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# fantastic

## ADVENTURES



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CHILDREN  
OF THE GOLDEN AMAZON by THORNTON  
AYRE

VOLUME 5  
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To be enslaved by the Mercutians was a terrible thing

# CHILDREN OF THE GOLDEN AMAZON

By

John Russell Fearn

Writing under the pseudonym Thorton Ayre.

Illustration by Frank R. Paul.

First published *Fantastic Adventures*, April 1943.

This is one of four *Golden Amazon* stories which were collected, turned into a novel, and reprinted in *Toronto Star Weekly*.

*The Golden Amazon and her two children were seeking the secret of life, and in an amazing scientific cavern they found it—but others sought the secret, too . . .*

The stranded space pilot paused at the edge of the little clearing and mopped his streaming face. Ahead of him stretched the same view he had encountered since he had landed in these sweltering Venusian Hotlands three hours before. . . . Trees, mightily tall, lushlike ground interlaced with vivid streams of color. And everywhere the overpowering, crushing heat and the gray, molten sky permitting a blinding shaft of sunlight ever and again. To an Earthman, unaccustomed to the planet, Venus was close to the gates of hell.

The pilot swore to himself, then at a sudden sound, the breaking of twigs underfoot, he swung round. For a moment he caught a brief vision of somebody in white, then the trees closed in again.

“Hey!” he shouted. “Hey, there, wait a minute!”

He dived into the undergrowth and within a few minutes came unexpectedly upon a slender girl picking her way with surprising skill through the labyrinth. She was but lightly attired in a white frock which threw the perfection of her young figure into enchanting relief. Her hair was black as carbon dust; her eyes violet blue, a coloring enhanced by the smooth brownness of her skin everywhere it was exposed.

“This is—unexpected,” she said in surprise, indulging in a scrutiny of her own and surveying the pilot’s ruggedly chiseled face and strong figure in gray shirt and breeches.

“I’m Barry Waltham, United States Lines,” he explained. “Something went wrong with my machine and— Well, I came down. But who in cosmos are you? As cool as icewater in this hellish dump!”

“I’m a survivor,” she said, after a pause. “Since we’ll need names, you can call me Dorothy Lake. The Trans-Saturn express crashed here three days ago and since then I have been living on fruit and hot water and trying to find my way to Hotlands Center. If I can once find it I’ll be okay.”

“Yeah . . .” Waltham’s eyes traveled in some puzzlement over her immaculate attire. “Yes, I suppose so,” he agreed. “But how do you know if you’re headed in the right direction?”

She thrust forth her bronzed bare arm and he smiled ruefully as he saw the jeweled watch compass strapped round her wrist.

“Due west,” she said. “I’m hoping to make it while this seven-twenty-hour-day lasts.”

“Unarmed and alone?” he asked doubtfully. “It won’t be any picnic. If the Hotlanders find you they’ll prove pretty rough. Look, I’ve got a flame gun. How about us moving together?”

She shrugged. “Why not? I don’t suppose that in this progressive age introductions are necessary. Come on. . . .”

They started off together and Waltham found himself hard put to it to keep up with the girl as she hurried on through the tangled wilderness. At last, exhausted, he called a halt. The girl nodded and relaxed against a tree, smiling rather oddly.

“Not in very good condition, are you?” she asked innocently.

“Oh, I don’t know. I— Say, is that water over there?” Waltham broke off, staring through the undergrowth. “Yes, it is! I’ll be back in a minute.”

He was away some little time and when he returned he had no water in his flask. Instead he seemed to be settling his radio and provision equipment more firmly on his shoulders.

“I was wrong,” he said, settling down again.

“Took you a long time to discover your mistake, didn’t it?”

“Sorry. I went a bit further just to make sure. . . .”

The girl said nothing: then abruptly she stood up again.

“We’re wasting useful daylight sitting here. Come on.”

---

With a grunt Waltham rose and followed her. She seemed to be preoccupied all of a sudden for for the next two miles of vegetation-choked trail she said not a word—then at a sudden crackling of undergrowth from behind both she and Waltham swung round.

“Reach!” a voice ordered, and it was followed by the appearance of four grimy men from the vegetation, the leader holding a flame gun and the others bars of iron. They wore the dirty tropical rigout favored by rocket hands.

“Yeah,” the leader said, eyeing Waltham, “I mean you—and the girl, whoever she is.”

“She has nothing to do with it—”

“No?” Cold eyes swept the girl as she stood with her hands slightly raised. The leader went over to where she was standing, but he had hardly reached her before her hands dropped with lightning swiftness and settled about his wrists. With one savage movement she bent his gun hand backwards. He dropped the weapon with a scream of pain as his wrist bone snapped. But the girl didn’t stop here. Still gripping his other wrist, she swung him round violently and then planted her right fist clean in his jaw. He dropped to the loam like a poleaxed bull and didn’t get up again, either.

“What the—” Waltham twirled round and dived for the nearest man with a crowbar. For the next few minutes they were both at it hammer and tongs, and out of the corner of his eye Waltham caught a glimpse of the girl lashing out with stinging force.

First she knocked one man out, then picking up the crowbar she bent it into a U across her bronzed forearm. The effect of this was sufficient to send the remaining man scurrying into the undergrowth as fast as he could go. . . . Waltham made a last effort and knocked his own antagonist out, then he turned to the girl as she tossed the bar into the undergrowth.

“Who were those men?” she demanded, as they proceeded on their way again.

“They’re chasing me. It’s rather a long story and I’ve only one person to tell it to—that’s the Golden Amazon. You’ve saved me a lot of trouble, you know. Of course, you’re the Amazon’s daughter, Hygiea? Nobody else could have inherited such strength.”

The girl nodded her black head slowly.

“I didn’t really crash,” Waltham went on. “I came out of space in the usual way, because I want to find your mother. Of course, it is common knowledge throughout the System that she lives in the Hotlands here with you and your brother Hercules.”

“Yes, that’s true,” Hygiea admitted. “My father was killed some five years ago in a space crash— But look here, did you meet me by accident or design?”

“Pure accident. I thought you *might* be the Amazon’s daughter, but I wasn’t sure until I saw you in action just now. Anyhow, I’ve got to see your mother.”

“All right, you shall. I’m on my way home, as it is. I had just been to Hotlands Center to inquire after some mails due on the Martian express. . . . Here, this way. Mother never turned away a visitor yet, providing there is *real* reason for taking up her time, that is.”

“There is!” Waltham said fervently. “Believe me!”

---

It was an hour later when, the girl leading the way, they came suddenly into a wide clearing. In it, surrounded by a high, wired inclosure—probably capable of being electrified—was a good-sized bungalow of the conventional Earth pattern. Waltham confessed to an inward surprise at seeing such a place in the Hotlands; then as he came nearer he noticed other details—the house was on stilts to preserve it from the periodic mud flows, and on the veranda there lounged a white-suited, black-haired young giant of perhaps twenty-two.

“My brother,” the girl explained, as he rose and held out a muscular hand in greeting. “This is Mr. Waltham, Herc—here on a special mission. Mother busy?”

“Yes—but I’ll fetch her.”

He strode off and the girl led the way into the spacious living room with its earthly furniture. After a while a slender woman entered by the doorway at the far end of the room. Instantly Waltham’s eyes traveled over her. She was tall, majestic, still young looking. Her violet blue eyes searched him.

“The—Golden Amazon?” he asked, shaking the amber-skinned hand she held out to him.

She smiled. “I used to be, but I am afraid that that legendary name died out eighteen years ago. What there is of the legend is perpetuated in my twin children here—Hygiea and Hercules, the Heavenly Twins, as some call them. . . . It’s their show now. But I understand you have a special reason for seeking me out?”

“Yes. It’s an odd story, and—”

“Then we’ll discuss it over dinner. Pardon me.”

The Amazon turned aside and pressed a button. It was not a servant who responded, but two robots. They soon had a perfect meal set out, and as it progressed Waltham began his story.

“I’m not just a wandering spaceman: I’m a special investigator with the Interplanetary Police. My latest assignment has been to look into peculiar happenings on the Twilight Belt of Mercury. We got to know that a band of scientific criminals were experimenting in human synthesis, and—”

“Synthesis?” the Amazon asked abruptly, glancing at the twins; then seeing Waltham’s look of surprise, she gave an apologetic smile. “I beg your pardon, Mr. Waltham. It so happens that I am engaged on synthesis experiments, too, and—”

“I think I should amend my own statement to zombieism,” Waltham said. “By that I mean that this gang is using a series of immensely powerful magnets from Mercury. These, aided by the immense drag of the sun from that quarter of space, are sufficient to pull aside any passenger liner near that zone. When the ship is dragged down the criminals fill it with gas. Afterwards they take the dead passengers—only gassed to death, remember, and therefore with all their organs intact—down into an underground laboratory and turn them into mindless zombies, blind slaves of anybody’s will. . . .”

“So far as I can make out, these zombies are then sold to Earth criminals who run what is equivalent to slave labor. It means that zombie servants will be everywhere in time. These scoundrels are making a fortune out of the most murderous racket ever conceived. I forgot to add that they alter the faces to make the zombies quite unrecognizable.”

“I learned long ago that scientific criminals will do almost anything,” the Amazon said, with a reminiscent smile. “But go on, Mr. Waltham. . . .”

“Well, I tracked down their hideout, but I had to depart in a hurry. Unfortunately I was seen. I knew when I was in space that I stood no chance of escaping them. My only hope was to head for the next nearest planet, Venus, and evade them. It was as I did this that it occurred to me that you might be able to help. Well, I landed—but even then I was followed and might even have been finished off but for the intervention of your daughter here.”

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Hygiea nodded a silent confirmation as her mother glanced at her—then the Amazon looked rather puzzled.

“But, Mr. Waltham, can’t you return to Earth and secure the necessary aid from the Interplanetary police?”

“And be killed on the way? No, I daren’t risk it. Besides, I doubt if the police could do much: this is essentially a job for space-rovers—adventurers, if you prefer—like you and your son and daughter here.”

“I think you had better leave me out of it,” the Amazon said quietly. “I have this important synthetic experiment to make and—”

“But we can help!” Hercules exclaimed eagerly. “It’s a job after our own heart, isn’t it, Hy?”

The girl looked across at him and gave an excited nod.

“Suits me! It’s a long time since we had any real fun— If you agree, Mother?”

The Amazon shrugged. “As you wish. I know how I used to feel when I heard the call of adventure.”

“Come on, then!” Hercules exclaimed. “There’s nothing to stop us getting on our way right now. The *Comet’s* all stocked up ready for emergency. Let’s go, Sis. . . .” Then as he clapped a huge hand on Waltham’s shoulder he added, “I think that between the three of us these crooks are in for a rough time.”

“I believe you’re right,” Waltham nodded, as they came out onto the veranda. . . .

The Amazon went to the doorway and stood watching them cross the clearing. Presently she saw the glittering bulk of the *Comet* rise from its hangar in a surge of exhaust sparks, circle once, then climb steadily to the dazzling gray sky.

Thoughtfully she relaxed against the door, staring before her long after the ship had vanished from sight. . . .

## CHAPTER II

### Grim Surprise

In the roomy control room of the *Comet*, Hercules set the course for Mercury, then he relaxed in the spring chair, Hygiea on one side of him and Waltham on the other.

“What sort of synthesis is your mother seeking?” Waltham asked presently. “Anything to do with that scientific empire she’s planning, about which press and radio have had so much to say?”

“Everything to do with it,” Hygiea answered. “She says that in Herc and I she has the most perfect male and female of the Earth species which it is possible to find. She wants an empire of beings like us, future rulers of the Universe, and intends to model synthetic beings to resemble us. But something is wrong somewhere and she can’t make a synthetic being come to life. When she has solved that problem a cosmic Empire will become an established fact.”

“A truly amazing woman,” Waltham mused. Then suddenly he gave a start and gazed through the side port. “Say, we’re being followed! Take a look!”

Hercules and the girl looked round sharply. A small, unidentified flyer was rapidly overtaking them, flashing the yellow “Stop!” signal from its prow. Hercules gave a grim smile.

“Stop, eh? What does he think we are? He has no authority, no insignia, and we’re *not* stopping.”

“That ship may be powerfully armed, though,” Waltham said anxiously. “Do you think it’s safe to risk it?”

“Safe?” Hercules gave a grin and glanced across at his sister as she turned from the window.

“Are these the same gangsters who pursued you to Venus?” she demanded.

“Yes, but—”

“Don’t worry any more,” Hercules said, and seized the switches of the disintegrator gun in his big hands. “They’ve asked for this, and they’re going to get it!”

With that he slammed in the switches and sent a stream of energy forth into the void. But the attacker was quicker and dodged the onslaught, releasing a stream of fire at the same time. The rear plates of the *Comet* became unbearably hot for a few moments, but, thanks to their special metallic composition, they did not liquefy.

Hercules tightened his lips, seized the gun controls again, and then as the girl swung the ship round in a huge arc and brought the pursuer right across the sights, he let all the switches in in one movement. Devastating force hit the vessel amidships and it blew apart, the two halves crumbling into molten metal.

Waltham stared fixedly at the ruins through the porthole. When he turned back again his face seemed oddly shocked.

“Well, you—you got them,” he said, in a strange voice.

“Naturally,” Hercules shrugged. “The machine that can beat ours hasn’t been built yet—unless it be mother’s *Ultra*.”

“I suppose it would be a shock to you, not knowing the resistance of this vessel,” Hygiea smiled. “However, that takes care of your enemies, Mr. Waltham. We have a clear course to Mercury now—or is it still necessary?”



“Oh, definitely!” he answered hurriedly. “Those men in that ship were only a few of the entire gang.”

“Good!” Herc exclaimed. “I’d have been sorry if things were going to end so soon.”

---

Waltham said nothing to that. He resumed his seat, and for some reason seemed to have little to say during the rest of the trip. . . . It was a wearying journey, too, with Hercules and the girl taking it in turn at the controls—but at last they were near enough to the erratic little planet to need their dark goggles. Here the sun filled all space with his naked heat and power, flooding little Mercury with eternal radiance on one side and perpetual dark on the other, except for the one spot which possessed a slight libration, known throughout the System as the Twilight Belt.

“Which way?” the girl asked sharply, needing all her skill to control the vessel against the mighty space warps created by the sun’s field.

“Keep going,” Waltham said. “I’ll direct you.”

From then on it was a tense job of maneuvering and following his orders. But little by little the *Comet* drew nearer, sweeping at last over titanic gulfs and seams, over powdered hurricanes of yellow pumice dust, over bubbling morasses of molten metals, and so at last to the frowning ridges of the mountains marking the Twilight Belt. There were incredible spires, warped and twisted with eternal heat and cold, lightning playing about their summits incessantly.

Swiftly Hygiea brought the machine into the valley which Waltham indicated. They came to rest at last in darkest shadows, relieved only by the pearly glow of the sun’s corona or else the livid vermilion of a prominence as it licked from the sun over the mountain range. . . . But there was air—thin, but still air. The tremors of it were visible.

“Well, what now?” Hercules asked, rising.

“The spot we want is a little way down this valley,” Waltham replied. “I suggest you come with me and study the layout, then we can decide on what weapons we’ll need. We shan’t need space suits, by the way. Air extends for twenty-five miles round the Twilight Belt. It’s pretty thin, but breathable. Come on.”

The two nodded and clambered outside. Then Hercules went back for special boots. Wearing these they could adjust themselves to the ridiculous gravity and thereby walk in relative comfort.

“There—down that cleft,” Waltham said presently, and led the way into an abysmal darkness. In some wonder the two followed him, surprised to find that rough steps had been made in the rock, leading constantly downwards.

At last they reached a complete tunnel leading still downwards. Waltham went ahead cautiously, flashing his torch, until finally he came to a massive door. Joining him, Hercules and the girl both noticed that subsidiary tunnels—two of them—converged at this door as well.

“Keep your lights off,” Waltham cautioned, as he finally succeeded in getting a responsive click out of the door lock.

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They all moved into the dark and there was a sudden sharp sound. Something brushed past Hercules and Hygiea and to one side of them two glowing tubes came into life. They could make out the outlines of machinery— Then light gushed abruptly upon them and they saw for the first time that they were in the midst of a perfectly equipped scientific laboratory.

“What the—” Hercules began, then with a sudden shock of alarm he realized he could not move his hands. In fact no part of his body at all. He just stood where he was. He glanced sharply at the girl.

“Yes—me too,” she said.

“I suppose,” Waltham said, turning from a switchboard, “that this is a most unpleasant surprise? You see, the criminal mind—so called—behind the abduction of bodies from space ships happens to be me! I invented the story of being a special agent in order to get you out here. Good psychology, don’t you think? Also, those men who attacked me on Venus were ordered to do it by me. They were my assistants. You remember, Hygiea, when after we had first met I went to look for water and you asked me why I had been so long? That was when I radioed my position to them. Unfortunately they overdid it by attacking us in space, and you wiped them out. I hadn’t expected that. It leaves me to work alone, but I think I can handle it. These paralyzing rays are very effective, even against such strength as you two possess.”

“Well, what the hell do you want with us?” Hercules demanded.

“I’ll tell you. See here . . .”

Waltham pressed a switch and a steel door swung open to the accompaniment of an icy blast of air. Beyond, brightly lighted, and obviously refrigerated, were rows of men and women lying in bunks, still dressed in the clothes in which they had died. In all there were perhaps two score of them.

“Gassed,” Waltham explained calmly. “But I have explained that already. Now, thanks to you two, they can be made to live again as zombies and I can send them to Earth for a good price.”

“What has that to do with us?” Hygiea snapped.

“I’m coming to that. You see, to make these men and women live again I need a man and woman of superhuman strength—which both of you possess. My method, which I proved to be correct, is to transfer the strength of each of you to ten men and ten women respectively. I know that, like your mother, your individual strength is ten times normal. At the end of the life-transfusion you will each have the strength of a normal human being—but if I choose to go one beyond that you will have no strength left at all. In plain words you’ll—die.”

The two were silent, grim faced, but Waltham could see their muscles straining to break the crushing paralysis of the rays trained upon them.

“You see,” Waltham added, “bodily energy is an actual life force, and with my apparatus it can be transferred in the form of so many life energy volts. You will see what I mean fast enough in a moment.”

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He picked up a tiny, but powerful force ray, and lifted Hygiea aloft. He carried her body to a huge machine, hung her suspended in midair at the center of a huge electrode. Hercules watched in quivering, passive fury, but he noticed Waltham stood outside the range of the beams to perform his job. Still watching, Hercules saw the girl struggling with demonic force as the effect of the paralysis beam left her. Carefully Waltham removed the girl’s clothes, and as her gleaming body was revealed, a fine spray of oil came from spray-nozzles and covered her body, so that she looked like a living statue. Her arms outspread in a helpless gesture, and Waltham’s rays held her that way as he trained them now on her to hold her still. Then he pulled a switch—

Hygiea’s arms and legs began to change color slowly, become a lovely silvery, metallic color, but somehow icy, more than metallic. An expression of horror came over Hygiea’s face,

and something of pain.

“The oil,” said Waltham softly, “prevents the burning that comes with freezing . . .”

“You can’t do this!” she shouted fiercely. “You can’t—”

Waltham only smiled and took off his coat deliberately. Then he went over to the refrigerating chamber.

“Herc!” the girl screamed, turning her eye vainly. “Herc, do something—!”

“I’m trying to!” he retorted, his voice hoarse with effort. He watched Waltham as he busied about in the depths of the refrigerator room—then deliberately allowing his knees to give way Herc fell over. His strategy was correct, for on the floor he lay just under the deadly paralysing beams with his strength surging back to him. Slowly he wormed his way to the clear area, stood up, then waited with clenched fists outside the door of the refrigerator room.

At last Waltham came out with the corpse of a woman in his arms. He had about two seconds to realize what had happened, then a fist of steel struck him in the jaw. It was a stupendous blow, with all Herc’s anger and superhuman strength behind it. Waltham dropped his burden, staggered backwards and crashed helplessly against the wall, blood streaming from his lip.

Herc did not even waste time feeling for his flame gun. He hurled himself forward, lifted Waltham in one hand and hurled him into the refrigerator, slamming the door upon him—Then he dashed across to Hygiea. For a moment the switches baffled him, then he pulled them open. Slowly Hygiea’s limbs regained their normal color—evidently only her skin had been affected. Hercules lowered her to the floor with the beam, and helped her resume her clothes.

“What now?” the girl asked anxiously. “From the noise going on inside that refrig you didn’t put Waltham completely to sleep. He may even have a way of opening that door from the inside—”

“We’re going back to Earth,” Herc interrupted. “We need some help before we can smash a racket like this. Come on!”

They went across to the door, yanked it open and hurried up the dark staircase outside. Then at the top, as they came into the tunnel, Herc paused.

“Say, do you remember there were three sets of stairways? I wonder if we took the right one in our hurry?”

The girl flashed on her torch. “No means of telling at the moment. Keep on and see what happens.”

They kept on all right, but they came no nearer to the valley from which they had started. After wandering through the tunnels for a seeming age they came to a stop again.

“I guess we’re lost all right,” Herc said grimly. “Yet, all the tunnels must surely lead out to the open some place— Try a bit further.”

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Hygiea nodded and advanced again, then as nothing of importance showed itself in the torch light she began to nearly run through the twisting underworld—until quite unexpectedly they came to a tunnel branching at right angles exactly across their own.

“Now what?” she asked, looking to either side.

Herc frowned in the torchlight. “I still insist they must come out on the surface, and from the feel of the draft we are still in the Twilight Belt region. Suppose we try opposite tunnels?”

“Sounds to me like the surest way to part for ever.”

“Not at all. Mark the wall as you go. It gives us a double chance of finding the way out, anyhow. The first one to find it will come back here and wait for the other. How’s that?”

“Right,” the girl nodded, and with a rather uneasy smile she started off down the lefthand tunnel. Herc watched her go, then switching on his own torch he went off to the right.

The tunnel seemed to go ahead of him for miles, certainly to the limit of his torchbeam. Steadily he went on . . . Then all of a sudden he heard a scream, a girl’s scream, as though from an infinite distance. It went echoing into the silences and almost immediately afterwards he heard, very faintly,

“Herc! *Herc—!*”

Instantly he spun round and raced back the way he had come. But the unexpected happened. In landing from a jump his heavy boots thumped into a piece of crumbled rock flooring. Thin as pumice it gave way under the shock and sent him tumbling downwards, feet first thanks to his boots.

He landed with a jarring shock some fifty feet below.

Getting to his feet he shook his lamp back into life. Down here, much nearer to the bowels of Mercury, the character of things had changed. There were no passages. This was a part of a giant inner cavern filled with a scorching wind which seemed to prove it had a connection somewhere with the sunward side.

But it was the remembrance of Hygiea’s cry which sent Herc hurrying forward desperately. It seemed to be only too evident that Waltham had come on the scene again and recaptured her—

Then Herc paused again, listening intently.

## CHAPTER III

### Master of Zombies

There were new sounds now in this crazy underworld. It reminded him of the wailing of Venusian jungle beasts or else the ceremonial rites performed by some of the still unextinct savages of Earth.

For a moment or two he stood still, focusing the noise, then he began to move swiftly towards it. It became louder and louder—then all at once he burst upon a scene such as he had never imagined possible outside the Circle of Dante.

He had come into another cavern, a truly vast one, at the far end of which was a flickering fire. Round it, like demons out of hell, were creatures startlingly similar to giant Earth grasshoppers, standing upright, moving about in the semblance of a dance with their tentaculate hands holding to each other. And as they danced they chanted . . .

This in itself was shock enough on a world thought to be devoid of life, but Herc was infinitely more shocked when he caught sight of the reason for all this crazy ceremony—For he suddenly caught sight of Hygiea in the midst of the circle, tied firmly to an upright stake, her mouth gagged and her eyes fearfully watching the insanity around her.

In the flickering firelight Herc could see the terror and revulsion in her expression as ever and again the leader of the dancing circle reached out his claw and laid it on top of her head. He kept it there for a moment or two and then resumed the dance. Obviously the action was all part of the ritual.

“Devils!” Herc breathed, worming out of the shadows with his flameweb ready for action. He was just about ready to blast the nearest Mercutians in pieces when he was suddenly seen. The dancing stopped, just as the leader had again placed his hand on the girl’s head.

Herc waited tensely—then a piece of rock sailed from somewhere and knocked the flameweb out of his hand. He did not hesitate a moment longer. Diving forward he seized the nearest Mercutian in his hands— But here again he ran up against the unexpected. The moment he grabbed the creature he received a distinct electric shock, and at the same time a torrent of unspoken words in his brain. They were from Hygiea!

“Herc, take care! These creatures are electrical, natural amplifiers of thought waves— As long as my head is in contact with the Mercutian’s hand and you are holding one of the creatures in the unbroken chain you receive my thoughts—”

The contact broke suddenly as the leader removed his hand from the girl’s head and turned to study Herc. There was a sudden menacing movement—but Herc was ready for it. Turning, he lashed out with a tremendous fist and struck the Mercutian he had been holding a terrific blow in his hideous face. His retaliation was just as swift for Herc felt electric force stream through him with such violence it slammed him to his knees.

Nor did he get the chance to recover himself for by the time the shock had passed the Mercutians were piling all over him, releasing new electric currents which made him gasp. Strong ropes, made of some metallic material, tightened about his wrists and ankles and bound him immovably. A second stake was propped up beside Hygiea and he was dragged over to it and secured upright alongside her. Then talking was prevented as a piece of spongy rock was thrust in his mouth and bound into place tightly.

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Again the crazy ceremony began, only this time the leader had two heads to touch. It was astonishing to the twins how their thoughts instantly interchanged through the electric medium of the Mercurian's body. Hygiea only read disgust and alarm in her brother's mind, so being the more practical of the two she busied herself with sending a further message.

"These beings overtook me in one of the tunnels. From what they have told me—by thought transmission—they are a kind of animated electricity, a condition engendered by this whole planet being impregnated with vast solar fields. . . . They are totally immune to the effects of heat or cold and can go with equal ease to. . . ."

There was an interval, then the girl resumed,

"And can go to either sunward or nightward surface without harm. So far as I have been able to make out they have a legend—something about the coming of a queen and her consort from the cosmos. When both of them are sacrificed to the Fire God—the sun, I presume—the Mercurians will be given dominion over all the universe. Pure heathen reasoning—but deadly reasoning as far as we are concerned."

"Decidedly so," Herc's thoughts replied; then communication was again broken between them as the leader removed his hands. In fact there was every evidence of a change in the ritual. . . .

Gathering to the rear the electrical beings congregated behind the two stakes and heaved with all their strength. The two pillars came out of their supports, were tipped horizontal, and then carried along with Herc and Hygiea face upward upon them, pulling and struggling with all their strength.

And here, Herc realized, there was something of an advantage—an advantage which perhaps his superior male strength could seize. Before, only sheer forward muscular effort had been possible to break his bonds, but now he was flat on his back he had the absurdly slight gravity to aid him. Tensile effort upward on such a planet should be easy. So he began to gather the strength of his arms and massive shoulders for a supreme effort. The girl, noting what was coming, turned her head towards him and watched anxiously.

It took Herc some time to gather the necessary tension for the effort, but when he was ready he abruptly threw all his power into a supreme strain. There was a rending and snapping as the metallic bonds broke apart. His shoulders and arms came free: instantly he forced his feet apart and snapped the ankle fetters— With a bump he fell down into the dust.

Instantly there was a concerted rush upon him, but this time he was prepared for it. Steeling himself against the electric shocks he lashed out with devastating force. Two of the hideous Mercurians went smashing backwards with broken necks. At this the others lowered the girl and her stake and came over to force the struggle. . . .

But, mysteriously, Hercules had gone. Hygiea stared at the shadows desperately but failed to see him—then she heard his voice from the far end of the cavern.

"Hang on, Sis—I'll be back. I've got to get help. If these brutes take you to the sunward side don't forget to keep your eyes closed!"

Then he was gone, and the Mercurians after a fruitless search came back to the girl. Again she was hoisted upon her stake on the creatures' shoulders. Every effort she had made in those few precious moments to release herself had failed. . . . But she knew Herc would keep his word. If he didn't—

But that was a thought too horrible to contemplate as she was borne onwards through the gathering darkness of the main tunnel leading from the cavern. . . .

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Certainly Herc had a definite plan in mind: the point that troubled him most was whether he'd be able to put it into operation in time, for once she was taken to the sunward side there was no knowing how long Hygiea would be able to hold out against burns and blindness. Everything depended on one thing—finding Waltham again and finding him alive. After that. . . .

But the problem to Herc right now was retracing his way. He came back finally to the hole in the tunnel floor through which he had fallen. It looked impossible to get up that fifty feet to the top. Yet the sides were rough. If he took off his weighted boots he might, with the little gravity, have a toe and finger hold—

He had no sooner thought of it than he acted. Discarding his boots he leapt with all his strength; then the moment he reached the limit he thrust downwards with his feet against the side wall and so went up higher again—constantly, in a succession of muscle breaking leaps, until at last he emerged over the edge of the hole through which he had fallen.

“Stay right where you are!”

He twisted round at the command, and immediately the glare of a flashlamp flooded into his face. In the beam he saw the glitter of a gun and beyond it a dim, indeterminate figure.

“Waltham!” he breathed, and his heart gave a leap of joy at the thought of how much time and trouble Waltham's advent had saved him.

“Surprised?” Waltham asked dryly. “You shouldn't be. You left enough footmarks in the dust of the tunnels to guide a blind man. It was a toss up at first whether I followed your footprints or your sister's. Then I heard sounds this way as you climbed up this shaft— Get up on your feet!”

“Okay, you win,” Herc growled, and made no attempt to resist as Waltham clamped his wrists behind him with steel manacles. Then, stumbling in the slight gravity, he went forward with the flamegun in the small of his back.

“Where *is* your sister?” Waltham snapped presently.

“I don't know. Since we parted at the tunnel intersection I haven't seen her.”

“Well she can't get far on this damned planet. I'll find her quick enough once I've settled with you. And I'll take it out of you for locking me in that refrigerator room, too. I had to smash the apparatus to get out an electrical tube and so burn away the lock. . . . Go on, keep moving!”

In ten minutes they were back in the laboratory, each watching the other warily.

“You're taking this very calmly,” Waltham remarked presently, with a touch of suspicion.

Herc shrugged. “I know when I'm licked, I guess—and I'm not fool enough to give myself a date with that flamegun of yours.”

“Get on that table!” Waltham snapped.

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Herc hesitated for the briefest instant, and then he complied. The buckled straps closed about him—new ones replacing those he had smashed in releasing Hygiea—and to them was added thin but immensely strong chain. Herc's lips compressed as he observed this: he realized more clearly than ever that if his plan failed in its objective those chains would beat him. And Hygiea? Desperation forced words to his lips.

“Well, how the devil much longer are you going to be?”

Waltham gave a grim smile and went over to the refrigerator. In a few minutes he had placed a dead man on the table adjoining Herc's. Then he began to arrange a series of electrodes from Herc's arm to that of the corpse. A switch closed: an array of electric apparatus

began to hum deeply: tubes came to life . . . Waltham, his eyes on a graduated wheel, began to operate a series of dials. . . .

Herc set his teeth at the pain that gripped him from head to foot as life energy was dragged out of him. The strain was immense, produced cramp in every limb, and he could feel his strength diminish under the onslaught. . . .

Then at last the dead man on the adjoining table twitched gently. Instantly Waltham shut the power off.

“Get up!” he commanded.

There was no response from the corpse.

“Get up!” Waltham thundered, coming closer. “Get up, I say!”

Still the corpse did not respond. Herc waited urgently. On the next happenings depended his whole scheme.

“Get up!” Waltham cried passionately, and instantly Herc concentrated on the same order. His heart leapt as the “dead” man rose slowly and got up from the table.

“It works!” Waltham breathed, his eyes gleaming. “He obeys my will! They’ll all obey my will! You see that, Hercules?”

Herc gave a crooked smile and as Waltham commanded the zombie to walk into a corner Herc repeated the order mentally and watched the man obey to the letter. . . .

Waltham laughed—the exultant laugh of a scientist who thinks he has smashed the last barrier to a great achievement. . . . Five, six-eight times he brought out male corpses and subjected Herc to that exquisite anguish each time—and each time Herc found that the living zombie obeyed his will and not Waltham’s, despite Waltham’s belief to the contrary.

But the strain was terrific. At the end of the eight life-energy transfusions Herc realized how weak he had become—weak in comparison to his normal giant strength anyway, and still strong even relative to a normal man.

Just the same he realized it was time to call a halt before he was too exhausted physically and mentally to put his plan in action, so this time when Waltham went across to the refrigerator room he watched intently until he was out of view, then forcing up his head against the straps about his neck he fixed his gaze on the dead faces of the zombies against the wall.

“Kill him!” he commanded mentally. “Kill! *Kill!*”

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Without a second’s hesitation, directed by his thoughts, they advanced towards the refrigerator room. At that very moment Waltham appeared with another corpse in his arms. In one glance he took in the menace of the advancing men, and tossing the corpse on the floor he yanked out his flamethrower and fired. The shaft burned through clothes and flesh, but it did not stop the advance.

Waltham hesitated, confused. He licked his lips and shouted a hoarse order.

“Stop! Stop, I tell you! *I order you to stop!*”

“Kill!” Herc shouted. “Kill him! *Kill!*”

Waltham saw the expressionless, implacable faces all around him. He dropped his gun and made a dash to get away—but fingers of iron clamped round his throat, drew tight, and tighter. He fell to his knees, struggling uselessly, his brain swimming.

At last the zombie who had done the deed released him, let his dead body slip to the floor.

“Here!” Herc shouted. “Come and break these chains! Unfasten these straps. . . .”



Dead white hands got to work and released him. He slid off the table, got a grip on himself as a deadly faint seized him for a moment. He felt worn out. . . .

“You . . . you will follow me,” he stated, straightening up. “Come this way.”

Picking up Waltham’s flamethrower and torch he headed for the door with the zombies right behind him. Once beyond the door he spent a considerable time making sure of his surroundings, finally deciding that the center staircase was the one down which he and Hygiea had come at first. He hurried up it and flashed his torch beam around. His eyes gleamed as ahead of him he saw a ragged opening set with cold stars.

“This way!” he cried, and raced forward in gargantuan leaps. In a few minutes he had come to the rocky valley floor where, a short distance away, the *Comet* still stood. He made for it in enormous strides, the zombies following mechanically in the rear. At length they had blundered into the control room and stood motionless around him as he operated the controls.

Swiftly he climbed to three hundred feet and headed for the writhing prominences visible over the mountain range. In one upward sweep he crossed the summits and the full glare of the awful sun smote upon him.

He cried out huskily and flung an arm over his eyes; gradually the pain and sea of green before his vision abated. Taking good care to avoid the direct glare he stared earnestly below. Hygiea had said the sunward side. In that case the Mercutians ought to have carried her here by now.

But for the moment there was no sign of them. Below was the yellow plain, swept by the cyclonic winds. Yellow dust, fine pumice ground from rocks long since blasted to powder by incessant heat, was everywhere; and here and there crisscrossing the waste, channels of molten metal boiled and bubbled dangerously. Death—scorching, blinding death—reigned down there . . .

## CHAPTER IV

### Problems Solved

Suddenly Herc's heart gave a jump. Emerging from the shadow of a mile-distant cliff were a number of fantastic figures, and in the midst of them a scantily clad girl in white bound to a stake. The party was moving deliberately toward a cairn of rocks full in the eye of the monstrous sun.

"Swine!" Herc breathed, passion sweeping him—and with a violent jerk he sent the *Comet* hurtling down in a huge arc. He found as he swept over the party, however, that his hopes of using the *Comet's* guns were false. He'd be very likely to hit the girl herself if he did that—so he turned aside and landed the vessel in a cloud of saffron dust about half a mile from the cairn.

Intently he watched through the port and saw the mad looking Mercutians come to a halt for a moment and look in his direction—then evidently dismissing him as innocuous they continued the procession. Herc still waited, until at last he saw the party had reached the top of the hill and were busy imbedding the stake in the rocks with the girl still secured to it.

Herc swung round to the zombies.

"These are your orders," he snapped, looking each in the eyes in turn. "You are to destroy those creatures out there by any means you wish—but *not* the girl. They will try and attack you and—I guess I'm forgetting you're dead men," he added grimly. "So carry on! On your way!"

He opened the airlock for them, and without a glance to left or right they marched outside into the burning dust, sank ankle deep in it. Herc watched fascinatedly through his dark goggles as the trousers about the creatures' ankles smoldered away. He reached straight away for protective lead boots and slipped them on. Then, flamegun in hand, he stepped outside into the scorching quagmire. For a moment he gasped at the burning furnace which hit him. He staggered, got a grip on himself, and then went on. In a few minutes he had caught up with the zombies. Keeping well behind them he still dinned the same order into their brains. . . .

Presently they left the hot ash plain and reached the stony ground at the base of the cairn. From here Herc could see that Hygiea was struggling violently, chiefly to turn her face away from the incredible glare of the sun. The Mercutians were in a circle about the stake, watching Herc's approach—and suddenly they all sprang at once.

Instantly Herc fired into the midst of them, but as he had half expected he only got two of them before the rest overwhelmed him. With his immense diminution of strength he simply had not the power to fight back. His goggles were knocked off his face, his flamegun snatched away, and a terrific electric shock sent him reeling on the scorching stones.

With the zombies it was different. They attacked with the blind, implacable fury of machines, undeterred by the electric shocks streaming through them time and time again. Swiftly the battle assumed hectic proportions.

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Despite all his efforts Herc found himself handicapped by lack of strength. He got up, fought back, administered violent punishment indeed, but the incessant electricity racking his body brought him low again at last. Hardly aware of what was happening, so dazed was he, he

found himself being bound and then dragged across the stones to be tied to the stake back to back with Hygiea.

He caught a glimpse of her hopeless face as she peered at him through slitted eyes—and he saw too that there was every reason for her despondency for the zombies too had been overpowered and were in the process of being fastened with metallic fiber. In the end all eight of them lay stretched face upward on the stones, struggling futilely and with increasing weakness.

This done, the Mercurians gathered in a circle and performed a brief ceremonial dance—then came a short telepathic message—

“The sacrifice is complete!”

With that the Mercurians began to depart up the stony trail until they were lost to sight in the surging, dust-choked wind. Even the *Comet* was out of sight too, hidden in a semi-opaque yellow blanket.

“At least they didn’t gag me,” Herc said, and by a supreme effort he managed to stretch his fingers far enough to clench the girl’s hand. Rather unexpectedly he found her answering in space-Morse by the pressure of her fingers.

“How did you get hold of these zombies?”

“I worked on a hunch. I figured that since their life was really part of mine their mental processes ought to have a similar contact. I was right. They obeyed me implicitly, even to killing Waltham. I felt sure they would be able to aid me in wiping out the Mercurians and rescuing you. Instead— Well, I guess we’re in the hell of a mess. Another hour here and we’ll be dead. If not that then blind and mad with thirst. Blast these crazy Mercurians and their cockeyed ceremonial rites! But for them we’d have everything straight again—”

Herc broke off and struggled again frantically.

“I’ve got to get free!” he panted. “I’ve just *got* to! The ship is hidden just behind those dust clouds. If we could only reach it . . .”

He pulled and strained until his flesh was bleeding and sweat was rolling off him in streams. Then he had to give up from sheer physical exhaustion. He twisted his head and saw the girl was moving feebly, raising her face ever and again to the naked sun glaring over the near horizon.

“Don’t do that!” Herc roared. “Don’t let that sun fascinate you! I know it can do it, even on Venus. It’s like hypnosis—It’ll blind you! Destroy you!”

“Does it matter?” asked her tapping fingers. “There’s no way out of this. It dries your skin, shrivels your bones, sweats you dry. I’ve been propped up here longer than you. . . . I know. It’s no use, Herc. Look at the zombies! If it even finishes them off, only filled with false life, what won’t it do to us?”

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She ceased communicating, and from the sudden slackness of her body and dropped head Herc felt sure she had fainted. He was sure of it when she made no response to him calling her name. In a way he was glad: it had stopped her succumbing to that insane longing to stare the sun in the eye and watch eternal darkness close down forever.

Then something attracted his attention. It was a feeling of gathering strength! He could sense it surging through him as though he had taken a stiff dose of restorative. . . . For a while he was puzzled. He should be feeling weaker, not stronger—then his screwed up eyes fell on the nearest of the zombies. The creature had gone back to the death from which he had been revived. Therefore—Herc’s eyes gleamed. There must be an eternal life current contact

between himself and the creatures to whom he had been forced to loan his immense strength. In that event the expiry of the creature caused the strength loaned to return.

So he tried his bonds again, but it still wasn't any use. He waited in a fever of impatience.

With awful slowness, as it seemed to him, the zombies died one by one. So far as he could make out it was dehydration which killed them, the total evaporation of whatever water remained in their wasted bodies, an infinitely less proportion than that in a normal living being, of course.

In thirty minutes of anguishing, searing torture three more had died. Herc found it hard to keep his senses. From the rate he was sweating at he realized he too was in danger of dehydration . . .

Another ten minutes passed. Torturing thirst, tearing headache, but a feeling of immense muscular power. Herc opened his blistered eyelids. All eight zombies had ceased to breathe!

By sheer will power he forced himself to an effort, strained with every vestige of his strength. There was a sudden snap and his chest and arms came free. Forgetful of his aches and pains now he worked at top speed on the rest of his bonds and in ten seconds had freed himself completely. In a moment he had the gag out of Hygiea's mouth, tore apart the wires holding her, and let her limp form drop into his arms.

Intently he stared along the dusty stone trail towards the ash plain edge where he had left the *Comet*. He still could not see the vessel because of the swirling dust, but— He gave a start. In the cracked, barren gray of the cliff face a little way off figures moved—

Mercutians!

Far from leaving their victims to the sacrifice they had evidently stayed nearby to watch the outcome of their handiwork. Herc stood trying to decide what to do. He had intended going back along the stone trail, but the Mercurians were between him and the spaceship. The only other course was to risk the ash-field. He had his protective boots, of course, and he had managed it before, but now with the extra weight of Hygiea there was no telling what might happen.

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He had to risk it: suddenly he made up his mind to it. Holding the girl tightly to him he turned and raced for the yellow ash plain with the Mercurians now right behind him. His first plunge into the ash brought him up to his knees and for a ghastly second he thought he'd landed in some kind of red hot quicksand. But he had touched solidity, for the moment anyway, with the deadly stuff only two inches from the top of his boots.

Eyes and skin smarting with burns and bewildering sunlight he staggered on a little way and then looked behind him. He had cause to be grateful for one thing, anyhow. The ash-field had stopped the advance of the devilish denizens of Mercury.

He grinned through cracked lips and went on again in floundering movements. When he looked back again some time later the Mercurians had vanished. It puzzled him. Not like them to give up a chase so easily.

Wearily he went on, and presently Hygiea revived and gave a little moan. Her sudden movement made Herc stagger for a moment, then with his heart thumping with fright he steadied himself again.

"Herc!" The girl's voice was dry and harsh. "Where are we? What's happened?"

Briefly he recounted events since she had fainted.

"Soon be safe now," he added thankfully. "The *Comet's* just behind this dust screen on the edge of the ash plain, under the face of that cliff—"

He stopped dead and the girl felt him tense in sudden alarm.

“What?” she asked breathlessly. “I—I can’t see so well. I’m dazzled. . . .”

Herc stared at the rifts in the blinding dust. A stupefied look came to his face.

“It’s gone!” he whispered in dismay. “Yet I *know* that is where I left it!”

He plunged forward again as fast as he could go and in a few more minutes staggered free of the ash-field proper onto the stony ground edging it. He set the girl on her feet and she clung to his arm as he hurried forward.

“Look!” He pointed suddenly. “There is the track the ship gouged when she landed!”

“Only one explanation,” Hygiea said at last, thinking. “Do you remember how easily the Mercutians carried us, those heavy stakes as well? Maybe the slight gravity makes them like ants, and every bit as strong. Even on earth ants carry many times their own weight. With the slight gravity there is here that would make the *Comet* an easy matter. . . .” She stopped, biting her lip. “It begins to look to me as though we’re finished.”

“We can’t be!” Herc retorted. “We haven’t got to be!”

He looked about him desperately, still hoping in his heart to see some sign of the vessel—but his hope was not realized. There was nothing but the harsh shingle and blinding escarpment of cliffs—

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But far above them was the unexpected. Mercutians! Dozens of them, watching. Or were they just watching? They seemed to be busy with something just out of sight. Herc stared anxiously, Hygiea clinging to his arm—then abruptly the danger was obvious to them as a series of immense rocks came tumbling down towards them. Before they had a chance to dodge the boulders had struck them and knocked them flying. Had earthly gravity been in force nothing could have saved them from being utterly crushed. As it was they were pinned down, even more so as further boulders came bouncing on top of them, but neither of them was injured.

“Of all the dirty, murdering scum!” Herc breathed, fighting to free himself. “I’ll—”

“Herc! Herc!” It was a cry from Hygiea. Herc twisted his head round and saw that she was buried to the waist not a yard away from him. But upon her legs and feet was a load of frightening proportions.

“Coming,” he answered grimly, and threw all the power of his body into freeing himself.

The boulders around him shifted and crunched under the force of his muscles. Two rocked aside. Another giant nearly fell on top of him. He held it at arm’s length and shoved mightily until it rolled sullenly out of harm’s way. Slowly, barking his knees and elbows, he fought free.

Immediately he turned to the girl, then something else caught his attention—the sight of blobs of molten metal dropping to the stones and bubbling near him. He stared upwards. Sheer horror rooted him for the moment as he beheld several of the Mercutians holding a massive caldron between them. It was tilted slightly forward so that drops of it fell below. What would happen if the full flood were released needed no guesswork. Obviously the murderous devils had obtain the stuff from one of the countless lava morasses.

“Herc!” Hygiea screamed suddenly, staring upward. “Look what they’re doing! Quick—get me out!”

He dived for her, caught her beneath the arms and pulled hard. But all his strength was unavailing. Those rocks had effectually pinned the lower half of her body.

“Move them!” she shouted desperately. “Hurry!”

Then she gave a little cry of pain as a droplet of the molten metal fell on her bare shoulder and raised an instant blister.

This was sheer diabolical torture. The Mercurians knew full well that the girl was trapped face upwards so she could not fail to see what was going on. Every second was an agony, waiting for the devilish impulse which would decide the creatures to drop the whole mass of liquid metal down. And that would mean death of the most anguishing kind. . . .

All these thoughts were flying through Herc's brain as he pulled away boulders and stones as fast as he could go. Drops of molten matter were falling on his back and shoulders with ever increasing frequency. . . .

In five minutes he had got rid of the smaller boulders and then came to the main one pinning the girl down. It was truly massive, large enough to crush an elephant on Earth. Again and again Herc shoved at it but it would not budge. Another huge effort set his feet slipping in the stones. Furiously he hurled his massive shoulder against it, to recoil half numbed.

"Do something!" Hygiea shrieked, squirming. "I can see them getting ready to tip that caldron—!"

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Herc glanced up again and saw that the creatures had brought the caldron much nearer to the edge of the cliff. They were quite obviously preparing for more decisive action.

"I can't shift this damned stone," Herc panted. "I can't—"

"You've got to! It's crushing me! Oh, Herc, hurry up—!"

He put his back against it and dug his heels into the ground, shoved until he could shove no more. But it was no use. Gasping for breath he looked above, following the line of his sister's horrified gaze. The Mercurians had gathered in considerable numbers at the edge of the cliff now and had not one but several rough crucibles. The contents of all of them would soak the area below in lava for half a mile and more.

Herc swung round.

"It's no use, Hy, we can't get out of this. All I can do is cover you with stones and trust to luck that—"

He broke off, his eyes attracted for a moment by a flash of light in the violet sky.

"What's that?" he asked sharply, and the girl stared fixedly through half closed eyes. Before she could answer the flash had come again and remained permanent, resolving itself into a spaceship sweeping down in a breath-taking power dive.

"The *Ultra*!" Hygiea shrieked. "It's mother! Nobody else in the system could make a power dive like that—"

She broke off, speechless for the moment. The Mercurians had seen the ship, too, now, and were watching it intently, their immediate schemes for the caldrons forgotten.

Then the *Ultra* swept low enough for the portholes to be seen. At the same instant all six molten metal crucibles lifted magically into the air, hanging to an invisible line beneath the ship's belly.

"She's using magnetic anchors!" Herc yelled. "Is that something—!"

He broke off again, watching earnestly. The Mercurians were obviously alarmed, milling up and down to escape the *Ultra* as it came sweeping back. Suddenly the caldrons dropped again, turning over as they fell through space. They fell far enough behind the cliff edge to miss the two below, but from the yells and screams which followed it was obvious that many of the creatures had been drenched in the stuff.

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Nor did it end with that. The ship circled again, blazing forth its deadly yellow disintegrator ray. With that queer streak of ruthlessness which had always marked her character when fighting an enemy, the Amazon went back and forth, picking off every stray Mercutian she could find, even those who sought to escape down the cliff face whom she blew to pieces.

Then at last she brought the vessel down in a long arc to the shingle. The airlock opened.

“Mother!” Herc and Hygiea cried simultaneously. “Come here quick! This rock. . . .”

There seemed to be a faintly amused smile on her face as she hurried forward.

“I think,” she said seriously, as she surveyed the pinned girl and Herc’s obvious exhaustion, “that you have both a lot to learn yet in space exploring. It seems that you have made the mistake your father was always making. I constantly told him never to turn his back on an enemy. You’re always safe if you don’t. . . .”

She broke off and pressed her shoulder against the massive rock, waving Herc aside as he moved to assist her. In silent wonder he watched the tenseness of her muscles as she strained them to the limit—then suddenly she threw all her superhuman power into a vast effort. The rock shifted, trembled, then with a final jerk rolled on one side.

“How the devil did you do that?” Herc demanded, helping Hygiea out of the hole. “Surely I’m as strong as you are?”

“Probably stronger—but the art of leverage is also one of balance. Given a lever long enough one could shift a whole planet— But we’ve important things to discuss,” the Amazon broke off. “You are wondering how I arrived so opportunely? It’s simple enough. I just thought that since I was tracking down exponents of zombeism, they, though criminals, might possibly have the missing ingredient for synthesis which I cannot find. So I decided to follow you. Next thing I saw here was your ship on the plateau at the top of the cliff and you being attacked by Mercutians— Just what happened to Waltham?”

“So they took our ship up to the plateau!” Herc exclaimed. “Well, thank heaven it wasn’t lost anyway— Oh, Waltham!” He glanced at his sister grimly. “I guess he turned out to be a no account criminal.”

“Meaning what?”

Herc explained in detail. At the end of it the Amazon was looking both grim and thoughtful.

“So he was the criminal scientist in question? Just as well I followed you. But, Herc, what you tell me about transfer of life sounds interesting. You say his lab is still intact?”

“All complete with apparatus—”

“That’s the best news I’ve had since I started my synthetic experiments. It means that I have only to duplicate—or better still, transfer—the apparatus to my own laboratory and study it out. Don’t you see what your adventure has brought to light?” she exclaimed. “If life current can be transferred to corpses to make them live it can also be transferred to synthetic beings to make *them* live, too.”

“Uh-huh,” Herc acknowledged, rather doubtfully.

“What?” the Amazon asked. “I shall use you for the synthetic males, and you Hygiea for the females. What’s wrong with that?”

“Two things,” Herc said worriedly. “On the one hand, how do you think our strength will stand up to it? Bringing eight of those zombies into life nearly finished me.”

“Eight on the run, yes. But to bring one to life would hardly affect you at all, would it?”

“No, but I’d always be about that much short.”

“Only for about twelve hours,” the Amazon smiled. “Life energy and bodily strength is simply replaced by food and vitamin tablets. A man who gives a pint of blood for transfusion does not permanently remain that much short, does he?”

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Herc looked surprised. “Good Lord, I never thought of it that way. By that reckoning, Hygiea and I could go on supplying life current for the synthetic creatures as fast as you made them.”

“Exactly. And for that reason alone your Mercutian exploit has proved eminently successful. That empire of synthetic, perfect beings to rule the universe can become a fact. . . .”

“There’s another drawback,” Herc said. “These synthetic men will be chained to my will, just as the women will be to Hygiea’s.”

“Could you wish for anything better?” the Amazon smiled. “Legions for both of you— infallible men and women ruled by your will as you spread the scientific dynasty to the far corners of space. That is real triumph. . . . Now come! I want to see this laboratory which Waltham so unwittingly built for us.”

[The end of *Children of the Golden Amazon* by John Russell Fearn (as Thorton Ayre)]