afraid of him. Animals run and birds fly at his approach. Anything that attempts to defend itself becomes a brute to be destroyed. I am not talking about the big predators,

the carnivores, against which man has every right to defend himself. I am referring to the creatures, and things, that can't defend themselves. Wherefore I say that if in the end man is himself destroyed it would be no more than justice."

"So you really think nothing can save men from their folly?" said Tiger.

The Professor thought for a moment. "There is perhaps one other thing that might give them reason to pause. If the people of Earth were made suddenly to realize that there were other worlds around them with civilizations far in advance of their own, the shock might bring them to their senses, particularly if they were made aware that some of these worlds could blot them out of existence at any moment. That would give the newspapers something to write about."

"If you feel like that why don't you tell them?" said Tiger.

"I've answered that question before. No one would believe me."

"You could produce proof."

"Not proof positive."

"You have photographs."

"They would be called fakes. The modern camera is capable of strange tricks. I recall a realistic whale in a film called *Moby Dick*. I learned it was made of what I believe is called foam rubber. I have thought about writing a paper about our experiences, but I still shrink from the scorn and ridicule that would follow publication. I doubt if any editor would publish such a paper, but if he did people would say: 'How do you know?'"

"You could answer, 'Because I have been there.'"

The Professor smiled sadly. "Think of the questions that would raise. How did you get there? In what did you travel? If I answered truthfully I would lay myself open to a charge of being a first class liar."

Rex stepped in again. "I would say: I have been to the Moon. I have walked on the Moon, I have picked flowers on the Moon, I . . ."

"Back would come the demand, prove it. How would you prove it? Think it over, my boy. Imagine yourself sitting in front of a television camera before a panel of experts, so-called, who would come convinced you were a liar and determined to prove it. Forget the other planets we have visited; how could you prove beyond all doubt or question that you had landed on the Moon?"

Rex thought for a moment. "We could produce a real live Martian. Vargo, for instance."

"How would you prove he was a man from another planet? In European clothes he would look like any other European."

“I’d produce him in his usual costume.”

“That would prove nothing. It would be said he was an ordinary man who had been dressed up for the occasion.”

“He could demonstrate his ability to read other men’s minds.”

“A trick, people would sneer. There are plenty of excellent trick thought readers on Earth. You may see them on the stage or the television screen. No, Rex, that wouldn’t do. I’m not going to make a laughing stock of myself by trying to convince a lot of sceptics of something they don’t want to believe. If you think about it you will see that to prove what we have done, where we have been and what we know, would be practically impossible. Photographs are useless. They could be fakes, taken on Earth by making use of models.”

“We could produce something that doesn’t occur on Earth.”

“Such as?”

“A piece of that red metal, oricholcum, which we found on Mars.”

“That would create some interest, no doubt, and people would wonder where we had found it. You must remember that it does occur on Earth; or it did, because it was known to the ancients. It was used on the lost continent of Atlantis, now under the Atlantic Ocean, although that has been questioned. All we could prove was that the metal did exist.”

There was a short silence. Then the Professor went on: “Another risk of overwhelming catastrophe is one to which I have often referred, and it is one that cannot be ignored. I mean the possibility of some overenthusiastic nuclear research worker, by going too far, doing fearful mischief by starting a chain explosion or drenching the world with strontium or radioactivity—and we saw on the pathetic planet Selinda what that can do.^[1] That may never happen, but it could, make no mistake about it. But there, perhaps after all it won’t be necessary for us to try to prove anything. Someone else will do it for us. At the rate space exploration is advancing it cannot be long before an official expedition succeeds in placing a man on the Moon. It could happen any day now. Whether he will succeed in getting back to Earth is another matter.”

^[1] See *The Death Rays of Ardilla*.

“We could offer to fetch him should he get stuck there,” suggested Tiger.

“No one would take that seriously.”

“They’d have to if we produced him.”

The Professor chuckled. “Let us wait until the occasion arises. If it does I

will consider it. Which reminds me. It is Vargo's night for coming over. Rex, you might switch on the landing lights. Vargo will be looking for them and we might as well have a chat with him if he's in the vicinity."

Rex walked over to the wall, threw a switch and made an adjustment to a small instrument, rather like an old-fashioned portable radio, that stood on a table under it. "Are you thinking of doing another trip with him, should he look in?" he asked, when he returned to his chair.

"I have an open mind about it," answered the Professor thoughtfully. "My decision will probably depend on any news he may bring. I must remember, should he make a signal, to have a large pot of tea brought in. It is strange, or perhaps it isn't, how the liking for it has spread to the planets we have visited. Vargo seems to think our simple popular beverage is the greatest contribution Earth has made to other civilizations."

"I'm glad we've been of some use to someone," said Tiger drily. "It has struck me more than once that for all our travels we haven't introduced to our own planet anything to its advantage. It's true we have seen some incredible things and had astonishing adventures, but you couldn't say that any of them have been beneficial to the human race on Earth."

"Some might have been, had we decided to speak."

"Then why didn't you?"

"I would have done had there been the slightest hope of my recommendations being accepted here, where our civilization, as we are pleased to call it, has somehow got adrift with the result that our world is now in a state of confusion. No one really knows what we are trying to do or where we are going. Even people of the same nationality have split into factions, each working against the other. That's no use. Until general agreement is reached there will be no real progress towards the ideal state. We know that can happen, for we have seen it."

Tiger looked puzzled. "I don't quite follow you."

"Then let me put it like this. You will agree that the ultimate objective of human endeavour is happiness, which is nothing more than contentment, or, if you like, peace of mind."

"Very well."

"Have the people of Earth found happiness? Of course they haven't. Everyone is still rushing through life, working harder than any wild animal, chasing that will o' the wisp called pleasure which they believe, wrongly, is happiness. Some concentrate their efforts on making money. Having made more than they can spend they still strive for more. What is the sense of that? Men have made wonderful machines, but have they brought him contentment?"

Of course they haven't. He must make more machines to control the machines; and so he goes on, getting ever farther from his goal. He lives in a state of fear; fear of himself, of what he is doing, of the future; fear of war; fear of the diseases he has brought upon himself by overtaxing his mental and physical resources. He can't stop. In desperation he goes on, making confusion worse."

"What should he do?"

"Go back. I know that sounds impossible, but we know it can be done for we saw it on Ando,^[2] where the people, seeing the danger ahead returned to a more simple way of life. With Terromagna^[3] it was different. The people there had learned to control themselves, which is the first requirement of true civilization, and thus were able to control their amazing scientific inventions. I allow that Terromagna is a world thousands, perhaps millions, of years older than Earth; but they had obviously proceeded on the right lines. Earth may come to that, if it lasts long enough. Then they will stop working with the feverish activity of ants, crowding in the same nests and persuading themselves that ugliness is beauty. In that respect the Greeks, 3,000 years ago, were nearer to perfection than we are today."

^[2] See *To Outer Space*.

^[3] See *The Edge of Beyond*.

"What is the basic trouble with us?" asked Rex. "People seem all right to me."

"Left alone, yes. Our weakness, I think, lies in the power of certain individuals. One bad man can infect a multitude with his wickedness, as did Hitler, for example. To achieve his personal ambitions he was prepared to put millions of people to death. Of course, people must have a leader. The ancient civilizations knew that, and tried all sorts of methods to find people who would not abuse their powers. If there is one lesson that history teaches it is that absolute power is too great a responsibility for any one man. That is the weakness, indeed, the danger, of dictatorships. We have kept our kings and queens, but as a result of bitter experience have taken care to leave them little real power."

"Then why have them?"

"For at least one very good reason. They provide a line of succession, so there is never any argument as to who is to be head of the state. That was not so centuries ago. There were periods when half a dozen people were claiming

the throne, and the result was battle, murder and chaos. Such conditions led to the dreadful Wars of the Roses, which laid the whole country waste; and it was of course the ordinary people who suffered. Eventually they had the wisdom to take steps to see it didn't happen again. They decided to rule themselves by their own representatives which we call parliament. When Charles the First tried to get rid of it they chopped off his head. But still, let us not talk about it. On the whole, from what we have seen elsewhere, Earth has been fairly lucky to exist at all. It would not make people any happier if we told them what we know, that there are other worlds which could wipe them off the map of the heavens if they felt so inclined. The day will come, when Earth has achieved interplanetary flight, when people here will see the folly of their present way of life. There lies their hope of taking a short cut to happiness which otherwise might take 1,000,000 years. Ah! There goes the signal," exclaimed the Professor, as the instrument on the table started a thin, high-pitched whine, and a small blue light glowed. "Apparently Vargo intends to land. Rex, you might go to the hill to meet him. I will have the tea brought in."

Rex went out.

Ten minutes later, with tea and cakes on the table, the door opened and Rex reappeared with Vargo Lentos, the companion and adviser on their several voyages. He was dressed in the fashion of his own planet, an open-necked robe caught in at the waist to form a tunic and a short skirt, in the manner of a kilt, leaving the lower half of the legs bare. Sandals, with cross lacing straps were on his feet. Comfort with simplicity was obviously the chief factor in the garments. He carried a slim black portfolio.

"Ah! There you are!" cried the Professor. "Come in, my dear fellow. Make yourself at home and give us the latest gossip from your part of the galaxy. Tea is on the table. Please help yourself."

Vargo smiled and shook hands all round. "I am happy to see you all again, and in good health," he said in his clear precise voice.

"I take it Gator and Borrion wouldn't leave the *Tavona*?"

"Your Moon shines brightly and they are afraid the ship might be seen, so they are standing off until I signal I am ready to leave. They will not go very high. Your upper atmosphere and the space above are making approach more and more dangerous; I mean, with all these artificial satellites your people are putting into orbit."

"Don't blame me for that. What news have you brought us on this occasion?"

"Nothing of great importance, I'm afraid."

"You've been doing some more exploring?"

“Of course. Several trips. Our survey ships never stop exploring. There is still so much to do.”

“But you have seen nothing likely to be of particular interest to us?”

“I wouldn’t say that. There is one thing that may excite your curiosity, bearing in mind your anxiety to find the reason for the exceptional life span of the people of Dacoona. You will remember we failed to ascertain the cause.”

“To my disappointment. If I could double the life span of my own people I should feel I had really done something useful.”

“Then I may be able to help you. You were kind enough to make me a present of the instrument you call a camera, with the necessary equipment to fulfil its purpose.”

“I thought you might, in your travels, get some more pictures for my collection.”

“Always now I am on the look-out for subjects of peculiar interest,” rejoined Vargo. “I have some here. They were taken on a rather large, curious but comfortable planet which until recently was unknown to us. We have put it on our general chart under the name of Krona. The population appears to be thin and widely scattered, although there may be a reason for that. The people themselves, or the few we met in the small settlement where we landed, are extraordinarily simple—perhaps undeveloped would be a more appropriate word—but most friendly and hospitable.”

“It is probably because they are undeveloped that they are like that,” put in the Professor, drily. “Civilization begets suspicion. I take it you mean they are undeveloped mentally not physically?”

“It was in that sense that I used the word. Physically they are normal.” Vargo had opened his portfolio. From it he took, and spread out on the table, a batch of photographic prints. “I would like you to look at these pictures and tell me if you notice anything remarkable.”

Everyone gathered round the table to study the photographs in the expectation of observing some unusual feature.

CHAPTER II
A STRANGE TALE

FOR perhaps a minute no one spoke, and by the end of that time the disappointment Rex felt was showing on his face. He also looked puzzled, because he could find nothing in the picture he had picked up worth comment.

It showed a group of apparently quite ordinary people, men and women, looking at the photographer and obviously posing for him. There were about twenty of them. Their complexions were somewhat darker than those of Europeans and the clothes they wore were uniform and simple, white in colour and loose fitting. The picture might have been taken in India, and the people members of a rather pale tribe, or caste. They looked lean, hardy folk, but Rex sought in vain for a feature that could be termed unique.

The others must have reached the same conclusion, for each put down his photograph without a word and looked at Vargo as if awaiting his explanation.

Vargo seemed in no hurry to provide it. He indulged in one of his rare smiles. "These are a few of the people of Krona," he said.

"So you told us," reminded the Professor.

"Do you not notice something strange?"

"Nothing whatever."

"Didn't it strike you that they all appeared to be of exactly the same age?"



“Now you mention it, yes. Is there anything remarkable in that?”

“Yes. I used the word *appeared*, in respect of their ages, deliberately. In fact, the actual ages of the people at whom you have been looking vary between twenty years and more than 300 years. I must add that a year on Krona is rather shorter than a year on Earth.”

“Really!” exclaimed the Professor, adjusting his spectacles. “I would not have guessed it. You are quite sure about this?”

“I only know what the people themselves told me.”

“We met people of astonishing longevity on the planet Dacoona, but it was easily possible to see that some of the people were older than others.”^[4]

^[4] See *To Worlds Unknown*.

“So. After our failure to ascertain the reason for the extended life span on Dacoona it struck me that you would be interested in Krona. Hence the photographs.”

“Are we likely to have better luck on Krona?”

“I am almost sure of it. I believe I know already *why* the people live for so long although that is not to say I understand the cause. There was at first the usual difficulty of language, but as with all primitive people they had a short vocabulary, just enough words for their simple needs; so I was soon able to master it. I should say the people of Krona see nothing peculiar in their attainment, having had no means of comparison with other planets. They take it as a matter of course, presumably because they have possessed the faculty for so long that none can say how or when it started. They have no history, although there is a legend that their early ancestors were put on the planet and abandoned there. I had some difficulty in making them understand that it was most unusual for people to live for as long as they do.”

“How do they do it? That is the important factor.”

“I gather it has something to do with one particular food they eat. That is what they told me, and I can see no reason to doubt it. Certainly whatever it is they do have the power of arresting age by preventing any further wastage or exhaustion of their bodies. While they keep to their diet there is no further development. This is not inherent in them. It has to be done deliberately, and with some ceremony. Everywhere, even on Earth as you once told me, there are tribes that have initiation functions for their young men and women when they reach the adult stage. Something of that sort appears to happen on Krona.”

“Can you be a little more explicit?”

“I will try.” Vargo helped himself to another cup of tea and sipped it with relish. “As I understand it what happens is this,” he resumed. “When children are born on Krona, which incidentally has a very low birth rate, they lead perfectly normal lives. That is to say, they eat ordinary food, and on practically a vegetarian diet develop in the ordinary way. But when they reach what they regard as the age of physical perfection there is a ceremony, after which their staple article of food is one particular type of bean, blue in colour, called Krona. This vegetable has the curious quality of sustaining life and at the same time preventing the deterioration of the cells, nerves and organs, of which the human body is composed. Once having started on the bean diet it is impossible to stop without the consequences being drastic, if not fatal, the effect depending on the age of the person. To put the matter in a nut-shell, as I have heard you say, if for any reason a man is prevented from getting his regular supply of the life preserving beans he ages with fearful rapidity. In the case of an old man he shrivels up and dies in a matter of days.”

“If they know that it must have happened,” interposed the Professor.

“It has happened. The Kronians have never forgotten one terrible year when the crop failed, and more than half the population succumbed. That is the risk they run. Their only fear is that it might happen again.”

“In other words, once having started on the diet a man must continue with it in order to stay alive,” said Toby.

“Yes, if he has passed the age at which he would normally have died.”

“How did they discover the peculiar property of this uncommon vegetable? At least, I think it must be very rare or we should have met with it in our travels. Have you ever seen anything like it, or heard reports of it?”

“Never. From what they tell me on Krona the bean was eaten in the first place, a long long time ago, because food of any sort on the planet was difficult to procure. I can believe that, as you will, if ever you see the place. The problem of getting enough to eat still exists. They had to rely largely on the fruits, nuts and roots, that grew wild in the vast forests. One of these was a sort of bean. Because it was hard to find they had the sense to clear some ground and cultivate it, just enough for their needs. So in course of time the bean became their staple article of food, as with cereals elsewhere.”

The Professor came back. “Have they never thought of preserving an emergency stock of beans, by drying some, for instance, against another shortage?”

“Naturally, but they haven’t yet found a way of doing that. They say the beans won’t keep. There is something in them which sets up a sort of fermentation.”

“What a curious problem they have set themselves,” returned the Professor.

“What this all amounts to is, if I went on a diet of these blue beans I wouldn’t grow any older?” Rex spoke.

“You would grow older in years but your body would not change,” answered Vargo.

“Now what genius discovered that, I wonder,” murmured the Professor.

“No one knows, it happened so long ago. Of course, if the bean occurred there, and was eaten, as it was almost sure to be, its peculiar property would soon be discovered. I noticed they made a meal of the bean four times a day.”

“What sort of people are these Kronians?” inquired the Professor.

“First of all I had better tell you about the planet itself,” returned Vargo. “It is about one quarter the size of Earth, that is, with a diameter of roughly 2,000 miles, and has a small, almost circular orbit, in the area we have called the Second Region of our galaxy. Approaching, it presents a curious aspect, not

only because the greater part of it is hilly, with resultant shades of light and dark caused by shadows or because it is densely wooded. But it is the effect of the unusual colour of the vegetation, both large and small, that is most striking. One could call it green, but it is deep and comes very close to blue. Even flowers which one would expect to be red or pink are in wonderful shades of blue; so it is not surprising that the bean which forms practically their only food is blue.”

“That must be the result of something in the soil, probably a mineral or the oxide of one,” averred the Professor. “Here it is possible to change the colour of certain flowers by the introduction into the soil of chemicals, usually of an acid nature. This is a common practice with hydrangeas, for example, which can easily be changed from pink to different shades of blue or purple according to the quantity of artificial colourant administered.”

“You are probably correct,” agreed Vargo. “I tested the water, of which there is an ample supply, and found it to have a slightly acid principle.”

“Which denotes a scarcity of lime or any other common alkaline substance.”

“Exactly.”

“Please continue. I am finding this a fascinating subject.”

“As regards the people, they are intelligent, and in many respects resemble tribes found on many other planets, including Earth, where technical or mechanical civilization has not yet begun. In the case of Krona there is not, and never has been, any need for it. The population is thin and widely scattered, the several groups—although I saw only one—living in small communities. These are joined only by footpaths. As there is no vehicular traffic there is no need for roads. Their dwellings are built entirely of wood, as one would expect since there is an unlimited supply. They are of the simplest possible design, seldom more than two rooms, again as one would expect because the climate is always on the warm side with practically no seasonal change.”

“How do you account for that?”

“At its zenith the Sun is hot, and the ground with its heavy cloak of vegetation absorbs enough heat to maintain a comfortable temperature through the hours of darkness. The composition of the atmosphere is good, that is, as we require it, with a comfortable density. There is no hostility between the different tribes, which resemble each other in appearance and character.”

“It sounds almost too good to be true,” remarked the Professor, smiling.

“Broadly speaking the Kronians are a happy, lazy, simple-minded race, rather small in stature, but mentally and physically active when need arises.

They play several games, chiefly I suppose because there is little for them to do except keep a certain amount of ground under cultivation for fruit and vegetables, but chiefly of course for their precious beans. With these they have all they need, so there is no incentive for them to do any other sort of work. They are clever wood carvers and that seemed to be the most popular hobby or pastime. They have no use for money so all are of the same social standing. They have no king, or leader. They are extremely friendly. They treated me and the crew of the *Tavona* with the greatest cordiality and hospitality, although, as I tried to explain to them, we were visitors from another world. It did not appear to occur to them that we might do them an injury.”

“Tell me this,” requested the Professor. “You speak of growing fruit and vegetables. Does that mean that adults, when they go on the bean diet, can still eat other foods?”

“Certainly they may, although with a stomach full of beans they need little more. They are vegetarians, although I know they eat eggs and honey. I don’t think it has occurred to them to eat flesh of any sort, even if it were available, which is something I don’t know. I was not on the planet long enough to do any exploring.”

Rex posed another question. “But if they never die won’t their planet get overcrowded?”

“I didn’t say they *never* died. They do die eventually, and I believe that when death does come it occurs suddenly, as if every organ had collapsed simultaneously. They appear to enjoy good health, but of course there must be accidental deaths.”

“Are there any natural hazards—malignant insects, voracious reptiles or dangerous wild beasts?” the Professor wanted to know.

“I didn’t inquire, but I heard no mention of any. I cannot think there are any dangerous animals otherwise I would have seen weapons. Tools they have, but I saw nothing that could be called a lethal weapon.”

“It sounds to me,” said Tiger, “as if you have struck a world as near perfect as one could imagine it.”

“Apart from the fact that they have developed a form of culture in human relations they are still living in the Stone Age,” asserted Vargo. “There may be metals there, and indeed it would be strange if there were none; but I saw no sign of metal being worked, or used for any purpose. I had some difficulty in making them understand what I meant by metal. Even when I showed them some metal objects from the *Tavona* it seemed beyond their comprehension that the material came out of the ground. But with sharpened shells and flints, time being of no object, they could do the most surprising things.”

“We must certainly pay a visit to what sounds like a little paradise,” declared the Professor.

“Will you introduce to them some of the things we understand, such as metals?” asked Rex.

“Definitely not. That might well put them on the road to devices they can do without. Vargo says they are a happy people. How many times must I tell you a man can’t have more than happiness. All the troubles on Earth today can be traced back to the invention of the first steam engine.” The Professor turned to Vargo. “Will you take us to Krona?”

“With pleasure, if I can get the approval of the High Council, which is now back on Mars, as are many people from Mino and Lentos. The re-occupation of our original home goes well.”

“Is Rolto still on Mars?” asked Rex.

“Yes, he is there.”

“Not causing any more trouble, I hope.”

Vargo hesitated. “I’m afraid he is still trying to cause mischief to you, and unfortunately there are some people who agree with him.”

The Professor looked up quickly. “What sort of mischief is he contemplating now?” he asked, sharply.

“He still argues that Earth, with its ill-considered explosions and elementary rocket launchings is on the way to self-destruction.”

“That need not be of any concern to him.”

“He claims, and not without justification, that it is the concern of everyone in our Solar System, in that should Earth disappear, or even move its position, every other planet would be thrown out of its orbit.”

“And what does he want to do about it? Does he still want to destroy all life on Earth?”

“No. Having failed in that proposal he has now put forward a compromise.”

“And what is that, if I may ask?”

“He suggests turning the radiant heat of the Sun on Earth’s polar ice caps. The resultant floods would inundate more than half the land surfaces of Earth, and in so doing provide the survivors with something better to do than experiment with forces which they do not understand.”

“Could that be done?”

“Without any difficulty at all. It would only need a few space ships equipped with light metal curtains which could be lowered and used to deflect the concentrated rays of the sun.”

“The villain!”

“I don’t think you can say that,” protested Vargo, dispassionately. “Rolto sincerely believes you are a danger to the rest of us. You would do your utmost to save Earth if you thought it was in danger. Indeed, you did that when you caused to be reduced to fragments that small planetoid Vontor, which was travelling along an orbit likely to bring it into collision with Earth.^[5] What Rolto wants to do is very much the same thing. He sees in you a danger and insists that it should be removed—naturally, with as little loss of life as possible.”

^[5] See *Return to Mars*.

“The scoundrel! Had it not been for us Mars would still be a lifeless planet, a place of utter desolation. By destroying the insect hordes we made it habitable. Again, my dear colleague, had it not been for us you would not be here now. You would have died on Mars. Is this all we get in the way of thanks for rescuing your home planet from oblivion? You were unable to deal with the menace. We did it for you.”

“I agree with every word you say. I have simply told you the lines on which Rolto is arguing.”

“Then I must see the High Council on Mars without delay, and put *our* case before them,” said the Professor. “I have met them before and have always found them reasonable. I’m sure they’ll see my point of view.”

“I thought you were opposed to these H-bomb experiments,” said Toby.

“I’m not opposed to nuclear research or experiments in space flight,” stated the Professor, succinctly. “After all, I engaged in them myself. Without them no scientist on Earth would have been able to put a vehicle beyond our belt of atmosphere. But I am certainly against atomic bomb explosions which are designed entirely for destruction and can lead to nothing else. But that is not to say I am prepared to stand by and watch half the people of our world drowned to satisfy the whim of a crank like Rolto. Somebody, at some time, had to experiment in space navigation or the *Tavona* would not be here now.” The Professor spoke hotly.

“There is no need to get upset,” said Vargo, comfortingly. “Nothing has yet been decided. Let us go to Mars. I shall have to return there, anyway. You speak to the High Council. Afterwards, perhaps, we shall be able to go on to Krona.”

“That would suit me admirably,” assented the Professor. “If you can wait while I put my things together I’ll be ready in half an hour.”

Tiger caught Rex’s eye and shrugged. “Here we go again,” he whispered.

Rex looked at Vargo. “Has Borron moved to Mars?” He asked the question with studied carelessness. Borron was the navigator on the space ship *Tavona*.

There was a suspicion of a twinkle in Vargo’s strange compelling eyes when he answered. “Yes, and his pretty daughter, your girl friend, is there keeping house for him, if that’s what you really mean. You’ll be seeing her.”

“This could be your chance, Rex, to put your name in the history book,” bantered the Professor.

“What do you mean?”

“You know perfectly well what I mean. You could go on record as the first man of Earth to marry a lady of another planet, although in 100 years or so it will probably be a common occurrence.”

“As you know, it would not be the first interplanetary marriage,” said Vargo. “You will remember that one of our engineers, Multova of Mino, married a girl of Terromagna, and now lives there.”^[6]

^[6] See *The Edge of Beyond*.

Rex shook his head. “I don’t want to spend the rest of my life on Mars, and Morino wouldn’t live here.”

“She has never been to Earth to see what it is like.”

“She couldn’t get here, anyway. You know it’s unlawful for a woman to travel in one of your space craft.”

“The High Council might make a special dispensation.”

“She wouldn’t be likely to come if she’s been talking to that wretched pilot Rolto. As you know, he landed here on one of his spying expeditions, and later admitted to me that he got the fright of his life when he saw our traffic. He couldn’t get away fast enough. He’s convinced that Earth is populated by madmen.”

“Why not bring Morino here for a holiday, when she could judge for herself?” offered the Professor. “I have rooms to spare, and there is no traffic near Glensalich. You could introduce her gradually to our high speed way of life.”

“I’ll think about it,” decided Rex. “I must say it would be fun to bring her

here and show her the sights, although what she'd think of them I can't imagine."

The Professor stood up. "Let's get ready," he concluded, abruptly.

CHAPTER III

REX MEETS HIS GIRL FRIEND

AN hour later Rex was once more going through the heart-chilling experience of watching the world he knew apparently dropping like a stone into the bottomless sea of eternal space below the *Tavona*. This feeling of fear, for a few seconds amounting almost to panic, was something he had never been able to overcome. It did not occur when he was leaving other planets and he had long ago worked out the reason. It was the same sensation that comes over some people when, having embarked on a ship for a distant continent, they see the coastline of their homeland dropping below the horizon. The thought comes, shall I ever see it again? But when leaving one's own planet for the unknown the feeling was intensified a hundredfold, because it was something entirely new to human experience—at least, as far as the people of Earth were concerned.

This emotion of fear, which with Rex passed as soon as Earth was not recognizable as such, had nothing to do with the initial acceleration of the ship, which for a short time was rather uncomfortable and purely physical. But this was not to be compared with the shattering strains that would be imposed by a rocket launching. With a limited amount of fuel a space probe rocket must get through and beyond the belt of atmosphere before its fuel is exhausted; which means it must reach maximum velocity within seconds of being fired.

With the *Tavona*, deriving its propulsion from cosmic rays, which occur everywhere, it was different. The need for immediate velocity did not arise. Always under control it could travel as slowly as occasion might demand, and could in fact remain stationary should this be required of it. The only reason why it wasted no time near the ground when leaving Earth was by this it was hoped to avoid being seen. Actually, the *Tavona* may have been one of the so-called "Flying Saucers", officially named U.F.O. (Unidentified Flying Objects) which had on several occasions been seen near Earth.

Any discomfort in the *Tavona* began to diminish as soon as it was out of sight of Earth and ended entirely once the void of actual space was reached. The motive power could then be cut, for it was no longer necessary. The velocity remained constant although there was no longer any awareness of motion. The scene around was unchanging, except that some of the constellations faded or became brighter. The stars no longer appeared to be points of light "stuck on the sky". They could be seen for what they really

were.

From this time on, once a course had been set, inside the ship there was nothing to be done. Wherefore monotony became the prevailing impression. All Rex had to do was keep his watch wound up, for although time as such had now ceased to exist it was the only means he had of checking the passing of the hours as he had always understood them at home. Time, of course, was not the only factor relative to Earth that had disappeared. Weight no longer had any meaning. At all events it would be different wherever they went. In zones of neutral gravity there would be no weight at all. There was no more day or night, although on other normal planets there would be periods of light and darkness. There was no longer any up or down. Under the influence of gravity an object was as likely to fall up as down, or for that matter in any direction. There were no points of the compass. In a word, all terms of measurement which men on Earth had made for their convenience no longer applied.

There was only one danger, one possible cause of accident in space travel, and, as Rex knew from his own experience and the experiences of regular space travellers, it was so rare that it could be ignored. This was collision with a meteor, an object that could be observed from Earth in the form of what is called a “shooting star”. This could happen. It was not denied. But Rex knew now that the risk prophesied by scientists on Earth had been greatly exaggerated. There were plenty of meteors, tiny pieces of solid matter seldom larger than a pea, which destroyed themselves when they became incandescent with heat on entering an atmosphere: but the distances between them—however close they might look from Earth—were so vast that the chances of a ship encountering one were infinitesimal.

Clouds of microscopic meteoric dust, particles of frozen hydrogen or some other gas, were more common, although that is not to say they were encountered very often. They did little damage, if any, although the noise inside the ship could be terrifying while it lasted, which was seldom more than one or two seconds. Comets were no danger because they could be seen from afar and avoided. In any case the orbits of most of them had been plotted, so it was known by space navigators where and when one might be expected to appear. There was a very slight risk of passing through the “tail” of a “stranger”; that is, a comet from a distant galaxy that had got adrift and not yet gone into regular orbit. The tail might leave a trail of dust 1,000,000 miles long. Thus might an ocean-going ship strike an uncharted rock.

The ever present problem of space travel was how to pass the time. Conversation, reading or sleeping, were the customary ways. Aside from that there were always the stars to study; they glowed like beacons in a sky which, outside any atmosphere, was always black. Their various colours could be seen

with the naked eye.

Rex could now read the map of the sky moderately well, anyway those parts of it that came within the Solar System or the nearer regions of the galaxy. Moving through the Universe he did not only have to look up at the stars. They were below the ship as well, and all around. It still amazed him how quickly Gator, the ship's captain, or Borron the navigator, could spot a newcomer, or any change of position in one of the constellations. This of course was the result of training and long periods of experience. They knew the sky as a mariner knows the oceans.

Time passed. Rex slept. He awoke, and with the others had a light meal. Looking for Earth he saw it, with its constant companion Moon, as a beautiful double star. For a while he read a book, but as was always the case he found it impossible to concentrate on matters which seemed trivial compared with what he himself was doing. Seeing the others sleeping he again closed his eyes, and this time he must have slept for a long while, for when he next opened them it was to see a gigantic sphere that more than half filled his observation porthole. He knew it could only be Mars, their objective.

He now had something worth while to look at, and after a time he made out the capital town which on their first visit they had named Utopia, after the fictional city of that name. He picked out the central space station, no longer half buried under the dust of ages as it had been when he had originally set eyes on it. It was then a place of desolation, depopulated, long abandoned after the explosion of the near-by planet Kraka, the blast of which had swept away nearly every living creature.^[7]

^[7] See earlier books of the series.

The others awoke, and seeing they were nearing their destination made preparations for the landing. The jet brakes hissed as they were applied and again there was a little discomfort as velocity was checked. The planet, about which there had been so much speculation on Earth, seemed to float up to meet them.

Rex studied it with interest. With the work of restoration still going on, with more and more people being brought from the small planets on which they had been stranded, the town and the area around it was beginning to look very different even since he had last seen it. It had become quite a hive of activity. More of the broad irrigation canals had been cleared and the cultivation extended; but it was obviously going to take more than one lifetime

to bring the entire planet back to the prosperity it enjoyed before the great disaster.

There were not many people on the landing apron and they took little notice of the ship, such arrivals being commonplace. Rex saw another space ship parked on one side and by its red star recognized it as the one Rolto used to fly.^[8]

^[8] New readers should note that Mars did not build its own ships. They were acquired from distant planets of much greater age where the conquest of space had long ago been achieved. For example, a friend named Multova, a scientist-engineer on the mighty planet of Terromagna, in the Third Region, once told them that Earth, and the System to which it belonged, was a mere baby compared with his own constellation. Its civilization was many thousands (possibly millions) of years older than that of Earth. To the population of that huge world the “Machine Age” was as remote as the Stone Age on Earth.

As the *Tavona* touched down in front of the building that had been assigned as a guest-house, Rex saw a young woman standing by herself, watching.

“It looks as if Morino has come to meet you,” said Vargo, at his elbow.

“She couldn’t have been sure I was coming,” answered Rex. “It’s more likely she has come to meet her father.”

The Professor prevented the argument from being pursued. “I shall ask Vargo to take me to the Council immediately, for no time is to be lost if I am to put a spoke in Rolto’s wheel,” he said. “I suggest the rest of you wait for me at the guest-house. I will then tell you what has transpired and we will decide what to do next.”

This being agreed the party broke up, the Professor going with Vargo towards the administrative buildings, and the others, with the exception of Rex, walking to the door of the guest-house. Only the crew remained with the ship to supervise the cleaning and a top overhaul before signing off.

Rex waved to Morino as he went quickly to join her, and presently they were greeting each other with the warmth of old friends, Rex a little self-conscious perhaps, for Morino was no longer the ingenuous schoolgirl he had known earlier. She seemed suddenly to have grown up and was now a young woman, and a very attractive one, too. Her honey-coloured skin, common to her people, went well with her sky-blue eyes and long flaxen tresses threaded

with beads of lapis lazuli, he thought admiringly. She was dressed in the customary loose-fitting ankle length blue gown of the standard silky material, belted at the waist. Hatless, her only other garment was a pair of sandals laced with gold braid.



“I hoped you would come,” she said frankly, as they held hands in her native fashion.

“And I hoped Vargo would call for us,” he admitted.

“Was there a doubt of it?”

“Yes. I think the Professor only decided to come because Vargo told us that Rolto was trying to make trouble again. He has just gone to speak to the High Council about it.”

“You mean trouble for Earth?”

“Yes.”

“Then why do you go back? You come. You stay a few hours and then you go. Why not stay here always?”

“What would I do?”

“Why must you do anything?”

“I don’t know. Force of habit, I suppose. On Earth all men do something.”

Morino shook her head. “This I do not understand.”

“I might become a space captain,” said Rex, as the possibility struck him.

She took a pace back. “No! Never that,” she cried.

Rex looked surprised. “Don’t you like space ships?”

“I hate them. All women hate them,” she answered vehemently.

“But why?” asked Rex, wonderingly.

“They take our men away. Don’t you understand? The wives and families of men who serve in ships live always in fear and anxiety. They have no happiness. Every time a ship goes on a voyage the women weep for fear it will not come back. Sometimes it does not, and no one ever knows what becomes of it. I lost my brother that way, on his first voyage. Now, at night, I look at the stars and wonder on which one he ended his life; or if his ship still orbits somewhere in space for ever.”

Rex drew a deep breath. “I didn’t know you felt like that about it,” he said, awkwardly.

“Every time the *Tavona* goes I watch it getting smaller and smaller until I can no longer see it; and as I watch my heart goes cold when I think I may see my father no more. Then I go home and cry. Afterwards I come back here and watch and watch and watch, as you saw me watching when you came. This is the price women must pay on worlds where they have these horrible machines. Now, when you go away in the *Tavona* I have two men to cry for.” Her eyes sought his. “Are you going on another voyage?”

“There was some talk of visiting a strange planet of which Vargo has told us,” confessed Rex.

“Don’t go,” she pleaded. “Stay here. One day you will not come back.”

Rex moved uncomfortably. “Let us talk of something else. Before we left home there was some suggestion of you paying a visit to my part of Earth.”

“It would not be allowed. Only for special reasons are women allowed to travel in ships, like those now being brought here from Mino and Lentos.”

“Would you like to come home with me when I go—just for a short visit?”

“Perhaps.”

“You speak our language well enough. There is much improvement since I was here last.”

“That is because I have worked hard to learn it. Vargo helps me, and my father, too, when he is at home. Sometimes we all speak your English together, which is much fun. Also I have the books you brought me. Every day I learn new words, but some have no meaning for me.”

“Such as?”

“In one book a man says many times to a woman, I am in love with you. What does he mean? What is this love he is in with her?”

Rex smiled. “It means he likes her very much.”

“Ah! Then I must be in love with you?” queried Morino, innocently.

“Thank you. But in my country a woman does not say that. She waits for the man to say it.”

“And if he doesn’t say it?”

Rex shrugged. “Well, that’s just too bad.”

“Will you say it to me?”

“Perhaps. One day.”

“When you do will there be kissing? What is this kissing I read about?”

“It’s an old custom on Earth, one you don’t have here.”

“What do people do?”

“Well—er—they put their faces together.”

“What a strange thing to do. Show me how.”

Again Rex hesitated, feeling this lesson in English was getting a little too intimate. He took a quick look to left and right and seeing no one about said: “All right. Put your hands at your sides and close your eyes.”

She did so.

Taking a pace forward he kissed her.

Slowly she opened her eyes. “I like that,” she said naïvely. “You have some nice customs.”

“Well, don’t tell anyone I showed you,” requested Rex. Then, finding the conversation getting too difficult he switched the subject. “I hope you haven’t been talking to Rolto. He speaks English very well but he is causing us some trouble. When he asked me for English books—he stole some from us, too—he did not say his intention was to go to Earth and spy on us.”

“We do not speak much because my father does not like this man. He has told me all the people of Earth are mad. Is that true?”

“Of course it isn’t true. Do I look mad?”

“No.”

“The people Rolto spoke to thought *he* was mad. He said he had come from Mars.”

“That was true.”

“But as we have no ships like the *Tavona* how could anyone believe him? He was locked up in a place for mad people, and had it not been for us he would still be there. Now for revenge he would kill us all.”^[9]

^[9] See *Now to the Stars*.

Morino laid a hand on Rex’s arm. “Here he comes now,” she said softly. “I think he will speak to you. I must go, to prepare food for my father. Shall I tell him you have showed me kissing?”

“Not yet,” said Rex hastily. “We will talk about it later.”

“Of course. When are you going away?”

“I don’t know. Tomorrow, perhaps.”

“Good-bye.” Morino turned abruptly and walked away.

For a moment or two, with a curious expression on his face, Rex watched her go. When she did not look back he made his way briskly, for the thin air was chilly, towards the guest-house; but Rolto overtook him before he reached it.

“So you have come back once more,” said the tall, hard-faced but good-looking space captain.

“What of it?” inquired Rex, curtly.

“What is your programme this time?”

“To prevent you from interfering with Earth.”

“So Vargo has been talking. Do you think you can stop me?”

Rex raised an accusing finger. “You listen to me, Rolto. I warn you that if you try to interfere with us it will be the worse for you. We have an instrument which will see you far away. You have seen some of our explosions. We can make them anywhere, even far out in Space. If one happened near your ship there wouldn’t be much left of it. The Professor would be sorry to do it, but if it was necessary to save Earth from what you propose he would see that it was done. So be careful.” Rex turned on his heels and strode on towards the guest-house, where he joined Tiger and Toby at the food table.

About an hour later the Professor came in. His face told its own story. "It's all right," he told them cheerfully. "The Councillors were most friendly. They assured me there was never any intention of adopting Rolto's plan. Moreover, Vargo had no difficulty in getting permission to take us to this fascinating planet Krona."

"When does Vargo think of starting?" asked Rex.

"Tomorrow. I told him that for my part the sooner the better. We may be on the threshold of a wonderful discovery. Imagine the sensation it would cause on Earth if we announced we could double or even treble the normal span of life!"

"You'd need an awful lot of beans," averred Toby. "You'd probably be trampled to death in the rush to get them."

"Before we start counting our beans we shall first have to ascertain if they can be cultivated on Earth, where conditions are likely to be entirely different from those of Krona," reminded Tiger.

"We shall see," concluded the Professor.

Rex said nothing.

CHAPTER IV
TROUBLE ON KRONA

EARLY the next day saw the *Tavona* refitted and ready for her voyage.

Rex stood at the heavy double doors until they were closed, and then went to his observation window hoping to see a blue-clad female figure. But Morino did not appear. The only person he knew who seemed to be taking an interest in them was Rolto, leaning against his own ship.

“Are you looking for someone?” asked Tiger, as the crew took their stations.

“I was hoping Morino would come to see us off,” replied Rex, somewhat disconsolately.

“She not come,” cut in Borron, who must have heard the remark. “Not happy. Stay home. Cry much.”

“I’m afraid I may have upset her,” Rex confessed to his father.

“How?”

“She didn’t want me to go on this trip.” Rex narrated their conversation.

“She’ll get over it,” Tiger assured him. “It’s natural for women to feel like that when a man is doing a dangerous job. Your mother behaved the same way every time I was briefed for a wartime operation. Don’t worry; she’ll be here to meet us when we come back.”

“If you’re thinking of marrying her, my boy, you won’t be the first man to be faced with the problem of whether to do what you want to do or what she wants you to do,” put in the Professor, philosophically. “But you’d better get in your seat. Gator is waiting to take off.”

Rex sank into his heavily cushioned seat, and a minute later the *Tavona* was rising vertically towards the blue sky, with the landing ground, as if seen through the wrong end of a telescope, fast shrinking below it. Again for a little while came the strain of opposing gravity, but it soon passed and things settled down to normal.

Of the long journey to Krona little need be said. It passed without mishap, most of the conversation being centred on the planet they proposed to visit and the peculiar faculty the people had discovered and developed, in the first place probably by accident, or so it was surmised. The Professor agreed with Toby who, as a medical man was particularly interested, that the unusual property of the blue bean might have been the result of observing the effect it had on birds

or other creatures. However, this was pure speculation, as Vargo had not thought to confirm that the bean affected them in the same way as it did human beings.

The Professor said his chief purpose in visiting Krona was to investigate this and secure a quantity of the vegetable for analysis when he reached home and to test the possibility of its cultivation on Earth. He would also take a sample of the soil, from which the remarkable power of the bean must spring. It seemed not unlikely that one particular ingredient was responsible. It was this that gave the bean, and, indeed, all the vegetation its unique colour.

He pointed out that unless the bean would flourish under the entirely different conditions of soil, gravity and atmosphere, on Earth, it would be pointless to introduce it, for it would not be possible to take any great quantity home, and to start on the diet, knowing what the effect would be if it could not be maintained, would be folly, if not suicidal.

Rex, who was still thinking about Morino, was glad when Vargo announced that a planet they could see ahead, one of a large and widely scattered constellation, was their objective. It was reassuring to know that Vargo, having been there, could pronounce it “safe”; so the unknown dangers always attendant upon landings on unknown worlds would not arise. He watched Krona becoming larger as they sped on towards it, on the look-out for the rare colouration Vargo had described. Already he would have known, had he not been told, that the planet was either mostly bare rock or heavily wooded, both of which present bad reflecting surfaces—albedo, as it is called by astronomers, the word literally meaning whiteness.

In fact, it was soon to be observed that the low albedo might be due, or partly due, to a different cause.

Slowly the face of the little planet took shape, and as it did so Rex realized what Vargo had meant by a “blue look”. Strictly speaking it was not blue, but it certainly had a bluish tinge, although the chief reason for this was still open to question. In the first place most of the ground was hidden under a layer of cloud, fog or mist, which, curiously, had a dull surface. Clouds, shining white in the direct rays of sunlight, generally result in a high albedo, as with the planet Venus, which is always completely enveloped so that its actual surface is never seen. As a result, it has the highest albedo of any planet in the Solar System. Incidentally, large polar ice caps can also give a high albedo.

But here the cloud gave practically no reflection, and this appeared to be the result of its colour, which was a dull, slaty blue. Through breaks in the cloud the surface of the planet looked really blue, almost a navy blue, although the fact that it was in shadow had to be taken into account. Strictly speaking the actual ground could not be seen because it was buried under vegetation,

apparently unbroken forest.

Rex looked in vain for a road, an area of cultivated land, or some other indication of a civilized community. All he could see was an occasional settlement, small, lonely in its isolation, surrounded by heavy timber. Thus, he thought, early Saxon England must have appeared before the Romans came to build roads and walls and establish military bases.

Such was Rex's first impression of Krona.

Seeing Vargo regarding the scene with a puzzled expression on his face he asked: "What's the matter? Is something wrong?"

"I don't know," replied Vargo. "You can't see it now, but a moment ago I saw what looked like a big fire. It may be responsible for the bad visibility. I mean, what looks like mist may be smoke, or partly smoke."

"Wasn't it like this when you last called?"

"No. I could see half the planet. There were patches of cloud here and there but nothing like this."

The Professor spoke. "I imagine there could be a forest fire here as well as anywhere else."

Vargo agreed. "Everything is so wet in the forest that I doubt if a fire would travel very far. Yes, there it is. You can see it now."

The *Tavona* closed swiftly on its destination although its jet brakes were already hissing to check the fall, the ship being well within the planet's gravity.

"Does Gator know where to land?" inquired the Professor.

"I have asked him to put us down by the village where we landed on our previous visit."

Gator spoke. "The fire seems to be not far from there."

The *Tavona* was now at a low altitude, and still going down, taking a diagonal course presumably to bring it over the spot where the landing was to be made, when Rex let out a cry of astonishment. "Look! There's a ship. Two ships. Just leaving."

Nobody spoke. All eyes were on the two strangers.

"Do you recognize them, Vargo," asked the Professor, sharply, as the two ships began to fade into the distance.

"No. I have never seen anything of that shape."

"Where could they have come from?"

"It is impossible to say. They could have come from anywhere."

"We'd better go down to see what has happened."

“Could those ships have started the fire?” queried Rex.

“What possible reason could they have for doing such a thing?”

Said Vargo, “Go down, Gator. We shall soon know what has happened. Let everyone watch for more ships still on the ground. Others may still be here. There is a chance they may not be friendly. It is advisable to be careful always in such cases as this.”

“What an extraordinary situation,” said the Professor. “When you were here before, Vargo, was there any mention of other space craft calling?”

“Nothing of the sort was said to me and it didn’t occur to me to inquire. From the behaviour of the people I thought ours was the first ship they had ever seen.”



The *Tavona* was now close enough to the ground for everything to be seen distinctly. The most notable feature below the ship was a clearing of some size, hemmed in by forest, in the middle of which, on a slight knoll, was a cluster of what were obviously dwellings, small wooden houses; but Rex looked in vain for signs of the people to whom they belonged.

“Something must have happened or everyone would be out to watch us land,” said Vargo quietly.

“Is it worth risking a landing?” questioned Rex anxiously.

“We shall never know what has happened unless we do.”

The Professor agreed. “We must find out, otherwise I shall spend the rest of my life in futile speculation.”

“Land, Gator, but be prepared to rise instantly,” ordered Vargo.

The ship scraped its wheels gently on an area of rough grass not far from the houses. Everyone stood at a window, watching for a movement, prepared for anything to happen. Nothing did happen.

“There has been trouble here, and recently,” observed Vargo. “Look at the bean plantations. I see marks of scorching, such as might have been done by the propulsion jets of a ship. There has also been some trampling of the crop.”

Two or three minutes passed in silence. Then Vargo opened the exit doors and stood on the top step. Rex joined him, and was at once aware of a queer smell, not unpleasant, but like nothing he had ever before encountered. He remarked on it.

“The place always smells like that,” said Vargo. “I don’t know the cause.”

In the village silence reigned. It had an uneasy, sinister quality.

Slowly, prepared to retire instantly should danger threaten, they all stepped out, only the crew remaining at their posts. Tiger had his rifle under his arm. Rex’s eyes wandered over the ground. “I don’t think anyone can have been killed or we should see bodies lying about,” he remarked.

“I’m going to look in the houses,” decided the Professor. “We must get to the bottom of this, and we may find the answer to the mystery there.”

“I’ll come with you,” offered Tiger. “You may need protection.” He patted his rifle significantly.

“The rest of you had better stay where you are,” advised the Professor, and with that, Tiger beside him, he began walking boldly towards the nearest house. Watching, the others saw them enter the first, come out, go on to the next and so on until several had been visited. Then they came back.

“Not a soul to be seen,” informed the Professor. “The people were here not long ago. Things have been left as if the village was evacuated in a panic.”

Vargo shook his head. “Very strange. I don’t know what to make of it.”

“I’d say those two ships we saw were responsible,” opined Tiger. “There may have been more. I don’t feel like going into the forest, and I doubt if it would be any use if we did.”

“Someone has been here and the people have run away,” was Vargo’s view.

“What do you suggest we do about it?”

“We have one chance left to meet the people. They know me, and as I told

you I speak their language fairly well. I will call to them. If they are within the sound of my voice they may come out of their hiding places.” So saying Vargo cupped his hands round his mouth and let out a hail, followed by some words. This he repeated several times.

There was no response, and Vargo, with a gesture of helplessness, was turning back to the ship when Tiger said sharply: “Wait. I saw a movement. Yes. I can see a face. Someone is looking at us. Over there! Beyond the bushes with the blue flowers.” He pointed.

Vargo looked in the direction indicated and called a string of words that meant nothing to the others; but apparently they were understood, for they had the desired effect. A man, moving with the utmost caution, stepped out from behind the bushes to stand and stare. Others could be seen just inside the fringe of the forest close behind him.

Vargo continued to speak, making signals of encouragement.

The nearest man spoke to those behind him. Four more joined him. Then they all advanced, slowly and nervously. Some women, easily recognized as such by having hair down to their waists, joined the men. At a distance of about twenty yards the group stopped, apparently afraid to come any nearer. Vargo walked towards them, still talking, his hands raised. A babble of voices suggested he had been recognized, and in a minute or two they were all standing together, the natives gabbling and gesticulating.

“Now we should know what it’s all about,” asserted the Professor, moving nearer to the group.

Presently Vargo was able to explain, and Rex was given the opportunity to have a closer look at the people who had evidently discovered what other worlds had sought and failed to find. Until comparatively modern times it had on Earth been called the Elixir of Life. In appearance they appeared to fall somewhere between the most primitive types and the modern educated Indian. They were clean, had small regular features, and broadly speaking could be called a good-looking race. As in the photograph Vargo had taken, with the exception of a few boys and girls all seemed to be about the same age. There were no obviously old people, not a grey hair among them.

The tale Vargo told was hard to believe although no one doubted the truth of it. “You were right about those ships being the cause of the trouble,” he told Tiger. “They have just been here, and as I understand it this was not the first time, although this has been subsequent to my visit. The people here, suspecting nothing, greeted the crews as they did mine, in the most friendly spirit. Then, suddenly, without warning, their guests fell on them, tied up those they caught and carried them into their ships. Those who escaped ran into the

forest and hid. The foreigners then flew low over the forest and dropped something which set it on fire, presumably in the hope of smoking them out. But the fire travelled the wrong way. Seeing this the ships made off.”

“Do you really mean that some of these unfortunate people have been carried away?” cried the Professor, aghast.

“Yes. Other villages have been raided, too.”

“What an abominable thing to do! What is the purpose of this?”

“I don’t know. The people here don’t know. They can’t understand it.”

“I can see only one possible answer,” put in Tiger. “The raiders, men who can build space ships, could hardly be cannibals, so one must conclude the Kronians are wanted to carry out some unpleasant task. In plain English they’ve been seized to become slaves.”

“But without their diet of beans the men will die.”

“I imagine the raiders were not to know that. It’s unlikely the people here told them about their peculiarity. They wouldn’t be given the opportunity. Apart from that there wouldn’t be a common language for conversation.”

“Shall I tell you what I think,” said Rex.

“Well?”

“It occurs to me that these unknown spacemen may have discovered an uninhabited planet and are now raiding other planets for suitable labourers to occupy it, build on it and perhaps bring areas under cultivation.”

“That could be the answer,” conceded Vargo. “But it’s not much use guessing. It’s unlikely we shall ever know the truth. To look for the victims of the raid would be a futile undertaking.”

“It’s a shocking business,” declared the Professor. “It shows what can happen if space ships get into the hands of unscrupulous people. We have seen some strange things, but this is something new in space travel. The question that now arises is this; what can we do to help the people who are left here?”

“I’ll speak to them about it,” said Vargo. “Surely the first and most important thing is to look at the position of the bean crop, for if it has been ruined more of them will die.”

“Could these villains have come to raid the bean crop,” suggested Rex.

Vargo answered. “I would think not. We can soon find out, for if that was their object there won’t be a bean left on the place.”

“We may be sure there won’t be enough to keep the people going,” said Toby. “For them this is a matter of life or death. Yet what can we do?”

Vargo came back. “They tell me some men have taken the risk of going to beg a supply of beans from one of the neighbouring villages.”

“Which way have they gone?” questioned Tiger.

“I don’t know. Why? Does it matter?”

“It matters a lot.” Tiger pointed. “Because if they’ve gone in that direction they won’t get far. As I remember the way the forest fire was spreading it must be right across their path. They might even find themselves cut off and be burnt to death.”

“You are right,” agreed Vargo, looking serious. “I’ll find out which way they went.” Turning, he put the question to the natives, who now stood silent, watching the discussion. Having got the answer he said: “They have gone in the direction of the fire. There is no village in any other direction for a great distance. All we can do is hope that when they realize their danger they’ll turn back.”

“We may be able to do more than that,” corrected Tiger. “But let’s take first things first; and the first is to find out what quantity of beans they have here to carry on with.”

Vargo put the matter to the spectators who, men, women and children, hurried off towards the bean plantations.

“Dear—dear, this is most unfortunate,” murmured the Professor, lugubriously. “We could give the people here some food, but if they can’t live without their precious beans it wouldn’t be much use to them. What was your idea, Group-Captain?”

“Simplicity itself. The fire wouldn’t affect us in the *Tavona*. We could leap-frog over it to one of the villages, where they have more beans than are needed, and bring back a load.”

“And get ourselves killed for our pains? In view of what has happened here space travellers are hardly likely to be met with open arms.”

“We could take one or two of the men here with us. They could explain we were friends before any mischief was done to us. As an alternative to bringing a supply of beans back here we could move all the people who live here to another village, or villages.”

“That might solve the immediate problem, but it would only be a temporary measure.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, these raiders have been here before, so I imagine they’ll come again. I don’t see what is to prevent them from carrying off the entire population, in course of time.”

“The people could hide in the forest.”

“What purpose would there be in that? They can’t live without their special

food and I can't see them finding a sufficient quantity of that in the forest. There lies the weakness of their mode of living."

Vargo stepped in again. "I told you before we left home that they were always aware of the danger of having their supply of essential food cut off for one reason or another. Now they have been discovered by a predatory race of men it looks like being the end of them."

"I don't agree. What do you suggest we do—run away and leave them to be wiped out?" demanded Tiger, belligerently.

"What else can we do?"

"We should be able to do something," declared Tiger. "I'm not prepared to admit that our brains are not up to the standard of those of these invaders. If these unfortunate people can't escape by running away, which would mean the end of them anyhow, they must learn to defend themselves."

"Situated as they are, how could they do that?" asked the Professor, sceptically.

"Give me a minute to think about it," requested Tiger, taking out his pipe and tobacco pouch.



CHAPTER V OLD WAYS ARE NEW

TIGER lit his pipe, and with a little wreath of blue smoke curling round his head, his brows knit, gave the problem his concentrated attention. So he stood for some minutes. Then, taking the pipe from his mouth, he said: "There's only one answer to this. These raiders must be taught a lesson."

"But we can't stay here indefinitely, waiting for them to come back," remonstrated Vargo.

"Perhaps not. But we could at least put these wretched people in a position to defend themselves if they should return."

The Professor looked startled, and a little shocked. "Surely you're not proposing that we arm them?"

"Why not?"

"You know my abhorrence of war in any shape or form. I would not consider starting one."

"You might if you lived here and found yourself a victim of an unprovoked attack," returned Tiger, trenchantly.

"I have always believed in pacifism."

“So did the people here, apparently. And where has it got them?”

“I take your point,” acknowledged the Professor. “But why talk of it. We have no weapons to give them, unless your generosity runs to presenting them with your rifle.”

“One rifle wouldn’t be much use, anyway. What the Kronians lack in the way of weapons they should be able to make up for in numerical superiority. These ships that are coming here are unlikely to carry a force of more than seven or eight men. The natives should be able to put a hundred, or possibly several hundreds, in the field.”

“And fight with their bare fists?” inquired the Professor sarcastically. “These people do not even begin to understand the purpose of weapons.”

“That’s because they’ve never had need of them. They need them now. Nobody, anywhere, made himself a weapon until it became necessary for his survival. That is the position that has now arisen here.”

“They wouldn’t know how to use a weapon.”

“They could be taught.”

“What sort of weapon have you in mind?”

“The most primitive weapon, in these circumstances, could be effective.”

“Such as?”

“Bows and arrows.”

“My dear Group-Captain! You can’t be serious. Bows and arrows against men so advanced in knowledge that they can construct and operate space ships? Ridiculous.”

“If that’s what you think I may be able to prove you wrong. With their longbows the archers of Edward the Third and Henry the Fifth could cut down ten times their numbers, and that included knights in armour. If a barrage of arrows could throw back a charge of iron-clad cavalry, as it did at Agincourt, it should be able to stop the advance of a handful of space men.”

The Professor blinked. “You astonish me. But I must admit there is some force behind your argument. But where will you get bows and arrows?”

“Make them, of course. Remember your history books. Until firearms were invented, and for some time afterwards, there was no more deadly weapon in the world than the Welsh longbow in the hands of a man who knew how to use it. With nothing but forest around us there must be plenty of wood suitable for bows and arrows. Vargo has told us that these people are craftsmen at woodwork. Given a steel knife, once they got the idea they should have no difficulty in producing the article required.”

“What about strings for the bows? From where will you get strands of

hemp, and glue or wax to bind them together?”

Tiger smiled reproachfully. “Come now, Professor. Where is your genius for improvisation? If you haven’t forgotten your classics you will remember the Amazons, those warrior women of Cappadocia, who cut off their long hair and plaited it to make bowstrings. The women here have long hair, as you may have noticed. Now they can put it to good use. Vargo has told us the people here eat honey, so there must be wax that could serve as a dressing. And if they eat eggs, as we are told, there must be birds, and where there are birds there must be feathers to feather the arrows. The arrows needn’t necessarily have metal barbs, although with the equipment we have in the ship I could probably provide those.”

The Professor looked at Tiger admiringly. “What a man you are for rising to an occasion! But I still think it’s lamentable. We set out on a trip with the object of discovering how to prolong life, and here we are, proposing to teach an innocent people how to shorten it.”

“These dastardly space hunters will do the shortening if we don’t take a hand to prevent it.”

At this juncture the people who had gone to the bean field returned, and their woeful expressions told their own story. Between them they had managed to collect only a few pounds of beans, in various stages of ripeness. Rex opened one and was fascinated by the colour of its contents.

“You see,” said Tiger. “These few seeds should be kept for stock. If they eat them they’ll have nothing to plant, in which case they’ll have had it, as we used to say in the R.A.F.”

“Well,” said the Professor. “The situation seems to be in your hands. What do you suggest we do next?”

“I suggest we all sit down and Vargo can tell our friends here what we propose. First we must tackle the job of getting more beans, after which we can see about the bows and arrows. In fact, both jobs might be done at the same time. By that I mean Vargo can take some of these chaps, if they are willing to go into the ship, to another village where they think there might be plenty of beans. There’s no need for us all to go. Rex and I could stay here and be having a look round for wood suitable for archery. I have the rifle, so should the raiders come back in the meantime I’ll see they get a warm reception. Vargo, you go ahead and explain the idea.”

The explanations, with questions asked and answered, was of necessity a long business, and occupied the best part of an hour. However, all details having finally been settled, two of the natives—it was decided two would be enough—went with Vargo and the Professor into the ship, which was soon

skimming the tree tops in the direction of a village the position of which had been indicated.

As soon as it was out of sight, Tiger, Rex and Toby, followed by a small party of curious spectators, made for the outskirts of the forest and set about their task of finding wood suitable for bows and arrows. It had not been possible to make the Kronians understand exactly what the weapon was and how it worked. They may not have understood that the article it was proposed to make was something designed to kill. As Tiger told Rex, their best course was to make one and demonstrate it.

Here again, the finding of suitable wood took some time, and several saplings were tested for bows, and straight seedlings for arrows, before a decision was reached. There was great excitement when knives were produced, the spectators never having seen anything like it. They whistled when they touched the cold steel and felt its sharp edge. The wood finally chosen was similar to ash, of which there was an unlimited supply in the secondary growth, the saplings being drawn up straight, and of even thickness, by the large forest trees. There was some amusement when Tiger tried to get some hair from the women, but when they understood what was wanted they gave it willingly enough—not that much was needed. Coarse and black it was thought six strands would be enough. It required careful knotting before being twisted, for although each hair was nearly three feet long, six feet were needed to string a longbow, allowing something at each end for tying.

The job when it was finished was not exactly a work of art, but it served well enough for the purpose of a demonstration, and the astonishment of the watchers, when Tiger sent an arrow whistling for nearly 100 yards, was great. The Kronians got the idea at once, and like children with a new toy their enthusiasm was such that they all wanted to try it.

Said Tiger, as he handed over his knife: “Now they’ve cottoned on we can leave them to get on with it. What their shooting lacks in accuracy should be compensated for in quantity.”

Operations were suspended when the *Tavona* returned with several bags of beans, and the good news that more were available.

The Professor was delighted. “The plan worked perfectly, although I fancy it would have been a different matter had we not had the Kronians with us. We learnt something, too. A space ship had landed there a day or two ago and had invited some of the people to enter the ship—obviously with the intention of carrying them away. It didn’t work. The people bolted into the forest, so the strangers set fire to the place, apparently from spite. Then, it seems, they came on here and seized some of the men before they realized their danger.”

“And what’s the position now—I mean in the matter of the bean supply?” asked Tiger.

“Well, the people are all right for some time. The future will depend on how long it takes to raise a new crop. Plenty of seed is available. For my part I shall take a few ripe seeds, and a sample of the soil in which they grow, for experimental work at home.”

“But even if the beans flourish in your garden it doesn’t mean they will retain the virtue they have here. How will you find that out?”

“By eating some, of course. If they don’t have the desired effect no harm will be done.”

“And if they do work properly what will happen when you run out of beans?”

“We will deal with that problem when it arises. I am an old man already, so it doesn’t matter much what happens to me. How have you got on in our absence?”

“Very well. We’ve produced a prototype and now the people have the hang of it they should have no difficulty in going into full production. They can have our knives.” Tiger turned to Vargo. “Make it clear to them that should the raiders come again they should take cover just inside the forest and then, when the men come out of the ship, all shoot together. Tell them not to waste arrows shooting at the ship. They should make a large quantity and put in plenty of practice. That’s as much as we can do, and they should now be able to take care of themselves.” Tiger smiled. “I’d like to be here when the raiders come, to see what happens.”

“We could stay here, if you wish, for two or three days, to make sure everything is properly understood. As it is beginning to get dark we might as well pass the night here.”

“Capital,” agreed the Professor. “I would certainly like to stay a few days to complete my investigation of these remarkable people. There are some questions I would like to ask. Since our arrival we have been so busy I haven’t had an opportunity.”

“If we’re going to stay here for a while I think it would be a good thing to move the *Tavona* near the edge of the forest and camouflage it. We don’t know what weapons these raiders have, and should they come here and find our machine standing in the open they might have a means of destroying it, or putting it out of action. We don’t want to find ourselves stuck here, on a diet of beans for the rest of our days, even though it could mean our days would be lengthened to a few hundred years. Imagine living on beans four times a day for 300 years!”

Everyone smiled. Said the Professor: "There may be animals in the forest for all we know, in which case, my dear Group-Captain, with your rifle it should be possible to satisfy your craving for meat."

"I'll have a look round tomorrow," rejoined Tiger. "With all this forest and jungle there should be something in it."

"Until then I feel like sampling a dish of these fantastic beans," returned the Professor. "At present I don't even know if they have to be cooked, and if so, by what method. Vargo, will you please inquire; and at the same time you might ask these good people if they can put a house at our disposal. We might as well have a roof over our heads, and we spend quite enough time in the *Tavona* without sleeping in it unnecessarily."

Arrangements were soon made, and preparation for the night completed. The *Tavona* was moved close to the fringe of the forest and camouflaged with branches which were ready to hand. As, with the sun setting in a purple haze, they walked back to the village a sound made Rex look up and he saw several formations of birds, that might have been ducks or geese, winging their way across the sky.

"Flighting, just as they do at this time at home," observed the Professor.

"There are our feathers for the arrows," said Rex quickly. "I wonder where those birds have come from and where they're going."

"I'll find out," promised Vargo. "The people told me they ate eggs but I didn't ask them what sort of eggs."

"I haven't seen any domestic poultry about so it rather looks as if they collect the eggs of wild birds," contributed Tiger. "If we can't get the goose feathers that the English archers used we may be able to get something like them."

Later, Vargo spent some time talking to the people, explaining what was intended and what they should do if the raiders came back. He also confirmed, as had been surmised, that the eggs they ate were those of wild birds, mostly waterfowl, which occurred in great numbers on lakes in the vicinity, and a small river which connected them.

Supper was made from the stock of preserved food in the ship. The visitors were presented with a dish of beans which they learned were usually eaten raw. Rex didn't think much of them. They were not unpalatable, but they had a strange taste, rather like the aroma that was always in the air. They left a hot, astringent aftermath in the mouth. More to his liking were some fruit and nuts, popular with the younger generation, having been assured they were safe to eat.

Some of the men went on fashioning bows and arrows while there was

sufficient light for them to see what they were doing, those who had no knives using their own primitive instruments, flints and the shells of molluscs which were found in the river.

So the day ended, a day as strange as any Rex could remember.

CHAPTER VI

WHAT IS RUXOR?

REX awoke the next morning after a good night's sleep, and having dressed, hearing a certain amount of noise, looked out to see the air so full of flying arrows that to cross the open ground would involve some risk of being struck by one. For a moment he thought the village was being attacked, but then realized from the behaviour of the natives that they were merely having fun with their new toys; or what they were treating as toys, apparently not yet having grasped the fact that their bows, with their pointed although barbless arrows, were really lethal weapons. He thought it advisable to ask Vargo to tell them to be careful, or there would be casualties before the raiders came.

After the usual breakfast of tea and biscuits the Professor announced his intention of proceeding with his inquiries about the bean if Vargo would act as interpreter. He would, he said, take samples of the soil and water, as well as some seeds, and put them in the *Tavona* to make sure they would not go away empty-handed whatever happened.

Tiger said in that case he would take a walk in the forest, if Vargo would ask one or two Kronians to go with him to act as guides. He assumed there would be footpaths. He would see what sort of wild life the planet could produce, and at the same time collect some feathers for the arrows, as this was necessary to ensure accuracy.

So it was arranged. The Professor, with Vargo and Toby for company, would go off to collect his specimens. Tiger and Rex, taking the rifle, with two natives to act as guides, would go for a stroll in the forest, if Vargo would explain to the natives what was required of them.

At least, that was the intention; but when Vargo put the proposal to the Kronians, while they did not actually decline to accept it they received the plan with so much reluctance that it became obvious that no one wanted to leave the village. At first Rex thought this was simply because the men would have preferred to remain on the open ground in order to continue making bows and arrows, or practising with those they had made. But inquiries revealed that this was not the reason. It was something entirely different, and some unexpected factors came to light.

In the first place the visitors were informed that it was not safe to enter the forest. There was something there. What this was could not be explained. The natives referred to it as *Ruxor*; or that was what the word sounded like. Vargo

asked about the men who had gone to another village in the hope of getting some beans, whereupon it was pointed out that they were taking a terrible risk. The Kronians reminded Vargo that they had said so at the time the matter was mentioned. This was not all. It was now learned, not without surprise, that there was only one route out of the village. The reason was simple. On three sides the village was bounded by low-lying ground. This was all swamp and impassable.

Said the Professor: "I now begin to understand why it is that intelligent people like these are so backward. You can't have civilization without communications. Our friends here live like goldfish in an aquarium, having no idea of what is outside their own little world, or, for that matter, what is beyond their own village. Apart from having only one exit, the path is beset with some sort of danger."

"This thing they call *Ruxor*."

"Yes."

"What do you think it could be?"

"I haven't the remotest idea. It could be anything."

"Well, I'm all for having a look at it," asserted Tiger. "If it's a beast of some sort I might be able to dispose of it and so give these people a chance to move about. All they do at present is just go on living. Vargo, will you ask for volunteers to act as guides into the forest?"

Vargo put the question and two men stepped forward.

"That's all right," said Tiger. "Now let's get on with it. Come on, Rex. See you later, Professor."

The two Kronians led the way to the edge of the forest at a point where a narrow track could be seen winding away into the gloom that prevailed under the trees. They stared into it for a minute and then, moving with caution, went on. They spoke quietly between themselves, one word recurring. It was *Ruxor*.

"It'll be interesting to see just what this *Ruxor* thing is," said Tiger, casually.

"From the way they're behaving it must be dangerous."

"What to them, having no weapons, would be a danger, need not be a danger to us. Anyway, I shan't go far. I'm hoping to find water, a lake or a river, when I might get a shot at one of those birds we saw last night. It's the feathers I'm after, for the arrows."

Nothing more was said. The little party proceeded slowly, the natives still leading but taking care to peep round every bend before exposing themselves. This sort of progress inevitably had the effect of making Rex nervous, too, the

more so because there was still no indication of what there was to fear. As far as the forest itself was concerned he could see nothing really remarkable about it except the colour of the foliage, which everywhere was nearer to blue than green. For the most part the trees were similar to those found in temperate climates on Earth, but there were some he was unable to recognize. They often had large, thick leaves. The strange smell that had been noticeable in the village was more pronounced here. It had taken on a sort of musty taint.

“We seem to be a long time coming to any water,” remarked Tiger, after they had gone some way. “There seems to be plenty about. I’ve noticed places where the trees are standing in water. The whole place rather reminds me of the mangrove swamps one finds in the tropics at home. The track we’re on seems to follow the only dry ground. That’s why it’s here, I suppose. Imagine living in a place where the only way out is always threatened by some sort of danger. There’s no doubt about that. These chaps know what it is. They’re scared stiff.”

“I’ve got an idea they’re deliberately avoiding open water,” opined Rex. “Two or three times I’ve thought I heard a trickle of water and each time they hurried on.”

“Hello! What have they stopped for?”

It did not take long to find the reason. The natives were looking at the ground. It was splashed, unmistakably, with blood. And there was plenty of it. Rex moistened his lips and looked at his father. “What do you make of this?”

“*Ruxor*,” said one of their guides.

“It looks to me,” said Tiger in a hard voice, “as if this is where one of the fellows who went to fetch some beans came to grief. Our guides think so. Look at their faces.”

“What a nuisance they can’t tell us what this *Ruxor* thing is. In fairness to them don’t you think we ought to go back?”

“It would do the community a better service if we could find this peril and kill it. It must be a beast of some sort. If these chaps are scared of water the creature might well be associated with it. I can hear the splash of water now so it can’t be far away.” Tiger walked on a few yards. “I think we could get to it this way.”

Rex joined him, and saw they had come to a fork in the track. Actually, it was not exactly a fork; rather was it a place where a minor track, little more than a line of trampled leaves and undergrowth left the path they were on. The two Kronians hadn’t moved.

“We’re asking for trouble,” said Rex, softly.

Tiger ignored the remark. “That’s queer.”

“What’s queer?”

“When I stopped I could distinctly hear water splashing and took it to be a waterfall. It’s stopped, so I must have been mistaken about a waterfall. But there’s certainly water not far away, and, moreover, a minute ago it was being disturbed. Let’s go down this side track a little way. From the direction it should take us to it.”

“From the way our two lads are looking I doubt if they’ll come with us.”

“Never mind. They can wait here. While we stick to the track we can’t go far wrong.”

Rex looked at the Kronians and pointed down the path, raising his eyebrows questioningly.

“*Ruxor*,” said one.

Rex turned back to his father. “You heard that? Apparently this path leads to the place, or one of the places, where it lives.”

“Then let’s have a look at it,” suggested Tiger. “I hate mysteries.”

Rex was not so comfortable in his mind about it. “We’d better be careful.”

“I can’t imagine anything here that a bullet wouldn’t stop. The beast, if it is a beast, can’t be very big or this track would be more definite. Come on. We’re wasting time.” So saying Tiger set off.

Rex followed. Glancing over his shoulder he saw the Kronians watching them apprehensively. They didn’t move, but they looked ready to run.

Tiger did not advance without due caution, his eyes always exploring the path ahead. One thing Rex noticed was the smell; it had become obnoxious. There was obviously something unpleasant somewhere ahead of them, but whether it was animal or vegetable there was still no indication.

They had covered about fifty yards in slow time when Tiger stopped, pointing. “Look,” he said. “Water.”

Drawing level Rex saw a little way in front of them a fair sized sheet of water; in fact, a lake, long but narrow. The colour was blue. A dark, ultramarine blue. There had been rushes round the perimeter but for the most part they had been broken down, so that the shallow bank was mud; blue mud. A few large boulders that lay scattered about were the same colour, although whether this was the natural tint of the rock, or because it had been splashed with mud, it was impossible to tell. What concerned Rex more than the colour was the fact that the water was not still. It was agitated as if it had recently been disturbed. What had caused it to move? He looked carefully but could see nothing. The birds Tiger had hoped to find were not there, although there were plenty of feathers lying about showing that birds did use the place. Rex picked

some up and stuffed them in a pocket. He then walked on to catch up with his father, who was still advancing, although very slowly now, a step at a time, with his rifle held ready for action. Near the water now they both stopped. The stench was nauseating.

Then Rex saw it. It was the eyes that gave it away, for he had taken it to be a boulder. The colour was the same. It was a reptile, the most repulsive-looking creature he had ever seen in his life. He was well aware, having seen pictures of them, that there are on Earth some hideous lizards, some of considerable size, which in olden times may have given rise to stories of dragons; but he had never seen, and could not have imagined, anything as horrible as the creature now glaring at them with baleful eyes. Except that it had no wings, as far as he could see, and did not exhale fire and smoke, it surpassed in monstrosity anything he had seen depicted impaled by the lance of St. George.

It kept so still that it might have been a piece of statuary, a gargoyle. But its eyes were alive, and they were staring fixedly at them. Its mouth was half open showing rows of backward sloping teeth. Slime dripped from the corners. It was not so very big, perhaps twelve to fifteen feet long, although its tail was in the water. But its bulk was enormous, several times greater than that of a crocodile. From its back a spiny carapace was slowly rising.

“You can see it?” Tiger breathed the words.

“Yes. I think it’s getting ready to charge. Let’s go.”

“Wait.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Shoot it.”

“Why?”

“To get rid of it for the Kronians. They can’t kill it. I can do that for them.”



“There may be more than one.”

“Possibly. But if we can kill one it will let the Kronians see we’re able to deal with these beauties. No wonder they keep out of the forest if these are the sort of rabbits they breed here.”

Very slowly Tiger brought the rifle to his shoulder and took aim.

Rex held his breath.

The rifle crashed, splitting the silence like a crack of thunder.

The result was pandemonium.

With a roar the “dragon” reared up on its hind legs, revealing a belly the colour of steel. Straight up it went, and then over backwards into the water with a resounding splash. There was a shower of blue mud. But this was not the end. Rather was it the beginning of a spectacle the like of which no man on Earth had ever seen.

The lake literally sprang to life. Heads appeared everywhere. Water swirled as more and more dragons broke surface. Some rushed up the banks. Others threw themselves on the one Tiger had struck and was still writhing in its death agonies. The noise, as they all bellowed together, was indescribable.

Rex did not wait to see the end of this dreadful performance. He jerked out two words, “Come on,” and ran for his life. He reached the main track to find their guides no longer there, which did not surprise him. Looking back he saw his father coming at a run, too.

“Keep going,” shouted Tiger. “We can’t handle this lot.”

Together they ran on down the track, a great din behind them telling them they were being pursued. However, this did not last long, and when it began to fade they steadied their pace.

“Phew!” breathed Tiger. “What a devil’s cauldron we stirred up. I wasn’t prepared for anything like that.”

“Are you telling me,” returned Rex, grimly. “I can understand why the Kronians don’t go in for picnics in their forests.”

“We have at least learned what they mean by *Ruxor*,” said Tiger. “I’m afraid bows and arrows won’t be much use against those horrors. A single rifle couldn’t wipe them out. Pity. I shall have to think about it.”

With frequent backward glances they hastened on towards the village. Just before they reached it they came upon their two guides, waiting. The Kronians looked astonished to see them.

Rex could understand that, too.



CHAPTER VII

THE RAIDERS RETURN

REX could see the brighter light of the open area, where the forest ended, just in front of them, when there came a cry, followed by a chorus of shouts, from the village. Alarm was so evident in the voices that they all broke into a run.

What they saw when they emerged into the open was a state of confusion. Kronians were running about in disorder. Only the Professor, with Vargo and Toby, were standing still. They were looking at something overhead. Rex, too, looked up, and saw at once the cause of the excitement. Three mushroom-shaped objects that could only be space craft were descending like parachutes towards the clearing. They were still at a fair height.

“The fools,” snapped Tiger. “Look at them; running about like a flock of panic-stricken sheep. They’re going the right way to get themselves captured. This is what comes of having nobody in charge. Vargo’s the only man who can talk to them. Let’s get to him.” He set off at a run towards them.

“Vargo,” he yelled, even before he reached him. “Get everyone together. Into the village. Quick! There’s no time to lose.”

Vargo, understanding what was wanted, set about his task. He spoke to the

two men who had acted as guides in the forest and apparently gave them some orders, for they, too, began helping to round up the people.

By the time this had been done, and everyone was under cover, the space ships were low, and clearly intended to land. Fortunately the men who had made bows and arrows, with which they may have been amusing themselves when the raiders appeared, still carried them.

Tiger, who had automatically taken charge, was at the disadvantage of having to pass his orders through Vargo, which meant loss of time, but eventually this was done and they got the bowmen more or less massed in doorways or between the houses.

“Tell them not to shoot their arrows until I give the signal, and then let them all shoot together,” Tiger told Vargo, tersely.

The Professor, who had been watching these preparations with something like consternation, now revealed how he felt about them. “Is it really your intention to start a war, Group-Captain?”

“I’m going to do my best to teach these bandits it doesn’t pay to come raiding here,” retorted Tiger.

“But heaven alone knows what they might be able to do to us if we open hostilities with them.”

“I know what they’ll do if we don’t.”

“War, war, always war,” groaned the Professor. “Once I thought that was peculiar to Earth, but now I see it’s the same everywhere.”

“We didn’t start this one,” Tiger told him, curtly. “Every man is entitled to defend himself and his home. Those who fail to do so don’t last long.”

The Professor sighed. “You are too practical.”

“I try to be logical.”

“Well, I can’t argue against that.”

Silence fell, a silence broken by the hissing of brakes as the three ships, keeping close together, neared the ground. Under perfect control they settled down on the bean plantation, the only place that was entirely free from obstructions. All noise ceased as the brakes were switched off.

Rex watched with mounting curiosity. He had of course seen ships land, but never before in these circumstances. As to the ships themselves, they were more or less of orthodox design, although flatter, more saucer-like, than some he had seen. They were on the large side, too, and now they were down they covered a good deal of ground.

A minute passed. Then, one after the other the doors of the ships were opened and men appeared in the openings. After a brief survey they stepped

down, five from each ship, leaving one, apparently a guard, standing in the doorway. The men who had disembarked quickly formed into a single group. One remained apart. He wore a short red jacket, so Rex assumed he was in command.

There was nothing particularly remarkable about the men. They were dark skinned—brown, not black—stockily built, with short thick legs. Black hair hung down to their shoulders. All were dressed alike in tight-fitting uniforms of a brownish material. They reminded Rex vaguely of a picture he had once seen of some early Mongolian soldiers, troops of one of the great Oriental conquerors, Tamerlane, or perhaps Genghis Khan—he couldn't remember which. What did strike him as odd was this; as far as he could see they carried no weapons. Far from relieving his mind he had an uneasy suspicion this might mean they had a secret device. He couldn't imagine them landing unarmed. Or was it they did not think weapons were necessary in dealing with placid people like the Kronians? The next few minutes should settle that, he thought.

“Good thing we camouflaged the *Tavona*,” said Tiger. “I don't think they've seen it.”

“It would have been a serious matter for us had they found it and damaged it.”

“I should have taken steps to see that didn't happen.”

“How?”

“Why do you think I carry a rifle? Any man going near that ship gets a bullet.”

“For that matter you could put their ships out of action by knocking a few holes in 'em,” suggested Rex. “I'm pretty sure a bullet would go through the casing.”

“I see no point in doing that. The last thing we want is to keep them here.”

Vargo stepped in. “They would repair such holes with the equipment they must surely carry to mend damage done by meteorites.”

No more was said on this subject, for the raiders, having spread out in a fan-shaped line now began to advance towards the village.

Tiger allowed them to approach to a distance of about fifty yards and then cried: “Now! All together. Shoot!”

Vargo passed on the order, and a cloud of arrows whistled through the air in a ragged volley.

Never was surprise demonstrated more clearly. The invaders, who had been strolling forward as if they had nothing to fear, as was understandable in view of the success of their earlier visits, turned and ran back towards their

ships—all except one, who seemed to be stumbling over something. Presently this could be seen to be an arrow, which had penetrated the lower part of one of his legs. Having no barb he was able to pull it out, and having done so he limped on after the others. As far as Rex could see this was the only casualty. Under Tiger's orders the bowmen had stopped shooting, with the result that when the enemy reached their ships they stopped, and went into a huddle apparently to review the situation.

"Now we shall know if they have any means of retaliating," said Toby.

It was an anxious moment, for it could be expected that people who operated space ships, whether or not they themselves produced them, would have not merely weapons but one that might well turn out to be devastating.

"They must be wondering how the Kronians so suddenly came to have bows and arrows," remarked Toby.

It was a relief to everyone when, as if a decision had been reached, the invaders entered their ships and closed the doors.

"Capital!" cried the Professor. "They've thought better of it."

"Let's not start cheering too soon," said Tiger seriously. "We're not out of the wood yet. I shan't be happy until I see those ships disappear altogether."

"If they came here only for prisoners it would surely be pointless for them to destroy the village, even if they had the means of doing that."

"They might do it from a spirit of malice, or revenge, now that the Kronians have dared to resist."

"We shall see."

"What I would like to know is where these people have come from, and their object in doing this sort of thing," put in Vargo. "There must be a reason."

"And why choose this particular planet?" queried Rex.

"I would be surprised if this is the only planet being attacked in this way. There are probably others."

"In which case these strangers must be a general menace."

Vargo agreed. "I can see Gator and Borrion watching from the *Tavona*," he added.

For a little while it did look as if the raiders intended to take their departure. They began very slowly to rise. All eyes were on the ships. Rex held his breath. It seemed too good to be true.

And so it was soon to be proved. A round object about the size of a football was seen to drop from one of the ships. Rex flinched, expecting an explosion, as it bounced heavily in the bean plantation. Nothing of the sort happened. The

ships went on their way and were soon lost to sight. But by that time a faint yellow mist, only just visible, was creeping over the ground, spreading outwards, from the spot where the object had landed.

“What devilment is this?” muttered Tiger. “I don’t like it. That thing wasn’t dropped for nothing. It looks to me as if it’s spilling some sort of gas, and if I’m right it won’t be a sort calculated to do us any good.”

“It is a gas,” declared the Professor. “It can’t be anything else. From the way it’s rolling over the ground it must be heavier than the air. In which case, as the village stands on a knoll we should be safe here from its effects, whatever they may be.”

“For how long?” questioned Vargo, who was looking worried. “As the gas becomes diluted with air it may start to rise. Even if it doesn’t, from the way it’s moving it will fill all the low ground round the village, in which case we shall find ourselves marooned on an island in the middle of the stuff, surrounded by a sea which I feel sure would be death to enter. We must do something quickly.”

“Yes, but what can we do?”

“We still have time to get to the ship,” Rex pointed out.

“And leave our friends here to perish? That would be a dastardly thing to do. Don’t forget we brought this on them by providing them with defensive weapons.”

“If we hadn’t done that they would have been carried off, which would come to the same thing,” argued Tiger.

“There may be something we can do,” said Vargo, suddenly. “Wait here. If my plan does not work I will bring the ship across and fetch you.” With that, without any explanation, he began running towards the *Tavona*. Rex had never seen him run so fast.

“Now what does he think he can do!” exclaimed the Professor. “He won’t dare to go near the source of the stuff, for that, I am convinced, would be certain death.”

“He’s obviously had a brain-wave,” said Tiger, hopefully. “All we can do is wait and see if it works—unless anyone feels like following him to the ship. There’s still just time to get to it.”

“I shall not abandon our friends,” said the Professor calmly.

The Kronians were now crowding round them, eyeing the menace apprehensively and obviously looking to them for help or advice. Already it was too late for them to reach the only path through the forest, for the cloud, flowing like water seen in slow motion, had reached the entrance.

Rex was watching Vargo. He saw him reach the ship; saw him say something quickly to Gator, who was standing at the door. They both went inside. The door was closed. The *Tavona* began to move.

“He’s coming here to pick us up,” guessed Tiger.

It was soon clear that this was not the intention. Having risen to a height of only a few feet the ship made a circuit round the mist and took up a position between it and the village. Then, tilted at a slight angle, it began a to and fro movement. The purpose of this was instantly apparent, for the creeping mist began to move faster, and in one direction only, which was away from the village and, of course, towards the forest. To the observers the effect was as if the gas, for it couldn’t be anything else, was being swept away by a giant broom.

“Wonderful!” cried the Professor. “They’re using the jets as a brush, and using them successfully, too. Vargo deserves our congratulations for the way he is dealing with an alarming situation.”

It was some time before the object that had been dropped stopped discharging its contents, and longer still before the open area had been swept clear, as far as this could be ascertained by sight. While this was going on Tiger took the opportunity to tell the Professor of the peril in the forest, of the dragon-like monsters which the Kronians called *Ruxor*.

“I should very much like to see one of these creatures,” said the Professor, when Tiger had narrated the adventure.

“Let’s make sure we’re out of one danger before we talk of looking for another,” returned Tiger. “Vargo still has a problem on his hands.”

“And what is that, pray?”

“He’ll have to make sure there’s no gas left about, however thin it may be, before he lands.”

“Yes. Of course. A small quantity could still be potent.”

Here again Vargo found the answer. From a safe height there was lowered from the ship what could be assumed to be an atmospheric testing device, the one that was sometimes employed to check the air before landing on unknown planets. The ship, with this hanging below it, covered the entire open area very thoroughly before it came over and landed near the village.

“Congratulations, my dear fellow, on a brilliant piece of inspiration,” exclaimed the Professor, when the crew had stepped out and Vargo had rejoined them. “The villains have gone, and I don’t think they’ll come back or they would not have attempted to murder everyone. You saved the situation.”

“I don’t know about that,” said Tiger, dubiously. “What are you going to do now? You realize that without their regular diet, or without any food at all

as far as I can see, the people of this village are going to die anyway. The few beans they have won't last long. Unless it's my imagination some of them are already showing signs of age."

"They will have to get a stock of beans from somewhere, enough to last them until they can raise a new crop."

"How are they going to do that?"

"They can borrow some from their neighbours."

"I don't think you quite understand. Without taking a fearful risk the people here can't get away, and no one can get to them on account of these monsters that live near the only path out of the village." Tiger explained to Vargo what the peril was.

"So that's it," said Vargo. "Now I know the nature of the peril which has kept these people isolated I understand more clearly what they have told me. The forest is a swamp. Much of it is always inundated. There is only one path. The beasts they call *Ruxor* seem to know that and lie in wait for anyone trying to get through. Occasionally someone will try it, but more often than not he is never seen again."

"We saw proof of that," said Tiger, grimly.

"How did these people get here in the first place?" questioned Rex.

"Conditions were not always like this. When they first came there was a river near-by. During a storm of wind and rain some trees fell across it. Debris coming down the river caught on the trees and so a dam was formed. This caused the water to overflow. The river ceased to exist and the surrounding country became a swamp."

Tiger nodded. "The same sort of thing has happened on Earth, notably in Africa."

Vargo continued. "The people hoped the water would go down, but they tell me it is getting worse. To make matters more difficult these beasts called *Ruxor* suddenly appeared in one of the lakes, with the result we know. They say there is nothing they can do."

"In that case we shall have to do something," asserted the Professor.

"You can't get near the dam on account of the monsters."

"I don't see why we shouldn't get rid of the dam and the dragons at the same time," offered Tiger.

"How?"

"A well-placed bomb should do it."

"We have no bombs," the Professor pointed out.

"If you think bombs would answer the problem I could get some," stated

Vargo. "It would mean going home to fetch them."

The Professor looked at Vargo over his spectacles. "I didn't know you still manufactured such things as bombs," he said in a surprised voice.

"We don't normally carry them, but we keep a small stock for an emergency should it arise. Explosives have their uses apart from military operations. It is a long time since we used any, and then it was for blasting through rock when we reopened some canals."

"I dislike bombs in any shape or form, but in this case I see no alternative," sighed the Professor. "I must say it would distress me to go off and leave these good people to their fate."

"Very well, let's be objective," resumed Tiger. "I suggest we go to the next village, or villages, and bring back enough beans to keep our friends going while we go home and fetch the bombs. Once the path is made safe the people will be able to keep in touch without any further help from us."

"That seems a sensible plan," agreed Vargo.

"There's no other way of getting rid of the monsters," said Tiger. "I wouldn't undertake to wipe them out one at a time with a rifle."

Rex was staring at the bean plantation. His eyes went on to the edge of the forest. The vegetation was brown. He pointed. "Look what's happened to the beanstalks!"

"Ah!" breathed the Professor. "The gas. Imagine what it would have done to us."

Said Vargo, "If we're going to attempt the salvation of these people I think we should be getting on with it. Time is important."

"I'd like to see one of these dragons before we leave," complained the Professor.

"The next time I see one I hope it will be dead," growled Tiger. "Don't worry; there are plenty of them, and if I know anything they'll still be here when we get back. Let's go."

"Oh, very well," agreed the Professor. "If our plan is successful we shall have discharged our responsibility. I have got what I came for, so once the people here are safe there will be no need for us to stay. Then we can either return home, or, if Vargo is agreeable, we can look at a few more planets while we are in the region."

CHAPTER VIII
A CHANGE OF PLAN

THE *Tavona* returned to its base without trouble. Having landed, the crew went home for a few hours, and the others retired to the guest-house there to wait for Vargo who departed to get the necessary authority for the proposed mission. Rex was disappointed not to see Morino, but he consoled himself by having his first square meal for some days.

When Vargo returned it was clear from his expression that he did not bring good news. "I'm afraid this is where we must say good-bye," he reported.

"Oh dear—dear," murmured the Professor, pushing up his spectacles. "I am sorry to hear that."

"Something has happened while we have been away and it must alter our arrangements."

"What a pity. What is the trouble?"

"We have a ship missing. Contact with it was lost some days ago. I have been ordered to investigate. As I think you know, we never abandon a ship without making every possible effort to find it, or to ascertain what happened to it. If we did not do that other ships might suffer the same fate. That of course is the risk the ship sent out to investigate must always run. It can never be other than a dangerous undertaking." Vargo smiled. "And so, my friends, this may be our last good-bye."

"Now wait a minute, my dear fellow," protested the Professor. "I would like to know more about this. Why have you been detailed for this task?"

"The *Tavona* is the only ship available."

"What about Rolto?"

"He has already gone. Had all been well he should have been back by now."

"Is it known where the lost ship was bound for?"

"Fortunately, yes. In a way it was itself responsible for what has happened."

"How could that be?"

"As a unit of the Remote Survey Fleet it had made an extended flight to a new quarter of the Third Region. On its return the captain, a friend of mine named Grantos, reported that while exploring a constellation long known to

our astronomers by the name of the Nine Horsemen on account of the rapid orbits of its nine planets, he had observed an unusual feature. This was on the largest planet, a body of fair size which we had named Barida.”

“What do you mean by a fair size?” asked the Professor.

“In your terms of distance it would have a diameter of about 16,000 miles, which would make it roughly twice the size of Earth. Very well. On Barida there were indications of an advanced civilization. There is nothing particularly remarkable in that, of course. As you know, planets with towns connected by roads are not uncommon. The feature that puzzled Grantos was this. At no great distance from the largest city there was what appeared to be a vast open area of grass covered ground, absolutely flat and obviously artificial. From the description I imagine it would be in the nature of one of the big airports you have constructed on Earth. Such features do not, in our experience, occur in nature or by accident.”

“Was anything to be seen on this ground?” inquired Tiger. “I’m thinking particularly of aircraft, which includes space craft.”

“Nothing. There was no movement. This, of course, made it even more remarkable. What was its purpose? In the ordinary way Grantos would have gone down to examine the place more closely, but he had been away for a long time, and finding himself running short of stores was compelled to hold on a course for home. What he saw was from a high altitude. To make the story short, having made his report he was ordered to refit his ship and return to Barida in order to ascertain the exact nature of what he had seen. He has not returned. It is known from signals he made that he reached his objective without trouble, for he sent a message saying he was about to go down and land, presumably on the open area. From that moment nothing has been heard of him.”

“Was anything done about it?” asked Rex, who was following the story with interest.

“Rolto was sent to investigate.”

“Then what happened?”

“He, also, has failed to return. It is known that he reached Barida safely. Since then, silence.”

“And now you are to go.”

“Those are my orders.”

“But what about the wretched people on Krona? We told them we’d be coming back. If we let them down they’ll never trust another ship.”

“I explained that to the Council, and they were sympathetic enough to suggest a plan which it is hoped will meet the case. I have permission to fit a

bomb rack on the *Tavona* and draw some bombs from store. Should my mission to Barida be successful I may go on to Krona and drop my bombs on what we might call the dragons' nest. Now I must make my preparations and leave you."

"But why must you leave us?" asked the Professor, looking pained. "Is there any reason why we should not go with you?"

"Only the obvious one. It may well be that I shall not come back."

"What of that? We have shared so many adventures for so long why should we not share this one, even if it turns out to be the last. You have whetted my curiosity, and for that reason alone I'd be very upset if you left me behind. As I have pointed out before, I am an old man. I have had my day and now I don't care very much what happens to me. I am speaking for myself. It is up to my younger friends to make their own decisions."

"If you're going on this trip it's unlikely that we'd be content to remain here," said Tiger, indignantly. "Without Vargo we can't get back to Earth, anyway."

"I could arrange for Multova to take you back to Earth should I not return," replied Vargo.

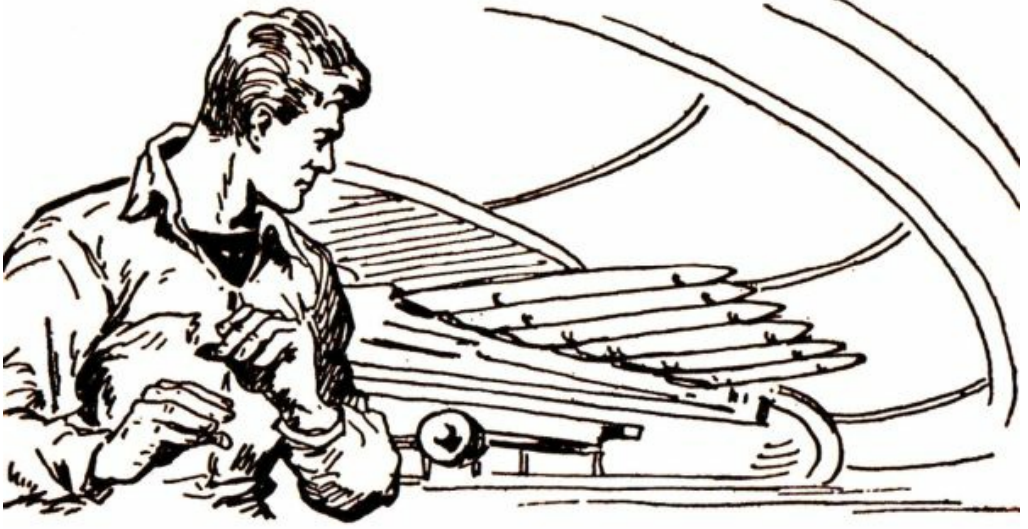
"I'd rather go with you, come what may."

"If you go you can't leave me behind," protested Rex.

Vargo shrugged his shoulders. "Very well. I have given you my advice, which is to take the sensible course and wait here——"

"We have made dangerous trips before," argued Tiger.

"Yes, but not like this. The dangers we have encountered were the result of unforeseen circumstances. On this occasion I must fly deliberately into what I know is a perilous situation." Vargo glanced at the disappointed faces around him. "Very well, if that is how you feel it is not for me to deny you," he concluded. "Wait here while I collect the bombs and the emergency equipment we always carry on these occasions. As far as it is possible we provide for any contingency that might arise."



Tiger had another question. "But if, as it is supposed, this planet Barida carries an advanced civilization, what have we to fear?"

"The fact that a planet has reached a high degree of technical and scientific ability does not mean it presents no dangers. You should know that by now. What about Ardilla, with its death rays. Or, for that matter, Earth, where men still kill each other indiscriminately. But I must not stay talking any longer. Rest while you can. I will let you know as soon as I am ready to leave." With a wave Vargo walked away, presently to be joined by Borron and Gator.

The others had nothing to do except wait. They saw some unusual gear being put into the *Tavona*, and something being fitted to the outside of the ship. No one paid much attention, but what Rex did notice was a small rack holding what appeared to be a row of silver pencils. When the opportunity arose his curiosity prompted him to ask Vargo what they were.

"They are the bombs for killing the dragons of Krona," Vargo told him.

Rex looked slightly incredulous. "Surely they're very small for the job they have to do?"

"The power of a bomb lies in what is inside it, not in its size or shape."

"On Earth the power of our bombs increases with size and weight."

"So it was once with us, but not now. As our bombs became more destructive so they became smaller."

Rex said no more about it. He hung about hoping to see Morino, but she did not appear, and from fear of being chaffed he hesitated to ask Borron what she was doing. Nothing was said about the proposed voyage, probably because

there was nothing more to say, conjecture as to what had happened on Barida being futile. Time would answer that.

The sun was setting, with far-away Earth and its companion Moon shining brightly in a darkening sky, when Vargo came over and said everything was ready so they would start at once.

Tiger knocked the ash out of his pipe, and in a few minutes they had taken their usual places in the space craft for which Rex was beginning to feel quite an affection. It had given them such good service. He took a last look at Earth, wondering if he would ever see it again; the double doors were closed, hermetically sealing the interior of the ship, and they were away, with Mars dropping like a stone below them. One last thought that did occur to Rex was that they might be the means of saving Rolto, the one man of many he had met in space whom they had reason to fear, if not to dislike.

As so often happened once the strain of initial acceleration had been relaxed there was a certain amount of conversation.

“Tell me this,” said Rex, speaking to Vargo. “Isn’t it possible that the failure to return of the two missing ships might be due to some mechanical or structural fault?”

“Such a thing is possible but it rarely happens,” answered Vargo. “As you know, for the greater part of any journey, once escape velocity has been achieved no motive power, no propulsion, is necessary. With no atmosphere, no resistance, velocity would be maintained. But should the cosmic jet brakes fail there would be no means of deceleration, and, unless the ship collided with a planet or a star it would continue on in space for all eternity. I mean that literally. In a hundred million years, or indeed, a thousand million, with nothing to stop its progress the ship would still be speeding at the same velocity into the great void which you call Space. Such a calamity is not impossible, but the chances of it happening to two ships in quick succession are so remote as to be hardly worth consideration.”

“Then any trouble that may have occurred must be due to some external influence?”

“Yes.”

“And that implies human activity?”

“Of course. There are low forms of life which have developed a high quotient of intelligence and ability, but I have yet to see any that have adapted natural resources, the use of metals, for instance, to their needs.”

How strange it was, pondered Rex, that even in Outer Space men were either aggressive or stood on the defence. On Earth the many tribes, if not actually fighting, were always suspicious of each other. On other worlds it was

the same. No doubt when men of Earth had settled their differences, if they ever did, and conquered Space, it would only be to find themselves in a state of enmity with other worlds. Was peace not to be found anywhere? The more highly civilized men became the deadlier their weapons. What sort of opposition were they going to meet, he wondered, on this, their present rescue flight?

He looked out of his window into the black depths that surrounded the ship, the unutterable loneliness that is Space. There were no blue skies here. The fact that the *Tavona* appeared to be motionless, just hanging in the void, did nothing to dispel a sense of awe. He was used to this sensation, of course, but he could never rid himself entirely of the feeling of unreality such conditions produced. All the old familiar things of Earth, to which he had been accustomed all his life, had vanished as completely as if they had never existed.

The ship was behaving perfectly. He heard Borron tell Vargo that if his calculations were correct they should arrive at the objective, the planet Barida, to find daylight on that part of the globe from which they would make their approach. After that he slept. Some time later—how long he did not know—he awoke, had some food with the others, and dozed again. This happened several times. As always it seemed strange, remembering the velocity at which the ship was annihilating Space, that these interplanetary journeys should take so long. It involved a period of boredom that had never, and would never, be overcome.

However, there came a time when he opened his eyes to a realization that something was happening. His companions were talking, and moving, and the pressure of deceleration told him the jet brakes had been applied. Turning to his window he saw a mighty sphere which appeared slowly to be swelling, like a ball being inflated.

“Barida,” said Gator. “We are arriving.”

Slowly but surely the giant globe filled a sky now taking on a tinge of blue, a sure indication that the ship was entering an atmosphere. It was now in free fall, with only its powerful jets arresting progress. These, presently, brought it to a halt, but by that time, although still distant, it was possible to get a broad idea of the surface of the world below.

Gator spoke, his voice sounding curiously loud in the eerie silence. “We are approaching from the same angle as the ships that came before us,” he said.

“There’s no doubt about the place having a high civilization,” observed the Professor.

This was apparent to Rex, for he could see towns of considerable size, one

in particular. Roads ran in many directions, long straight roads suggesting an efficient surface transport; yet oddly enough, he could see no movement of any sort. The Professor, who was surveying the scene through his binoculars, made a remark to that effect. "What do you make of it, Vargo?" he asked.

"I make nothing of it, as you would say," answered Vargo. "Below us we have a well-furnished planet where at one time there must have been a great deal of industrial activity. Now, even in that big town, I cannot see a movement. Why? Things are not as they should be. There is something wrong."

"That large, flat, open space, not far from the town, must be the area which was reported," observed Tiger. "On Earth I would say, without hesitation, there is an aerodrome. There's nothing doing there, either. The whole place looks dead."

"We are still too far away to make out details," rejoined the Professor. "I suggest we continue the reconnaissance from a lower altitude."

"You realize what that means," said Vargo, seriously. "We must be in precisely the same position as the ships that came before us. They, too, would stop here to make a preliminary survey. Then, no doubt, they went lower, just as you have suggested, Professor. What happened to them? All we know is, from that moment contact with them was lost. To follow their example would be to invite the same fate."

"Your purpose in coming here was to find out what had become of them. It is now evident that you won't do that from here."

Vargo turned to Borron. "What of the atmosphere?"

"I can find nothing wrong with it."

"Then that rules out any question of asphyxiation," said the Professor.

Rex stepped in. "A thought has just struck me."

"Yes, and what is it, my boy?"

"Well, to me it is inconceivable that everything we see below us, those important-looking buildings, have been abandoned. There must be somebody there."

"Then why do the people not show themselves? Why do we see no sign of life?"

"I wonder could it be that the people are afraid of something."

"Of what would they be afraid?"

"Us. They may have seen us."

"But why should that make them afraid?"

"Suppose they were at war? They might go into hiding at the first

appearance of the enemy.”

“On a planet of this size, in a place of such importance, the first thing they would do would be to strike at the enemy. Why have we not been attacked? This is not defenceless Krona. If the people here could construct what we can see they would certainly have weapons.”

“What sort of weapons?” queried Rex, developing his theory. “If a hydrogen bomb war broke out on Earth, if England was involved I don’t think you’d see many people walking about in the streets of London—I mean, when enemy aircraft appeared overhead. People would rush for shelter. That’s what they may have done here.”

“There may be something in that,” conceded Tiger.

“Let us go a little lower,” suggested the Professor. “If these people have a means of striking at us we shall soon know about it.”

“And then what?” inquired Vargo.

“Obviously, we should retire. We haven’t come here to engage in a war. Once we have seen the danger our question regarding the lost ships will have been answered.”

“So you would deliberately invite attack?”

“We shall learn nothing while we remain where we are.”

“We may assume that is exactly what Rolto would think when he arrived,” returned Vargo, drily. “Two courses are now open to us. We can return home and report failure or we can go closer to the objective and risk disaster. Which is it to be?”

“I’d go down, very slowly, prepared to retire the instant we see anything coming up at us,” said Tiger.

“What could come up at us?”

“Hostile space ships or missiles of some sort seems to be the answer to that.”

There was a short silence. Then Vargo looked at Gator, standing at the controls. “Descend slowly,” he ordered.

The hissing of the brakes which held the space craft stationary diminished in volume. It began to lose altitude.

Rex moistened his lips. His eyes explored the ground for the flash of a weapon, or the appearance on the airfield of enemy craft.

Nothing happened.

CHAPTER IX
WHERE IS ROLTO?

THE *Tavona* continued to lose height, and as it did so the nervous tension mounted.

To Rex it was like walking on ice that cracked at every step, and he could see from the attitudes of the others that they felt the same. If ever they asked for trouble it was now, he thought. Still nothing happened; or if anything was happening he was unaware of it.

Suddenly his eyes, now scanning the landing ground—as it appeared to be—became focused on a small object near the perimeter. He stared at it for two or three seconds and then let out a cry. “Look! I see an aircraft!”

“You mean a space craft,” corrected the Professor.

“No. An aircraft. A crash. Its back is broken and the wings crumpled.”

“I see it,” said Tiger tersely. “There’s a space craft there, too. In fact I can see two. They are not far apart.”

“One of them is Rolto’s. I see his red star insignia.”

“Halt, Gator,” ordered Vargo.

The *Tavona*, now directly above the field, continued to lose height.

“I said stop,” cracked Vargo. The jet brakes were screaming but the machine continued to fall.

“I can’t stop,” said Gator, calmly. “We are out of control.”

Everyone turned to look at him. He seemed to be struggling with the controls.

“What is it?” asked Vargo.

“As you can hear, the brakes are full on, but we continue to fall. There is nothing more I can do.”

Gator spoke so casually that it took Rex a second or two to realize just what this meant; that if the ship could not be stopped they were falling to what looked like certain death. Everyone watched in silence as Gator tried all the controls; but nothing he did made any difference.

From the noise the jets were making Rex knew the brakes were full on; yet the ship continued to fall. How could that be? It did not make sense. The thrust of the jets should be sending them up; but, as he could see from the ground rushing to meet them, they were falling with ever increasing momentum. Fear

took him by the throat, drying his mouth. So this was it: the end at last. This is what had happened to the lost ships. They had been gripped by the same unnatural power. He could see them clearly now, immediately below them. There was no movement near them, no sign of the crews. Why? The answer was all too obvious. There would be no movement near the *Tavona*, either, after it has crashed.

Nobody spoke.

Suddenly Vargo jumped across the ship and pulled a small lever, for what object was not apparent. A few seconds later there came from below two tremendous explosions, followed by a blast so violent that for an instant it seemed to check the ship. Rex, dazed by shock, was flung against his observation porthole. Even as he grabbed at it to recover his balance he caught a fleeting glimpse of the airfield below them being torn open by a tongue of blinding blue-white flame. A split-second later he was being dragged down in his seat with a force so crushing that he was unable to move.

He did not wonder what was happening. He was in no state to wonder anything. But as the awful pressure began to relax, and the ship to stop spinning and come to even keel, he became dimly aware that they were shooting up like a rocket. Gator, who, like everyone who had been standing, had been thrown to the floor, had dragged himself to his feet and was clutching desperately at the controls. In a matter of seconds everything was back to normal, except that everyone looked white and shaken. Glancing down Rex saw the ship was again back at the altitude from which it had begun to descend. He drew a deep breath and wiped the perspiration from his forehead with his sleeve.



Vargo was the first to recover fully. He said: “All right, Gator. There is no need to go any higher. Stop.”

Movement ceased. Rex looked at the others and tried to force a smile. What had happened he did not know, and he found it hard to grasp that they were, for the moment at any rate, out of danger. Had the horror really happened, or had it all been a ghastly nightmare? Looking down again he saw that it had been no dream. Smoke was rising from the airfield.

The Professor looked at Vargo. “What happened?”

“I don’t know. All I know is, there is some devilish weapon, or instrument, below us.”

“But what were those explosions?”

“Bombs.”

“Whose bombs?”

“Our bombs. I dropped two of those intended for the dragons of Krona. I could think of nothing else to do. There seemed a chance they would affect, possibly break, the force that had us in its power. As it happened they must have done that. Once the power was broken the ship returned to normal behaviour——”

“And as the jets were full on we shot up like a bullet.”

“Exactly.”

“What could have been this power that could so affect the ship at such a range?”

“I don’t know.”

“It must have been a weapon of some sort.”

“I think so. In fact, it must have been.”

“It began to affect us as soon as I started to go down,” put in Gator. “I felt it in the controls. I have never experienced anything like it before.”

“The bombs broke it, whatever it was,” said Rex. “They ripped right across the airfield. I saw a blue flash. It looked to me like an electrical discharge, as if the explosion of the bombs had caused a short circuit.”

“The bombs certainly put the thing out of action, because from that moment we were free,” said Gator.

“And what do we do now?” asked Tiger, always practical. “Do we make another sortie, hoping the weapon is still out of action, or do we go home?”

“To go down again would be pressing our luck rather hard,” put in Toby. “I must confess I found our last attempt more than somewhat disturbing.”

Gator answered. “Now we know what the danger is I think I could prevent a repetition of what happened.”

“How?”

“Because last time I was slow to realize that I had lost control. By the time I did realize it, it was too late for me to counteract it. Now, if the same power is turned on us again, I shall be prepared, and at the first indication of it I will put the ship into escape velocity.”

“I still have four bombs left,” said Vargo, meaningly.

“Then let us go down and get to the bottom of this mysterious business,” said the Professor, briskly. “We may still be in time to help the crews of the two ships which failed to escape. That is the purpose for which we came and it still has not been accomplished.”

“Has anyone any objection?” questioned Vargo, looking round.

No one spoke, so apparently no one had.

“Very well,” said Vargo. “Proceed, Gator.”

“Towards what point?”

“The landing ground: as near as possible to Rolto’s ship.”

Almost imperceptibly the *Tavona* began to lose height, moving at an angle that would bring it directly above the two space ships. Everyone stood at his

observation window, eyes on the ground, watching for a movement that would indicate the presence of men. Rex watched the space ships in particular for signs of the crews. It was significant that no bodies could be seen outside. In what state would they be found if they were inside? he wondered. The complete absence of any form of life was uncanny. It became a strain on the nerves. There was something wrong about it. Were they entering a trap?

The ship was still behaving normally. From time to time, Borron, who was making atmospheric tests, announced that in that respect all was well. Otherwise the only sound was the constant hiss of the brakes, which alone prevented the ship from falling sheer. The sound ended abruptly as a slight jar told everyone they were on the ground. Around them was a sea of coarse grass, slightly undulating now that it was observed from ground level. Rising from the grass like giant mushrooms were the two lost ships. Astonishingly enough, neither appeared to be badly damaged, although the legs had gone rather deeply into the ground as if they had landed heavily. It was not possible to see if the doors were open, for they happened to be on the far side. This, Rex thought, was unfortunate, for upon this much depended. If the doors were closed the chances of finding the crews still alive would be very small indeed.

The doors of the *Tavona* having been opened, for a minute Vargo stood surveying the landscape suspiciously. For at least half a mile in every direction the ground was open, so that anything, any movement, would be seen at once; but there was still not a living creature in sight.

“I see nothing,” said Vargo. “I do not understand this. There must be something, somewhere. I will examine the ships. Wait here. If danger appears, escape at once—if you can.”

Courageously, Rex thought, he stepped down and walked quickly towards the nearer of the two abandoned ships, which happened to be Rolto's, recognizable by its red markings. The others saw him go on up the steps leading into the interior and disappear from sight, which told them the doors must be open. In a few seconds he reappeared, and having made a signal which was taken to mean there was no one in it, strode on to the second ship. This, of course, was the first one that had failed to return. Again he went straight in, soon to come out again and stand gazing round the featureless landscape.

Said the Professor to Gator: “You had better stay here in case we come back in a hurry; but I must ask Vargo if he can explain the mystery.”

He walked towards him, the others following, leaving the crew at their posts.

“Nobody in the ships?” called the Professor, as he approached.

“Not one.”

“Then they couldn’t have been killed or injured when they landed.”

“We may suppose that.”

“Then why did they leave the ships with no one on guard?”

“I don’t understand it,” said Vargo again. “There must have been a reason but I cannot imagine what it was—unless, of course, they were captured and taken away.”

“By whom?”

“The people who live on this planet. There must be people here, many people, from what we saw before we landed. Someone must have installed and operated the device that forced these ships to land, and would have brought the *Tavona* down, too, had I not been carrying bombs. As you can see, the ships landed heavily, but not with sufficient force to damage them; that is, as far as I have been able to ascertain without close examination.”

“Are they still in working order?”

“That is the next thing to find out.” Vargo went into the ship by which they were standing. A minute later it was off the ground, having hung a little as its legs were withdrawn from the ground. The same test was applied to the second ship. It took a little longer to “unstick”, but the result was the same.

“This only deepens the mystery,” declared the Professor. “Why did the crews abandon the ships if they were in working order? Even supposing they were attacked they could still have escaped.”

Vargo thought for a moment. “I think the answer to that lies in our own experience. What happened to them is what would have happened to us had I not dropped the bombs. Up to that time these ships were immobilized. They couldn’t move. That is why the crews left them.”

“What did they hope to do?”

“What else than to find the object, weapon if you like, that was holding them on the ground. They must have realized that their only chance of ever getting away was to destroy it. A desperate remedy for their predicament, but the only one.”

“Then what it boils down to is this,” said Tiger. “The bombs did what they hoped to do. They put the device, whatever it might be, out of action. From the moment they burst we were free, and these two ships were free. If the crews were here we could all get away.”

“That is how it appears to me,” agreed Vargo. “The first of our ships to come over was caught. Then Rolto came. He saw the ship on the ground and had moved to land near it when he, too, was caught in the same trap. Precisely the same thing nearly happened to us, and would have happened had I not

dropped the bombs. I had no idea of what was below us and only dropped them as a last expedient.”

“But where is this device?” asked Rex.

“I don’t know. It could be near at hand or it might be many miles away. What is more important, where are the crews of these ships?”

“I can tell you which way they went,” asserted Tiger. “Look. You can distinctly see tracks in the grass. It must have taken a number of people to tread the grass down like that. As there are no other tracks, those we can see must have been made either by people coming to the ships, or leaving them—possibly both.”

The tracks were studied more closely. One led from one ship to the other. Then there was a single track going off in a straight line.

“It’s fairly plain to see what happened,” resumed Tiger. “The first ship found itself grounded. The crew went off. Then Rolto came. He, too, was grounded. What did he do? The most natural thing, I’d say. Seeing the tracks leading away from the ship he had come to find he followed them hoping to catch up with the crew. After all, if his own ship was out of action there would be no point in leaving anyone here with it. I would say both crews are now together, assuming they are still alive. Of course, they may be dead, or they may be prisoners.”

“I entirely agree with you,” said Vargo. “It is the obvious explanation.”

“Then the question that now arises, is what are we going to do about it?”

“That is easily answered,” returned Vargo. “I shall try to find them. That is my duty. It is contrary to our traditions that anyone should be abandoned, whatever the risks involved. I shall follow the tracks. There is no need for anyone else to come. Should I not return the *Tavona* must go home to report what has happened.”

“Rubbish!” exclaimed the Professor. “Do you suppose for one moment that we would go off leaving you here? I shall certainly come with you.”

“We might as well stick together,” offered Tiger, casually. “Either we all go or we all stay. If the worst comes to the worst Gator and Borron can take the machine home to report the facts of the case.”

“Then let us proceed,” requested the Professor. “If we can find the source of our trouble we may be able to prevent other people from getting caught in the same trap.”

“Trap?” queried Toby. “You really think it’s a trap?”

“What else can it be?” answered Tiger. “What else can this place be except a trap to catch invading ships. This is obviously the place for a ship to make a

landing. I'd say it was laid out with that object. Whose ships? Where are the ships? Where are the people? Why isn't there a soul in sight? There must be millions of people on the planet; why haven't we seen any? We're within ten miles of a city. We didn't see anybody moving there, if it comes to that. What are they doing? If they don't want visitors why don't they come out and say so? Are they afraid of something? Of us? Half a dozen men? That's ridiculous. The whole thing is corny. It doesn't make sense. Frankly, I don't like it. I've got a feeling we're due for a shock, and when it comes it won't be a pleasant one. But we could stand here asking questions till we're blue in the face without getting anywhere near the answers. Anyhow, if we're going, let's go. Vargo, if you'll tell Gator what we've decided to do we'll get on with it. Rex, you'd better stay here."

"Not me," replied Rex vehemently. "Where you go I go."

Tiger shrugged. "Please yourself. You're old enough to know your own mind."

A minute later the rescue party, following the tracks, set off across the plain.

CHAPTER X
HARD TO BELIEVE

WHAT REX had imagined would be a long walk in a gravity heavier than the one to which they were accustomed, for they could see no objective nearer than the perimeter of the landing field towards which the footmarks led, turned out to be a short one. The reason came as a surprise to everyone.

The party had covered less than 200 yards when it came upon a feature there had been no cause to expect, for the simple reason that looking across the grass from ground level it could not be seen. Moreover, showing no difference in colour from the rest of the field it would not have been easy to pick out from above. Anyhow, with all eyes on the stranded ships no one had noticed it. To use the word that would best describe it, although the term is no longer in common use, it was a fosse; that is, a deep, open, man-made trench which in olden times was constructed as a fortification. Sometimes it could have water in the bottom. Sometimes it was dry. This one was dry.

The excavation that suddenly appeared across the path of the explorers was perhaps twenty feet deep, with sides that sloped back at a rather acute angle so that it was wider at the top than at the bottom. It might have been taken for a railway cutting had there been any rails. Like the surrounding ground it was entirely covered with grass and had obviously been in existence for some time. It ran absolutely straight, in one direction, the direction of the town, for as far as the eye could follow it. The tracks which the party had been following went straight down into this curious earthwork but did not appear on the opposite side. They continued on along the bottom, the direction being towards the distant town.

“Now what the devil have we got here!” exclaimed Tiger in a voice pitched high with surprise, as the party halted on the brink.

“What an extraordinary thing,” murmured the Professor, adjusting his spectacles. “What could be the purpose of it?”

Tiger answered. “If I had to make a guess I’d say it was part of some sort of defence scheme.”

“Defence! Against what?”

“I wouldn’t know. It’s artificial. I mean, it couldn’t be a natural formation. Nature doesn’t work in straight lines. This was cut by engineers who knew what they were doing. One thing we may be quite certain of is, this trench

wasn't dug for fun or merely for exercise. It has a purpose."

"But this sort of permanent defence arrangement went out of fashion long ago," protested Toby.

"With us, yes. But obviously not here."

"Are you suggesting that the people here still fight each other with swords and battle-axes?"

"I'm not suggesting anything. What I'm saying is, this is, or was, a military undertaking."

"Let us not waste time arguing about it," interposed Vargo. "The others went along the bottom. Having come so far we might as well see the thing through."

"I agree," said the Professor.

Still keeping to the tracks the party went down to the bottom where it turned sharp left along the already trampled grass, Tiger remarking that the tracks must have been made recently.

Again they had not gone far when they found another problem confronting them. In the left bank they came upon a structure of squared stone that formed a framework for a door. Here the tracks ended.

"They must have gone in here," said Vargo, looking at the others with startled eyes.

Tiger stepped up to the door and tapped it with his knuckles. Afterwards he did the same with its supports. "Iron," he said laconically.

"See if the door can be opened."

"I'd expect it to be locked."

"I don't see a lock. The others must have been able to get in."

Tiger agreed. "I wonder why they shut the door behind them. If we can get in we should soon know the answers to all our questions." So saying he put a shoulder against the door and pushed.

The door swung open as if on well oiled hinges to reveal a cave, or rather, since it was obviously artificial, a tunnel, lined with brickwork. It appeared to run straight back under what they had called the landing ground. From the hole drifted out some fumes that caused the Professor to wrinkle his nostrils. "I smell acid," he said.

"I'm afraid that's a bad sign for Rolto, and Grantos, the captain of the first ship," said Vargo, sadly.

Tiger advanced and put his head in the hole. "The gas isn't too bad," he announced. "Are we going in?"

"Certainly," answered the Professor. "We can't turn back now."

Tiger shook his head. “If ever I saw a death trap this is it,” he muttered. “Still, as we have friends inside we must at least try to get them out. That’s why we came here. I still can’t make up my mind whether the people responsible for this extraordinary set-up are more or less barbarians or more highly civilized than we are. It’s got me beaten.”

Vargo had taken a pace inside the tunnel. “I can see light globes at intervals but they don’t appear to be working.”

A quick search was made for switches but none was found.

“We shall need a torch,” went on Vargo. “It would be useless to try to do anything without one.”

As nobody could have foreseen the situation there was not a torch in the party.

“I’ve a few matches,” informed Tiger. “They won’t last long. Not that they’d be much use, anyway.”

“I’ll run back to the ship and get a torch,” offered Rex.

“Good boy,” said the Professor. “We’re helpless without one.”

Rex, after scanning the field from the top of the bank for possible danger, sprinted back to the *Tavona*. In a few minutes he had explained the position and with a torch in each hand had raced back to the mouth of the tunnel.

“Let’s get on,” said Tiger urgently. “We shan’t be left alone much longer. I’m only surprised that we haven’t been interfered with before this. Somebody must know we’re here. If they didn’t see us arrive they must have heard the explosions.”

With a torch in his hand, and the other one in reserve, he threw a beam of light into the tunnel and moved forward. There was no more talking. As far as Rex was concerned he found this business of going underground on an unknown planet too frightening, not to say uncanny, for lucid conversation. The acrid fumes were unpleasant, and from time to time caused them to cough, but on the whole, as Tiger had said, they were not too bad. He did not try to guess what caused them.



He was soon to know.

Revelation came, or rather, burst upon them when, after a walk of no great distance the tunnel suddenly opened out into a low, circular chamber of such vast size that with one accord they stopped to stare. It was not only the room that held them breathless; it was what it contained. It was packed with electrical installations of a magnitude almost beyond belief. Electro-magnets reached from the floor to the ceiling where a massive metal grid acted as a support for the roof. Rex had been into power stations but he had never seen anything like this. His jaw sagged as he stared. All he could stammer was, "I don't believe it."

"So now we know," said Tiger in a strange voice.

"You mean, we know whether the people of this planet are barbarians or ahead of Earth in scientific development," queried the Professor.

"We certainly know that, but what I really meant, was we now know what threw the two lost ships, and then the *Tavona*, out of control." Tiger coughed

as the fumes irritated his lungs.

“What did happen to the ships?” questioned Rex.

“That should be pretty obvious. They were literally dragged down out of the sky by the attraction of the fantastic electro-magnet force that must be generated by all this equipment. I was right when I said we were attacked by an unknown weapon, for that’s what all this stuff means. It can’t be anything else.”

“But why is no one here?”

“No doubt the apparatus can be operated by remote control. That would be easy for people able to assemble a power plant of such colossal dimensions. I’d say that when not required the whole thing can be switched off. On the appearance of hostile aircraft it could be put into action to reach up and pull the enemy down. What an idea! No accuracy of aim would be required as with anti-aircraft guns and missiles. The entire sky for miles around, and up to almost any height, could be cleared of machines in a matter of seconds. And in all probability only one man would be necessary to do it.”

“But why weren’t we dragged down?” demanded Rex.

“We were on the way down until the power was cut.”

“How? Why?”

“I can tell you the answer to that. Vargo’s bombs cut the electrical circuit thus killing the magnets.”

“That, no doubt, is what happened,” agreed Vargo. “And I can tell you something else,” he went on. “Not only was the *Tavona* freed from the grip of this monstrous power, but also the two ships which up to that time had been anchored to the ground, unable to move. That’s why they were still here when we arrived. The crews couldn’t get away. Once the circuit had been cut they were free; which explains why, when we tested them they were in working order.”

“You think someone on watch saw the ships arrive and pulled them down?”

“Yes, and the same with us.”

“When they realize the power has failed they’ll be along to find out why.”

“They may not have realized it yet, but all the same I don’t think we should stand here talking,” said Vargo tersely. “The crews of the missing ships should be in here somewhere. Let us find them and get away. We can talk later.”

Rex raised a hand. “Listen! Did I hear something?”

Silence fell.

“What did you think you heard?” asked Tiger.

“It sounded like someone calling. It could have been close, or it might have been a long way off. It’s hard to judge in—there it is again!”

This time there was no doubt of it, a voice could be heard; it seemed to be calling, but not very loudly.

“That sounded like a cry for help,” said the Professor. “It might be our people, in distress.”

“It might be the men who run this place,” argued Tiger.

“Someone comes,” said Vargo.

They waited, alert, ready for any action that might be necessary.

Then, from the mouth of a tunnel similar to their own, at the far side of the great chamber, staggered a figure. Rex recognized the uniform of the Minoan Remote Survey Fleet. “It’s Rolto,” he cried.

They all hurried towards him as he stumbled on, sometimes stopping to cough. When they met Rex could see he looked weak and ill.

Vargo asked the first question. “Where are the others?”

Rolto pointed to the tunnel from which he had emerged. “They are coming. Some may need help.”

“Are they injured?”

“No. But we have nearly choked to death.”

“Why didn’t you come out?”

“Impossible. All the doors we found were sealed. How did you get in?”

“The door we found was open.”

“The same door?”

“Yes. We followed your tracks.”

Rex turned startled eyes to his father’s face. “We shall look silly if we can’t get out.”

“The door closed behind us and nothing would move it,” said Rolto. “We’ve been looking for another way out ever since.”

“I think the door will be open now,” opined Tiger.

“Why should it be?”

“If the doors closed automatically it must have been by an electrical device. The current has now been cut.”

“I hope you are right.”

Toby spoke. “Better get him outside. He needs air.”

“It would be a good thing to check the door is open, anyway,” said Vargo. “Here come the others. Rex, see Rolto to the door. We’ll attend to the rest and

join you as quickly as possible.”

Rex obeyed. Taking the space captain by the arm he led him to the tunnel by which they had entered and so to the door. To his unspeakable relief he found it open. Leaving Rolto on the threshold he made a quick reconnaissance outside to make sure there was no one about. He ran to the top of the bank but could see no one. The three ships stood as he had last seen them. Returning to Rolto he found him sitting on the grass with his head in his hands.

“Everything is all right,” he reported.

Rolto looked up. “But the ships? They won’t move.”

“They should be all right. They were when we left them.”

“We were dragged down. On the ground we couldn’t move.”

“You know why, of course.”

“I know now. How did you cut the current?”

“With bombs.”

“Ah! Now I understand.”

“I can hear the rest of them coming,” said Rex, looking into the tunnel. “You can tell us what happened when they’re all here. Vargo will want to know.”



CHAPTER XI

WHAT HAPPENED ON BARIDA

IN a few minutes the entire party was sitting on the grass, with Rex watching for danger while the missing crews cleared their lungs of the fumes that had nearly asphyxiated them. Toby, as a doctor, gave them what help he could.

Rolto, having been the first out, was the first to recover, and while waiting for some of the original crew who were still hardly able to stand, began to explain, although it was obviously advisable to get back to the ships as quickly as possible. But Toby thought it better to wait until everyone was well enough to make the short journey to the ships before they exposed themselves on the open plain.

“Well, what happened to you?” inquired Vargo, looking at Rolto.

“I needn’t tell you how we were pulled to the ground and held fast,” answered Rolto. “We saw the lost ship standing on what looked like a landing ground, and as our purpose was to find it and ascertain what was wrong, we were on our way down when we lost control.”

“We know all about that,” said Vargo, grimly. “The same thing happened

to us.”

“By using our full power, although it was not enough to get us away, we were able to prevent a serious crash. But we struck the ground hard and were all badly shaken. When we had recovered sufficiently to be able to think it was to discover we were helpless. I walked over to Grantos’ ship and found it in the same state. It had been abandoned. We could see tracks leading away from it, so as there was no point in staying where we were I decided to follow them.”

Here Grantos interrupted with a few words. Unable to speak English he used his own language.

Vargo translated. “He says he left the ship hoping to find the cause of what was affecting it.”

“That’s what I, too, hoped to find, as well as Grantos himself,” resumed Rolto. “It was all very mysterious and outside my experience. I realized of course that we were being held by some tremendous power, perhaps a power unknown to us; but what was harder to understand was the absence of the operators. Since the moment we arrived we have seen no one. What are these people doing?”

“In my opinion they are afraid of something and have gone into hiding; taken cover if you like to put it that way,” said Tiger. “I can think of no other reason why they should not show themselves.”

Rolto went on. “We followed the tracks made by Grantos to this door. To my surprise we were able to open it. We went in. At once the door closed behind us, as if we ourselves had in some way operated it. I turned back to find the door locked, and nothing I could do would open it. So we went on looking for another exit. We found other tunnels, but always at the end we found the same thing—a locked door. Finally, by such a door we came upon Grantos and his crew. They had been doing the same thing. Weak from exhaustion they had given up hope.”

“Then what did you do?”

“We joined them. They assured us there was no way out of the place. It was useless to go on. All we could do was wait, feeling sure that sooner or later someone would come in and find us. We were not thinking of you, or a rescue party. We assumed the people who came would be those to whom the place belonged. What could we expect from them? We would be captured, perhaps put to death. I reasoned they must have enemies or they would never have constructed such a defensive weapon, a trap for airborne invaders. I fail to see how the place can be anything else.”

“So you waited for the people to show themselves.”

“Yes. We waited for what seemed a long time. Sometimes we slept. Having no food with us we became weak. Still nobody came. I gave up trying to work out why. It was all beyond my understanding. Then, a short while ago, came the explosions. Two, one following quickly on the other. Instantly the whole place became alive with blinding electric arcs. Fortunately none of us was in the main chamber, but from where we were, the tunnel being straight, we could see what was happening. I caught a glimmer of indirect daylight in the distance, but I was not sure of anything. The noise of the arcs was like cracks of thunder. The heat became unbearable. The place was filled with smoke and fumes. I thought it was the end.”

“We were all lucky in one respect,” put in Tiger. “The magnets must have been connected in series, so a disconnection anywhere along the line would cut the entire current. Had they been connected in parallel only those actually hit by the bombs would have been put out of action.”

“I think we had better finish this conversation later,” said Vargo. “If everyone is now able to walk let us get to the ships, for we must still be in danger.”

With this everyone agreed, and as soon as everyone was on his feet a move was made, some helping others who were still too weak to walk unassisted.

“How did it happen that you were carrying bombs?” Rolto asked Vargo, curiously, as they climbed up the bank.

Vargo explained that the *Tavona* was about to start on another mission when he was ordered to make a search for the lost ships.

“That was lucky for all of us,” said Rolto.

Rex was the first to reach the top of the bank. He took one look and let out a shrill cry of alarm when he saw a line of men advancing at a run towards the three ships. “Hurry,” he yelled. “They’re coming. We shall be cut off.”

They began a race which those who took part were not likely to forget. It was one in which the enemy had a big advantage. They were on their own planet, with muscles adapted to its heavy gravity, whereas the visitors could run no faster than had the soles of their shoes been made of lead. Those who had been weakened by hunger could do little more than plod. It was obvious to Rex almost from the outset that they would lose the race. Gator must have seen what was happening, he thought desperately. Why did he not move the *Tavona* nearer to them? Then he realized his predicament. He would not be able to save them all. He could move the *Tavona*, but not the other two ships, and the *Tavona* was not equipped to carry the combined crews of three ships, numbering a total of seventeen persons. The *Tavona* might be able to lift them, but its compressed air supply, even with the reserve oxygen tanks, would not

be sufficient to carry them for any distance. Even one extra person would make a difference to the endurance range of the space craft.

What finally would have happened is a matter for surmise, but at this juncture, when the Baridians were closing in on them, they stopped, staring at the sky. At the same moment there came to Rex's ears a low rumble, like distant thunder; but unlike thunder it persisted. He, too, looked up, and it did not take him long to locate the source of the awful roar. Still far away, above the horizon, was a cloud of dark objects, as thick as midges over a garden path on a summer evening. At the distance it was impossible to tell what sort of aircraft they were. Apparently the Baridians knew, for they turned away and raced for the embankment, presumably for cover, or shelter.

In a way Rex could find it in his heart to be sorry for them. The defence which they had designed and constructed with so much care, whether they knew it or not, was out of action. He, with the rest, ran on towards the ships, for Gator was standing in the doorway of the *Tavona* beckoning furiously. The party broke up as each member of it hurried to his own ship. Rex heard Vargo call to Rolto and Grantos as they parted: "Go your own way. We have a call to make. Will see you later at home."

By the time he had reached the *Tavona* and had fallen, panting, into his seat, the noise made by the great fleet of approaching aircraft was so deafening as to be terrifying. One by one the others came on board. In a moment Borron had closed the double doors. Gator was ready. The jets screamed, and then the *Tavona* was away in the most crushing take-off Rex had ever experienced. He was barely conscious by the time Gator relieved them of the strain of maximum acceleration. Rex did not complain. He was only thankful that the ship was behaving properly, for he had been conscious of an awful fear that the magnetic field might again be in operation and they would find themselves unable to move. He had of course no idea of what the great fleet of aircraft intended, and he did not want to know; whatever it was he felt sure it would be something devastating. With the nerve-shattering noise of the fleet fading he dared to look out of his window, and to his unspeakable relief saw they were well above it.

Tiger was the first to speak. "I'm glad to be out of that," he said feelingly.

"We were only just in time," murmured Vargo. "Look below."

Rex looked, and saw that the area of the big planet they had just left appeared to be enveloped in a cloud of smoke or steam.

"It's now fairly easy to see what was happening on Barida," went on Tiger. "The people were expecting a bombardment, or perhaps invasion, by a superior force, either from another part of their own planet or possibly from

another world. I'd say that's why we saw no movement in the town. Either it had been evacuated or the inhabitants had gone underground for shelter."

"I think that is a reasonable explanation," agreed Vargo.

"War, war, always war," said the Professor dolefully. "What is happening on Barida might well happen one day on Earth. It seems a pity that a world having got so far in knowledge must risk annihilation by its own inventions."

"You mean nuclear weapons?"

"Of course."

Rex was looking out of the window. "I don't see the other ships," he remarked.

"They are on a different course," explained Vargo. "They are returning to base."

"Aren't we?"

"No. We still have four bombs so I thought we might as well finish what we originally set out to do."

"You mean we are going to Krona, to settle with the dragons?"

"I thought the Professor would wish that."

"You are quite right," confirmed the Professor. "We made a promise to the Kronians that we would return and I would be very upset if we did not keep it. Indeed, we must keep it, because until the people are able to move freely between the villages they will be unable to get the vegetable on which their lives depend."

"And that would be just too bad," observed Tiger. "It's an odd thought that people should pass away as a result of having learned how to prolong their lives."

"I see a moral in that, one which Earth would do well to consider," said the Professor seriously. "By trying to get too much from life one may get nothing."

Silence fell.



CHAPTER XII BACK TO KRONA

THE flight to Krona was delayed through the *Tavona* having to go off the direct course to avoid the tail of a comet. The comet itself was not seen, but Borron, always on the look-out, saw the faintly luminous haze that marked its trail. It was, he said, a stranger to him, and the head was already an astronomical distance away. He would report its entry into the galaxy when he got home, although in all probability it had already been noticed and its orbit plotted. But, he remarked, there was nothing uncommon about this. Comets were a menace that had to be accepted.

Otherwise the trip was made without any trouble, and on arrival at Krona they found such a state of affairs that put all thoughts of comets out of their heads. Not only were the people in a bad way through the failure of their indispensable vegetable, some of the older people having died, and all the others with the exception of the very young being more or less sick, but there were unexpected developments. There was nothing really wrong with the people who were unwell; it was merely that they had become listless from physical weakness.

The position that emerged as a result of conversation with them was this.

When the *Tavona* had left it had been thought it would be possible to pick a few more beans from the plantation, a sort of late second crop; instead, the haulms lay flat, black, like seaweed on a beach after a storm. There could be only one explanation of this. It was the effect of the poison gas that had been discharged by the unknown raiders.

This was only the beginning. It was noticed that dead birds were lying about all over the place. It appeared that they, too, were dependent on the beans. Vargo said that on their previous visit he had been told it was difficult to protect the bean crop from the depredations of birds and small mammals that lived in the forest. To them, of course, the beans were merely food. It was unlikely they realized that this particular food had the property of extending life; but now, deprived of it, they felt the effect in the same way as the people. The older birds were dying off. The flocks of water lovers, the ducks and geese that filled the sky at sundown, were noticeably thinner.

Even this was not the worst. The *Ruxor*, the dragons as Rex called them, had taken to hunting in the forest. It was quite impossible to get to the next village. Some of the younger men who had tried it had been killed and devoured. The dragons had now started to come into the village at night, with the result that people had to sleep on roofs beyond their reach.

“What could be the cause of that?” asked Rex. “The dragons wouldn’t be likely to eat beans.”

The Professor answered. “Maybe not, but they’re feeling the effect of not having them, or rather, the chemical they contain. We may suppose that in the ordinary way creatures that do not actually eat the beans get their supply of the chemical second-hand, as we might say, by eating creatures that do. Thus we see an example of the sort of chain reaction so common in nature. It seems to me that these confounded beans, or the unknown chemical they contain, have the effect of a drug. Once creatures become accustomed to it they must have it, and will go to any lengths to get it, even if they are unaware that their lives may depend on it.”

Tiger stepped in. “If the dragons have become distributed in the forest it’s going to be difficult to deal with them. Our plan depended on finding them concentrated in the lake. We can’t hope to wipe them out one at a time.”

The Professor shook his head. “I’m afraid I’ve been rather stupid over this. It’s a situation that might well have been expected. The life and condition of everything that lives is governed by the food supply. In ancient times it was not uncommon for an entire tribe, or nation, finding its food running short, to pick up all its belongings and migrate *en masse* to another country where more food was available. This is seldom necessary today. Indeed, it would hardly be possible. But birds and even some animals do it regularly. At least, that is the

generally accepted theory to account for the migration of birds. The swallows and swifts that live on insects know perfectly well from long experience that they wouldn't find any in Britain in the winter, so off they go to Africa."

"There is one bright spot in a gloomy picture," put in Vargo. "The raiders, slave hunters as we suppose them to be, haven't been back."

Tiger resumed, somewhat impatiently. "Well, what are we going to do about all this? It looks as if we've taken on a bigger job than we allowed for."

"Obviously, the first thing to do is get the place back to normal," replied the Professor.

"How are you going to do that?"

"There is only one way. We must fetch some beans from another village. That shouldn't be difficult. It would alleviate the immediate danger."

Vargo decided. "That is the thing to do. It should not take long. I will speak to two of the fittest men here and ask them to come with me and guide the ship to the place most likely to have a reserve stock of beans."

This being settled Vargo went off, and a little while later Rex saw him walking towards the *Tavona* with two natives. The ship took off and disappeared over the tree tops.

Those left behind could only wait, discussing the situation, particularly the best way of disposing of the dragon menace.

"I would very much like to see one of these uncouth beasts alive," said the Professor.

"With any luck I should be able to show you one dead," returned Tiger, drily. "I've seen quite enough of them on their feet."

"If we throw bombs on them I may never have an opportunity to see a complete specimen."

"So much the better. Take my advice and be content to see one that can't bite. I hope the *Tavona* comes back in time for us to finish the job in daylight. I don't want to spend the night on a roof."

Rex, thinking he might benefit from a little exercise while he had the opportunity, wandered away, looking for anything of interest. He did not go far from the village and the sound of roaring in the forest sent him back to where his father and Toby were seated on the ground.

"The dragons sound as if they're upset about something," he remarked, jokingly.

"We can hear them," returned Tiger.

Rex looked around. "Where's the Professor?"

Tiger looked up sharply. "Isn't he with you?"

“No. I haven’t seen him for some time.”

“When did you last see him?”

“It must have been nearly half an hour ago.”

“Where?”

Rex pointed. “He was strolling in that direction.”

“That’s the way to the track that runs through the forest.”

“That’s right.”

Tiger got to his feet, picking up his rifle. “The inquisitive old fool,” he muttered harshly. “I bet I know what he’s doing.”

“What?”

“You heard what he said. He’s gone to have a look at a dragon.”

“By the noise they’re making I’d say he’s found one,” said Toby, soberly.

“We’d better find out,” said Tiger, shortly. “Why must he go looking for trouble.” Snapping a cartridge into the breech of his rifle he set off at a fast walk towards the track.

The others followed.

Reaching the entrance to the forest path they paused to survey it before proceeding, although as the light beneath the trees was dim it was not possible to see far. The fearsome roaring of the dragons had increased rather than diminished. Rex noticed that while most of the sound came from a fair distance, in the direction of the lake, one of the creatures seemed to be not so far away; but he couldn’t see it.

“He must be in here,” said Tiger, meaning, of course, the Professor.

“It sounds to me more as if he went in here and the overgrown lizards have caught up with him,” replied Toby, looking worried.

Tiger, his rifle held at the ready, advanced a few paces, halted again and let out a hail.

To Rex’s surprise the call was answered immediately, from no great distance away it seemed.

“What the devil can he be up to,” muttered Tiger, looking astonished. “Are you all right?” he shouted.

“No, I am not,” came the answer.

“At least he’s alive and able to speak,” observed Toby.

“We’d better see what he’s doing,” decided Tiger, and strode on down the track.

Rex, supposing there could be no danger between them and the Professor, did not hesitate to follow; and in this supposition he was right—more or less.

But he was certainly not prepared for the spectacle that awaited them when, after covering some fifty or sixty yards, they rounded a corner.

At first he did not see the Professor, probably because his entire attention was taken up by a dragon, and more particularly, what it was doing. Standing erect on its hind legs and claspng the tree with its front ones it appeared to be trying to rock it, or push it over. Seen thus, the size and shape of the monster could really be appreciated, and the thought struck Rex that if in prehistoric times beasts like this had roamed Earth it was easy to understand why dragons featured in legends, and a man who slew one with a sword or lance became a national hero.

He raised his eyes to discover what the brute was looking at, and when he saw it—well, if his hair didn't actually stand on end he experienced that sensation. It was the Professor. With his camera hanging round his neck he was sitting astride a branch, about thirty feet up, only just out of the dragon's reach. The behaviour of the beast was now explained. It was either trying to shake him off, or push the tree over; and it seemed likely to succeed, for using its entire gigantic weight it was causing it to bend. Near the foot of the tree lay a bag which the Professor in his haste must have dropped.

He had certainly got his wish, was the thought that flashed through Rex's mind. Not only was he seeing a live dragon but he was getting a closer view of one than was comfortable.

"Stand back and be ready to run," rapped out Tiger, raising his rifle.

"You can't miss," said Toby.

"I may not kill it outright. The brute will take some killing. If I only wound it we can expect a charge."

This, to Rex, made sense, and he followed the advice by retreating to a safer distance.

The rifle crashed.

The dragon's jaws, which had been agape in a bellow, snapped shut, cutting off the noise. But it did not move. It did at least stop rocking the tree. Tiger fired again. The shot had the effect of causing the monster to slide down the tree and look around for what was hitting it. Tiger fired yet again. This time the great lizard shivered and sank flat on the ground with blood slavering from its jaws. But it was still far from dead, for it struggled as if trying to get on its feet.

"There's no killing the devils," growled Tiger, reloading. Then, raising his voice, he yelled at the Professor, who was moving as if he intended coming down: "Stay where you are. He isn't finished yet."

So saying he walked closer and fired again. All that happened was, the

great brute sank to the ground, but its jaws continued to snap.

A movement beyond it, farther up the path, caught Rex's eyes, and a cry of warning broke from his lips when he saw another dragon bundling ponderously towards the scene.

Then came the final touch to what was fast becoming something more in the nature of a nightmare than reality. It may have been that the Professor, seeing the second dragon coming, decided to take a chance of getting away before matters became more difficult. At all events, in spite of Tiger's warning to keep still he reached for the trunk of the tree as if getting ready to descend. Trying to reach too far he slipped. For two or three seconds he hung in space, kicking desperately, trying to get back astride the branch. In this he failed. Then his hold gave way and he dropped like a brick to land fair and square, fortunately feet first, on the horror underneath. This at least broke his fall, which in itself might have caused an injury. Like a ball he bounced off the scaly hide and in a flash came flying down the track, all arms and legs as the saying is.

"Run," he shouted. "I'm coming."

This advice was quite unnecessary. They waited until he had caught up with them whereupon they all raced down the path together. Not until the open ground was in sight did they waste time by pausing to look back; then they were able to relax, for there was no sign of the second dragon following them. A blood-curdling noise of snarling suggested it was attacking the beast Tiger had shot.

As they walked on, Tiger, mopping his forehead, turned to the Professor. "What sort of lunacy is this?" he demanded angrily. "Are you stark, staring mad, coming here alone, without a weapon, knowing what was at the end of the path?"

The Professor, in spite of looking shaken, managed to force a smile. "I confess I was foolish," he said meekly. "And I apologize for putting you to so much inconvenience——"

"Inconvenience! That's putting it mildly," retorted Tiger. "You might have cost all of us our lives. What in the name of creation induced you to do such a thing?"

"To tell the truth I was hoping to find an egg."

"An egg! Is this a time for birds' nesting?"

"I wasn't thinking of birds."

"Then what *were* you thinking of?"

"Lizards."

Tiger stopped dead. “Lizards?”

“Yes. Normally, as no doubt you know, lizards breed by laying eggs.”

“You—went—looking for—a dragon’s egg?”

“Exactly.”

“For what purpose? Aren’t you getting enough to eat?”

“I would certainly not eat a dragon’s egg. I was thinking of the Zoological Gardens.”

“What have they got to do with it?”

“The thought occurred to me what a wonderful thing it would be if they could add a dragon to their collection. As we couldn’t very well take a fully grown specimen, an egg, in the hope that it would hatch, might be the answer. Imagine what an attraction it would be. Every boy and girl in the country would go hot foot to see a baby dragon.”

Tiger looked at the others helplessly. “Can you beat that? He wanted to take home a dragon’s egg to incubate.” He turned back to the Professor. “I take it you didn’t get one.”

“Unfortunately, no. I couldn’t even find one; not that I was given much opportunity. However, I may have succeeded in my second purpose.”

“And what, may I ask, was that?”

“A photograph. If possible a close-up.”

“Of a dragon.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“For my records. After all, my dear fellow, it isn’t every day one encounters a living dragon, and I thought I might never have another opportunity for a snapshot.”

“Did you get one?”

“Yes, indeed. I got very close to a magnificent beast, the one you shot; but unfortunately at the click of the camera it turned its head and saw me. From the speed with which it acted the brute must have been hungry, and I had to find refuge in a tree. It was a most uncomfortable situation, and I was very relieved when I heard you calling.”

“I can believe that,” retorted Tiger.

“Ah well,” sighed the Professor. “I don’t know why I do these things. I can only say, as the French put it, that’s the sort of man I am.”

“Then the sooner you become another sort of man the better for all of us. Don’t do it again. If you must, you should at least warn us of your intention.”

“I will remember it,” promised the Professor, contritely.

Rex looked up. “Here comes the *Tavona*.”

“With, I hope, a sack or two of beans,” rejoined Tiger. “We should now be able to give that infestation of dragons something to holler about.”



CHAPTER XIII

A LIGHT IN THE NIGHT

IT soon transpired that Vargo and his Kronian guides had been able to beg or borrow several large baskets of beans, which put the natives in good heart, for these they said would see them through the lean period until another crop was raised. There were not as many mouths as there had been, and it was now learned that owing to the warm moist climate it was possible to raise on Krona as many as four crops of corn or vegetables a year.

“These people would be wise to forget about long lives and return to a normal diet,” was the Professor’s opinion.

“All right, now that’s fixed how about settling with the dragons?” said Tiger.

“You would like to do that today?” queried Vargo.

“Why not? It would only take a few minutes. We don’t want the brutes prowling about the village all night. It’s still daylight. We could do the job before dark and examine the result tomorrow.”

“As you wish,” agreed Vargo. “We’ll leave it as late as possible to give any of the beasts who are in the forest time to get back to the lake for the night. I imagine that is their habit. Meanwhile I’ll tell the people not to be alarmed if

they hear a loud bang.” He walked off to where the people were busy distributing the life-saving vegetables.

“I’ll handle this bombing business,” said Tiger. “There’s no need for anyone else to come. It won’t be pretty to watch. In fact, it’s likely to be a gory mess.”

“It seems a pity to have to do it,” lamented the Professor.

“I see nothing else for it if these people are to survive. There’s nothing they can do about it, and at the rate the brutes seem to be increasing it can only be a question of time before the whole planet is overrun. There have been some pests of one sort or another in Earth, and that includes man-eating lions and tigers, but I doubt if there’s ever been anything like this.”

Vargo came back. “I’m ready if you are,” he told Tiger.

“I shall wait here,” said the Professor.

Rex and Toby, after a brief hesitation, decided to stay with him.

They watched the *Tavona* move off, take a little altitude and head for the direction of the lake. Presently there came two shattering explosions and a column of smoke rose sluggishly into the sultry air. After a little while the ship reappeared and landed at its usual place. Tiger stepped out and rejoined the others.

“That should have done the job,” he affirmed. “About time, too. The lake was fairly crawling with dragons. Far more than I expected to see. Anyway, it’s gone.”

“What’s gone?” asked Rex.

“The lake. The rush of water that followed the bomb bursts swept away the accumulation of muck, dead trees and stuff, that was holding it up. Any dragons that survived must have gone with it. With no lake there should be no more trouble from that quarter.”

“That’s capital,” approved the Professor. “As you know, I dislike killing anything, but that I think was the least we could do for these harmless people after the hospitality they have shown us. I suggest we spend a comfortable night here and leave for home in the morning.”

No one raised any objection, and they were all walking slowly towards the house that had been allotted to them when a sudden outcry arose behind them. They turned to see some men who had been clearing the bean plantation running towards the village in something like panic. One or two were looking up as they ran.

Rex, naturally, looked up for the cause of the disturbance, and what he saw brought a cry from his lips. Dropping diagonally towards the village were four

space craft.

“So the raiders have come back after all,” muttered Tiger.

“With reinforcements,” observed Toby.

“Yes, those are the same ships,” confirmed Vargo. “I know of no other ships that shape.”

“The time seems to have come for more drastic treatment than bows and arrows,” announced Tiger, grimly, hitching forward the rifle which, as usual, he was carrying.

“What are you going to do?” asked the Professor, sharply.

“Teach ’em a lesson they won’t forget in a hurry.”

“Do you mean you’re going to shoot at them?”

“I am. A few holes should make them think again.”

“But you can’t do that,” protested the Professor.

“Can’t I? It’ll be easier to prevent them from landing than deal with them on the ground.”

“The Kronians are coming out with their bows and arrows,” put in Rex.

“A lot of use they’ll be. They might as well try to stop a tank. If we’re to stop them landing it will have to be with bullets.”

“They’ll plug any holes you make,” said Vargo.

“I can make holes faster than they can plug ’em,” asserted Tiger.

“This is awful,” cried the Professor.

“It will be if they land. They’re the attackers, not us. By driving them away I reckon to save casualties on both sides. I’ll go for the ship with the blue ring round it. That seems to be the leader.” Tiger raised the rifle slowly to his shoulder.

“The bullets may not pierce the metal,” said Vargo, doubtfully.

“The noise they make when they hit it should give the people inside something to think about, anyhow,” answered Tiger, and with that he fired his first shot.

Rex distinctly heard the smack of the bullet, but as far as he could see it had no effect although the big ship was well within effective range.

Tiger fired again, and kept on firing, the bullets smacking against the polished metal skin of the ship. At the fourth shot a thin jet of something squirted from below. The ship stopped, hung for a moment, and then began to rise, gathering velocity. The other three followed it.

“You’ve done it,” cried Rex delightedly.

“Watch out for gas,” warned Vargo.

“Now what will happen?” questioned the Professor.

“What can happen?” asked Rex.

“I was thinking that if the ship has been punctured in several places the pressure inside is bound to fall, in which case, if nothing worse, it will not be able to get home—unless, of course, the crew has some means of repairing the damage.”

“We’ve driven them off, that’s all I care,” growled Tiger. “They weren’t prepared for what I gave them. They must be wondering how the Kronians, who a short while ago were so helpless, have suddenly produced an effective weapon.”

“I still think what you did was harsh,” said the Professor.

“Desperate occasions call for desperate remedies,” returned Tiger, tritely. “The ships that get home will report that Krona is no longer safe for raiding. That’s the main thing.”

Rex was still watching the ship that had been struck. It had lost velocity and seemed to be wandering. The other three kept close to it.

Then it appeared to falter. It began to drop, faster and faster. “Look!” he cried. “It’s out of control.”

The remark was unnecessary. All eyes were on it, and followed it down until it disappeared from sight into the trees. The noise of the crash as it struck into them came plainly to their ears. Nobody spoke as the other three ships hung low over the spot. Eventually they made off, gathering velocity, and faded into the gathering dusk.

“Dreadful,” said the Professor, in a shocked voice. “We shouldn’t have done it.”

“It’s done, so there’s no point in arguing about it,” replied Tiger. “They came here bent on mischief so they have only themselves to blame.”

“We ought to try to reach the ship that crashed.”

“You certainly won’t do that tonight,” declared Tiger emphatically. “You know what the forest is like. I doubt very much if you’d get near it in daylight. How could you hope to find it, anyway.”

“The *Tavona* could find it from above,” put in Vargo.

“Even so it couldn’t land.”

“No, I don’t think it would be possible to land.”

“There might be injured men in it,” Toby pointed out.

“At the rate the ship hit the ground I’d say that’s highly improbable,” came back Tiger.

“The least we can do is make sure of that, if it’s humanly possible.”

“I couldn’t agree more. But what can we do in the dark?”

“Nothing.”

“I will take the *Tavona* over in the morning as soon as it’s light,” stated Vargo. “If nothing else we might find out where these people come from. Krona may not be the only planet on which they are making raids.”

There the matter was left. Leaving the Kronians, who were still standing about with their bows and arrows as if they didn’t know what to make of it all, they walked slowly to their lodging, being joined on the way by Gator and Borron, who had watched the attempted invasion from the *Tavona*. They had brought some food with them, but no one had much appetite for a meal and after a while they lay down to sleep. Rex dropped off pondering the recent strange events and wondering what fresh problems the morning would bring. The Universe, it seemed, was made up of problems; but perhaps that was to be expected.

As it happened he did not have to wait until morning for the next development in their latest adventure. Some time during the night a babble of excited voices took them outside to discover the reason. From a group of Kronians it was learned that a bright light had been seen to drop from the sky. After circling for a while low down it appeared to fall in the forest on or near the spot where the raiding ship had crashed. It had not been seen to go up again.

“Now what goes on?” said Tiger. “It sounds to me as if there might be more devilment afoot.”

“We had better watch, prepared to leave quickly,” advised Vargo.

They watched for some time without seeing anything of the light, and were about to return to their beds having decided the Kronians had seen nothing more disturbing than a falling meteor, when a brilliant white light appeared over the trees, ascending with rapidly increasing velocity. They watched it until it was a mere pinpoint that finally vanished.

“Now what are we to make of that?” inquired Tiger.

Vargo answered. “I think the most probable explanation is, hard as it is to believe, someone, or something, has been down to the fallen ship.”

“But if it was decided to try to rescue the crew why didn’t they do so at once, instead of waiting until now?” queried Rex.

“It may be they were afraid to come near in daylight,” returned Tiger. “Having seen what happened to their leader they were taking no chances of meeting the same fate.”

Vargo agreed this was a reasonable explanation.

“But what could they do if they did come down?” asked Rex. “They couldn’t land on the tops of the trees.”

“They might have landed on the fallen ship,” offered the Professor. “Their ships are large, and it seemed to me that the one brought down was somewhat larger than the others. The top surface might be large enough to support a smaller ship.”

Vargo thought it might be possible. “I didn’t consider that or we might have tried it ourselves,” he added.

“I’m glad you didn’t think of it,” said Tiger. “We’re better where we are.”

“There is nothing we can do in the dark, but we will go over when daylight comes to see if anything can be done.”

“I’d say that anything that could be done has already been done by the ship that just went down,” put in Toby. “It must have been a space craft. It couldn’t have been anything else.”

No one disputed this.

“We might as well finish our night’s rest,” suggested the Professor; whereupon they returned to their quarters and settled down with something more to exercise their minds.

They were on the move again by the time the stars were paling in the sky, and after a cup of tea and some biscuits made their way to the *Tavona* for the task they had in mind. A thorough search of the fast lightening sky revealed no sign of any raiders.

In a matter of minutes they were over the objective, having had no difficulty in locating it, for seen from above it was larger even than they had supposed. It lay the right side up, and from a tangle of broken branches had crashed its way through the trees to the ground. Gator took the *Tavona* down to within a few feet. There was no sign of life, and as far as it was possible to see, the ship did not appear to be badly damaged.

Gator said he thought there would be no difficulty in putting the *Tavona* down on the broad, dome-shaped, upper part of the ship, if this was what everyone wanted. It was left to Vargo, who was really in charge of the expedition, to make the decision, and he, when there was no dissenting voice, gave the order to land. After a little trouble, the result of the landing platform being slightly tilted, this was effected, and the *Tavona* was brought to rest on the fallen foe.

Vargo opened the doors. “I will go down alone,” he said. “When I am satisfied that there is no danger I will call, and anyone who wishes may follow me.” So saying he stepped out on to the dome, and from there slid gently down it to the entrance steps of the fallen ship, from where he disappeared inside. He

was out again almost at once, to call up to the watchers that there was no one there. The ship was empty and he would take the opportunity to examine it.

Gator, who as a space captain would naturally be interested in all forms of space craft, went down.

“So our guess wasn’t far wrong,” remarked Tiger, while they waited. “The raiders came down and picked up the crew, injured or otherwise.”

“The big question is now, will they come back,” said the Professor.

“One thing is quite certain; the *Tavona* won’t be able to remain here indefinitely on the chance of that happening,” returned Tiger. “We’ve done all we can for the people here. With the dragons out of the way they are free to move to another part of the planet if they feel like it, and as we’ve got what we came for we might as well press on home.”

The Professor agreed.

After a little while Vargo and Gator rejoined their own ship, Vargo observing there was nothing unusual about the one below them. It was large, but of orthodox design. However, he had found one item of interest. It was a chart, or route map, which on close examination provided the information that was of particular interest to the crew of the *Tavona*. It was not unlike the one used by Borron. From a planet in a distant constellation lines radiated out like the spokes of a bicycle wheel. The centre, it could safely be assumed, was the world from which the raiders had come, and the lines marked the courses they had taken. One of these ran to the planet on which they were standing—Krona.

“Do you know this planet which seems to be the headquarters of these raiding ships?” the Professor asked Vargo.

It turned out to be in a region unexplored by any member of the *Tavona*’s crew, and, as far as they knew, by any other unit of their fleet.

Said the Professor, tentatively: “I suppose there’s no hope of our going there to rescue the people who were carried off from here?”

“I wouldn’t consider it,” replied Vargo. “In any case the people may not be there,” he added, as an afterthought.

The Professor’s eyes explored Vargo’s face. “Have you some reason for saying that?”

Vargo hesitated. “I haven’t mentioned this before, but hasn’t it occurred to you that these raiders may have come here for the same purpose as ourselves, although not perhaps in the first instance. Let us suppose they made a casual call. The Kronians received them hospitably, as they did us, because that is their nature. If the visitors learned, as no doubt they would, about the astonishing longevity of their hosts, it is possible that they carried some of them off to learn the secret.”

“How?”

“By blood tests, or some other form of surgical operation; perhaps an anatomical inspection, under which the victims might have died.”

After a short silence the Professor said: “I didn’t think of that.”

“In my opinion,” went on Vargo, “the answer to the whole thing lies in the planet itself. I feel sure there must be here some rare element traces of which are picked up by most forms of vegetable life, but which is particularly concentrated in the beans and produces their unusual colouration. For that reason I think it would not only be dangerous to attempt a rescue, but a waste of time, because without their diet of beans the people carried off must already be dead.”

“I am sure you are right,” averred the Professor. “My congratulations on the way you have worked it out. I would like to see what has happened to the lair of the dragons, following which, after a few last words with our amiable hosts, we might as well return home.”

“Now it’s broad daylight we might as well call on the dragons right away, before going back to the village,” proposed Tiger.

Thus it was agreed. As the ship had no distance to go, and altitude was unnecessary, they did not trouble to close the doors. In fact, Rex sat on the top step, enjoying a panoramic view of the planet. As far as he was concerned the adventure was over.

CHAPTER XIV

FAREWELL TO KRONA

WHEN, in a matter of minutes, the *Tavona* reached the Lake of Dragons, there was not a living creature in sight. Rex found himself looking down into a deep depression of dark blue mud. It was evident that if any of the monstrous lizards had survived the explosions they had either abandoned the place, been swept away on the flood when the dam burst, or had sunk into the accumulated sludge of ages. It was not what he had expected to see. Apart from the depth of the lake, and it was much deeper than he had supposed, there seemed to be something peculiar about the surface. For one thing it carried a faint sheen, as if it had been polished. What surprised him still more was a cobweb-like pattern of cracks, as if the mud was already drying out. A tenuous mist hung over the place preventing a clear view.

“A good thing that I got my photograph when I did,” remarked the Professor cheerfully. “I must confess to curiosity as to the nature of that mud. The colour must result from an unusual ingredient, probably something soluble, in considerable quantity.”

“Some form of copper,” suggested Rex. “Copper sulphate is blue,” he added, remembering experiments in the lab., at school.

“So are many other compounds containing copper. But in that case one would expect to find similar deposits around the copper-bearing areas of Earth, having the same effect on life as here. But we needn’t waste time trying to guess the answer. I have a sample of the soil, and when I get home analysis should tell us all we want to know.”

“Why should that mist be forming on the site of the lake?” asked Rex. “Why should it be so patchy, and why should there be none anywhere else?”

“It isn’t mist,” answered Tiger.

“Then what is it?”

“Smoke.”

“How do you know?”

“I can smell it.”

“You are right, Group-Captain,” put in the Professor, who was using his binoculars. “A mist would form evenly over the whole area. What we see is coming up through the cracks. We might ask ourselves why should the mud have cracked so quickly. It could hardly have dried out in the time.”

“Then what’s the answer?”

“There can be only one. Heat.”

“Heat? From what?”

“Fire.”

“I see no fire.”

“Nor I. Which means it must be underground.”

“How do you account for that?”

“The depression we see below us is either the crater of an extinct volcano or else the crust of the planet, at this particular spot, is very thin.”

“If that’s the explanation the volcano couldn’t have been extinct.”

“I used the word ill-advisedly. I should have said it was *presumed* to be extinct. If you ask me why should it suddenly become alive my answer would be the skin was broken by our bombs.”

Vargo stepped in. “I think you are right. Unless I am mistaken the cracks are widening, and something that looks like bubbles is now seeping up through them.”

“This is what comes of interfering with things we don’t understand,” rejoined the Professor. “If we have started off a volcano, the village, instead of being safe, will be in greater danger than ever.”

“Don’t you think we should get a bit farther away, in case it blows up,” suggested Rex, anxiously.

“It doesn’t necessarily follow that it will break into open eruption,” said the Professor. “This sort of demonstration is not uncommon on Earth. There are hot water and mud geysers in New Zealand and America. Also on a number of islands in the South Indian Ocean where the ground is always smoking; and that has been going on ever since the islands were discovered without getting any worse. All the same, I agree it would be wise to retire to a safer distance.”

The *Tavona* had hardly begun to move when its departure was expedited by a column of blue steam which shot high into the air.

“That’s the best thing that could happen,” declared Tiger.

“Why?” inquired Rex.

“Because if pressure—and there’s obviously plenty of that judging from the height of that steam geyser—I say if pressure can be relieved she’s less likely to blow her top off.”

Vargo was standing in the doorway studying the sky. “If what I think is about to happen, does happen, we can expect worse trouble here.”

“How do you make that out?”

“The clouds are deepening. If they break there will be a storm of rain.”



“Well?”

“According to the Kronians the lake was formed by the accidental damming of a watercourse. The watercourse seems to have run dry, but heavy rain may reproduce it. If there is fire, or molten rock, under the bed of the lake, I needn't tell you what the result would be if water suddenly poured in on it. That is what is assumed to have happened, in 1883, at the island of Krakatoa, in the Malay Archipelago. The island disappeared in a cloud of smoke and steam with an explosion that was heard three thousand miles away. The tidal wave that was started travelled seven thousand miles and killed thirty-five thousand people.”

“You do think of some nice things, I must say,” growled Tiger.

“If it happened on Earth it could happen here. We should feel very foolish if, in order to save the people here from one danger, we generated another far

worse.”

“We acted for the best.”

“Of course we did; but the Kronians may not look at it like that. As it is I have an uneasy feeling that the source of the element that gave them their long lives may have been in the bed of the lake. Judging from the colour of the water, the mud, the foliage around it and the dragons themselves, it was certainly concentrated here. Should it be destroyed, or scattered far and wide in an explosion——”

“We should have done more harm than good,” put in Toby.

“It would be just too bad for the Kronians,” said Tiger, grimly. “What are we going to do about it?”

“We can’t undo what we have done, that is quite certain,” stated Vargo. “We ourselves are in danger here, so the first thing to do is remove ourselves beyond the reach of anything that could happen. We could then give the matter more thought. There is no point in taking unnecessary risks.”

“That makes sense to me,” agreed Tiger.

Gator did not wait for orders, and the *Tavona* left the vicinity.

For a little while, from what was considered a safe height and distance, the spacemen watched to see if the lake boiled over, as Tiger put it. While doing so they discussed what now looked like a new peril, and came to the conclusion they should warn the people of the village that it would be advisable for them to leave their homes and settle in another, at least for the time being. The dragons were no longer a menace, and it seemed improbable, if not impossible, that they would ever return. It was estimated that the number of people who remained in the village was fewer than 100, so in an emergency it would be possible to remove them, a few at a time, in the ship. This could be done at a low altitude and so make no call on the liquid air storage tanks. They would see how the Kronians felt about it.

With this in mind the *Tavona* returned to the village and landed on its usual spot close to the houses. To their surprise only two men could be seen. Usually everyone turned out to watch the ship in flight.

“How very odd,” remarked Tiger, as they stepped out. “What are we to make of this?”

“I will ask them,” replied Vargo.

This he did, and after a brief conversation he was able to tell the others that hearing the bombs explode—as they had been warned—assuming the forest path to be safe they had left the village for another where they had friends who would support them with beans until they could raise their own crop. The two men who had remained had done so in order to explain what had happened

when the ship returned. They would now follow the others.

In fact, by the time Vargo had finished talking the two Kronians were already on their way.

“What extraordinary behaviour,” said the Professor. “Here we are, having been to all this trouble to make the place safe for them and now they run away without thanking us or even saying good-bye. Why? What reason could they have had for that?”

“The two men said they had gone to a place where more beans would be available,” reminded Vargo.

“But why the hurry? We had brought them plenty to go on with.”

“Seems queer. There must have been another reason why they should push off in such a hurry,” said Tiger.

As he finished speaking the ground under their feet seemed to quiver. They looked at each other.

“What was that?” asked Rex.

“An earth tremor, of course,” answered the Professor, sharply. “There may have been others while we were in the air. If so, I wonder if that is the real reason why the village was so suddenly evacuated.”

“They may have had experience of volcanic eruptions,” said Vargo, thoughtfully. “It is possible that this area is subject to such disturbances. We know the skin of the planet must be very thin in the cavity left by the lake. It might be the same everywhere.”

“In that case the sooner we’re off it the better,” said Tiger.

“Look!” Rex pointed.

From the area of the lake a coil of black smoke was spiralling upward. They were all staring at it when down came the rain. It was not ordinary rain. It was the sort that is usually called a cloudburst.

“Let’s get out of this,” requested Tiger tersely. At the same time there came another tremor, definite and more prolonged.

Nothing more was necessary to hasten their departure. There was a rush for the ship. The doors were closed and in a few minutes the planet was no more than a grey shape fading in the downpour.

“What a pity,” said the Professor from his seat. “I would have liked to watch what happened at the lake when the water poured in.”

As this would obviously be impossible, even if they had been prepared to take the risk of going down, there was no comment. Gator did not stop, and having passed through a cloud layer that must have been nearly a mile thick, there was general relief when the *Tavona* burst out into a clear sky. Below, as

far as the eye could see, lay a blanket of cloud that cut the planet from view, so it was only possible to guess what might be happening. As Tiger remarked, drily, it was perhaps as well they didn't know, or they might have it on their consciences that they, with the bombs, had been responsible.

For a little while, from far above, they looked for a break in the cloud, but failing to find one the *Tavona* went on its way, homeward bound.

* * * * *

In due course the ship landed on Mars to find Rolto, and Grantos, the commander of the first ship that had been reported missing, already there. Rolto seemed to be in a better humour than usual and thanked them for their rescue work on Barida. There was some conversation but nothing was said about Krona, although Vargo would have to give full particulars in his report to headquarters.

The Earth party stayed on for a few days, the Professor and Tiger inspecting the work of restoration and Toby doing some medical work, which gave Rex an opportunity to spend the time with Morino. He did not know whether to be glad or sorry when he learned that permission for her to visit Earth had been refused. In one way it would have been pleasant, and probably fun; but he could foresee complications. He felt that the Wise Men of the High Council may have realized this when they decided that the time was not yet ripe for interplanetary visits of this nature. Should he and Morino get married there would be children, and the question would arise, were they to be brought up on Earth or on Mars? Later, when such travel became commonplace, it would be no more than moving from one continent to another.

So the *Tavona* took the Earth party home, where the space travellers settled down to their usual occupations.

* * * * *

As to the life-prolonging vegetable, to the Professor's bitter disappointment his attempt to raise it at home was a complete failure. The sample of soil he had collected revealed, on analysis, as he had suspected, traces of an element which he could not identify. This, evidently, was essential to the growth of the blue bean, for seeds planted in the soil the Professor had brought home, in pots in the greenhouse, germinated freely; but as soon as they were put out in ordinary garden soil they wilted and died. Seeds planted in various soils found on Earth merely rotted away without attempting to put up a shoot.

“So there goes our hope of living for another hundred years,” said the Professor, dolefully, when he abandoned his experiments. Then he pushed up his spectacles and chuckled. “With the way our world is going perhaps it’s just as well,” he went on cheerfully. “For men of my age it becomes more and more difficult to keep pace with events. Ah well, life on Earth could be worse. We have seen some remarkable worlds in our travels, good, bad and indifferent, but I still have to find one that I’d care to exchange for our own.”

Rex grinned. “At least we know where we are.”

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Worlds of Wonder—More Adventures in Space* by Capt. W.E. (William Earl) Johns.]