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**RED SUN
OF DANGER**
A Captain Future Novel
By **BRETT STERLING**

THE ISLE OF UNREASON
A Hall of Fame Story
By **EDMOND HAMILTON**



BUY WAR BONDS
AND STAMPS
FOR VICTORY!



“Curt!” Joan screamed to Captain Future (CHAP. XVIII)

RED SUN OF DANGER

By BRETT STERLING

From the archives of the mighty Ancients, Curt Newton brings back forgotten Denebian science to balk a greed-maddened schemer who seeks to loose unspeakable terror on the Universe!

CHAPTER I

Seven Against a World

TO SEE your whole life-work smashed to ruins by no fault of your own, to see the great dream of humanity which you had helped fulfill destroyed now by trickery and greed—yes, the taste of these things was bitter!

They put a sickness in Philip Carlin's studious, spectacled face as his rocket-car purred up the wide north ramp into the center

of Great New York. They crushed his mind with a black foreknowledge of disaster to come.

He drove into the great paved plaza that is the heart of Solar System civilization. The titanic bulk of Government Tower loomed like a thundercloud above the lights of the metropolis. Far up there against the stars glowed a lighted window, like a vigilant eye looking watchfully out into the universe that man had begun to conquer.

A Planet Patrol officer met Carlin. "Dr. Carlin? I have been ordered to conduct you to the President's office. This way, sir."

Carlin glanced at the officer as they walked toward the mighty tower. Impulse made him ask a question. "How old are you, Lieutenant?"

The Patrol officer looked surprised. "Thirty, sir."

Carlin brooded over the answer a moment. "I suppose you've got your next seventy years all planned?"

The lieutenant grinned. "Oh, sure. There's a lot of things I want to do after I quit the Patrol, some day. But I've lots of time."

Carlin's voice was heavy with foreboding. "I'd do them now, if I were you. I wouldn't count on those seventy years too much."

The lieutenant's grin widened. "You're joking, aren't you? Everybody will live more than a century now, barring accident. Vitron has seen to that."

His cheerful words echoed ironically in Philip Carlin's mind as a soundless magnetic elevator bore him upward.

"Vitron has seen to that!"

Vitron! The whole Solar System depended on the magic drug these days, as much as on the air it breathed—the drug of long life!

For vitron was a super-vitamin, a chemical agent that combated the poisons which cause the human body to age. It would give people a century of life, and decades of useful youth. It had at one stroke enormously expanded man's prospective life-span.

But nine-tenths of the precious vitron came from a world far outside the System. Now that supply was threatened!

If the System learned of that danger, there would be a panic. But Daniel Crewe, the System President, had imparted it only to the scientists who had discovered vitron and to the others whom he had summoned to this urgent conference tonight.

CARLIN was thinking of those others now, without hope. "What can they do, if the Government is powerless? What can any of us do?"

When he entered the tower-top room that was the President's office he found that Zamok, the solemn Martian biochemist, and Lin Sao, the plump Venusian cytologist, were already there. So was Commander Halk Anders of the Planet Patrol, a hard-faced, massive man in gray uniform.

But the room was somehow dominated by the fourth man, the worn, colorless little Earthman upon whose shoulders rested the vast weight of administering the government of the System's worlds and moons. Daniel Crewe looked as though that weight were crushing him, tonight.

"They're not here yet?" Philip Carlin asked hesitantly.

"They're coming now," Commander Anders said curtly. "Hear that?"

A low, muffled drone was audible from the night sky somewhere above this tower-top room. To Carlin, who was no spaceman, it was indistinguishable from the sound of any other rocket-ship. But Anders was sure.

"That's Captain Future's ship," he said.

Crewe's tired eyes lighted a little. "I was sure they would come quickly."

Carlin was unimpressed. Why did all these people regard Captain Future as though he were something superhuman?

Who was Captain Future, anyway? The greatest of space-adventurers, people said. They told wild tales of his planeteeing exploits, of his scientific achievements, of his three non-human comrades who were called the Futuremen, of his mysterious home up there on Earth's wild, barren Moon.

But what did it all boil down to? To the fact that a young Earthman with three freak-ish companions had performed certain exploits in space which popular enthusiasm had magnified beyond all reason. Just as legend credited the Futuremen with impossible scientific attainments.

Of course, Carlin grudgingly admitted, these so-called Futuremen did have one major scientific achievement to their credit. Their invention of the vibration-drive, giving space-ships speeds beyond that of light, was what had made interstellar travel possible. It had enabled the System peoples, in the last ten years, to explore and even to start colonizing the nearer star-systems.

People had to have a hero, Carlin thought morosely. This brash young adventurer had caught their fancy, had become the center of nonsensical legends. But why did the President and Commander, in a serious emergency like this, place such dependence on a cheap popular hero?

"I suppose none of us are wholly immune to mob hero-worship," Carlin thought wearily.

The muffled drone above the tower reached a crescendo and stopped. Quick footsteps sounded on the stair leading down from the

little landing-deck atop the tower. A man came quietly into the room.

"Got here as quickly as we could, sir," he said to Daniel Crewe. "Hello, Halk. I presume these three gentlemen are the vitron scientists?"

With a little shock, Philip Carlin partly revised his cynical estimate. If this man was Captain Future, he had about him little of the flamboyant or swashbuckling air Carlin had expected.

This was a tall young Earthman, lean in a close-fitting drab zipper-suit. Except for an atom-pistol unobtrusively holstered at his belt, he had none of the attributes of a space-adventurer.

His torch-red hair was uncovered. His tanned and rather handsome face was grave. His cool gray eyes looked as though they could light easily with humor, but their gaze was searching.

Carlin's attention next centered upon the trio who were entering after Captain Future. Carlin rose sharply, astonished. He'd expected three clever, freakish automatons. He hadn't expected these!

"This is Curt Newton," Daniel Crewe was saying quietly to the scientists, "and these are the Futuremen—Simon Wright, Grag and Otho."

Simon Wright, the one known to the System as the Brain, held Carlin's fascinated gaze as he mumbled acknowledgement of introduction.

WRIGHT was totally divorced from human form. His "body" was a small, square transparent case, poised in mid-air on jetted magnetic beams. His face was merely the side of the case on which were his protruding glass lens-eyes and the curious resonator of his mechanical speech-apparatus.

Carlin now remembered the story that people told and that he heard skeptically. If it were true, inside that box was a living human brain. Once it had been the brain of Doctor Simon Wright, brilliant, aged scientist of a generation ago, but when Wright was on the point of death, so they said, his living brain had been surgically removed and placed in the ingenious serum-case which had ever since served him as a mechanical body.

If that story were true—but it must be true, after all, Carlin thought in stunned surprise, for the Brain was speaking to the President, in a metallic, inflectionless voice.

"You said in your telaudio call that the vitron supply is threatened. What's wrong?"

"Yes, what's all this fuss about vitron?" boomed the loud voice of Grag. "It can't be as important as people make out. I never take it."

Grag was a gigantic robot—a metal man, seven feet high, having massive arms and legs and a bulbous head with glowing, photoelectric eyes. Carlin had always believed he was an automaton, constructed with unusual cleverness.

But this robot was no automaton! His blustering comment attested intelligence and perceptions equalling a human's, a powerful mind and personality seated in the robot's complex mechanical brain.

Otho, third of the strange trio of Future-men, was wholly manlike. Yet the stories insisted that he too had been artificially created, that he was an android or synthetic man born in a laboratory long ago.

His slender white figure had a liveness that hinted agility and speed to match the titan strength of Grag. An ironical, reckless personality was mirrored in the android's thin, mobile face and slanted green eyes.

"Of course you don't take vitron—only we humans take it," he said tauntingly to Grag.

Grag appealed loudly to Captain Future. "Chief, I thought you said Otho was to stop insulting me? Did you hear that crack?"

"Cut your rockets, both of you," Captain Future said sharply.

They had sat down around the President's big desk. All except the giant robot whom no ordinary chair would bear, and the brain who hovered silently beside Curt Newton and watched with expressionless lens-eyes.

It was a weird council indeed to gather here in a tower of old New York! Carlin still felt a sense of unreality as he looked at the Brain, robot and android.

These strange Futuremen, this quiet-eyed young Earthman—was it possible that they had done the things with which legend credited them? For the first time, Carlin's numbed mind felt a vague hope.

"You all know how vital the vitron supply is," Crewe was saying. "You ought to know, since it was your joint labors that gave vitron to the System."

Carlin realized the truth of that. Zamok and Lin Sao had discovered vitron in their laboratories, but when the drug proved too complex to synthesize on a large scale, it was

he himself who had developed vitron-plants which had a high content of the substance and could be grown wholesale.

Vitron-plants would grow only in powerful solar radiation and high humidity. In the System, Venus alone met those conditions, and dry land there was limited. It was then that the Futuremen's past explorations of nearby star-systems had revealed that the star Arkar had a planet, Roo, which was ideal for growing vitron-plants. On Roo had been established the colony which now grew the precious vitron for the System.

"And you all know," Crewe continued, "that the System depends for nine-tenths of its vitron on distant Roo. Now that supply is threatened by a rebellion of the Roo colony against the System Government!"

Curt Newton's brows drew together. "Rebellion on Roo? What would start it? What grievance have the colonists?"

"It's the Roons," said the President. "They've been attacking the colonists, raiding their plantations. And the raids are getting worse."

"The Roons?" echoed Otho, puzzled. "The humanoid natives of Roo? I remember them, a primitive people of the red jungles. But they weren't hostile when we first explored Roo ten years ago."

"They weren't hostile to the colonists until a few months ago," Commander Halk Anders said harshly. "Then they suddenly began attacking the colony. We believe someone is deliberately inciting them to hostility!"

"We believe it, but we can't prove it," Crewe said wearily. "The attacks have enraged the colonists. They want to take summary vengeance on the natives. But we can't permit that—it would mean a massacre of the Roons. It would be an evil beginning for our interstellar expansion. We want to stop these raids without slaughtering the inhabitants of Roo." He spread his hands helplessly. "So the agitators for rebellion claim that the System Government won't protect the colony, and that it should secede and declare its independence." Carlin looked troubled.

"We think someone is using this scheme to set up a puppet independent government on Roo and get a monopoly on vitron. Then vitron, which means health and life, would be sold only to those in the System who could pay high prices!"

"A neat profiteering scheme, and not a new one," rasped the Brain. "Remember that fellow

Lu Suur who tried to corner vitron production on Venus, years back?"

"Whatever became of Lu Suur, anyway?" Curt Newton asked thoughtfully.

The President nodded. "We thought of that. The fellow dropped out of sight after the Roo project broke his attempt at monopoly. He might be mixed up in this. Joan and Ezra are checking on him."

"I've been saying that the way to nip this whole rebellion business is to send a big Patrol squadron to Roo and crush the revolt before it begins," Halk Anders cut in harshly.

WEARILY Crewe shook his head. "We've argued that out. The colonists are so inflamed now that any show of force would be interpreted as coercion by the Government, and would bring the rebellion to a head. It would play into Harmer's hands."

"Harmer?" Captain Future's question came sharply.

"Jed Harmer is the leader of the independence movement on Roo. We think he's only a puppet of the real conspirators, whoever they are."

Curt Newton spoke thoughtfully. "Since your reports indicate that those conspirators have deliberately incited the Roons to hostility, why not send secret agents to Roo to expose that fact? If the colonists there learned how they've been tricked, they'd turn against the agitators immediately."

"We did send four of the Patrol's best secret agents to Roo," the President said. "All four of them met death on the way there—'accidentally'. Their identity and purpose had been suspected."

Newton shrugged. "Then the job must be undertaken by agents who know Roo thoroughly yet who will not be suspected."

He looked around their faces. "I think this is a job the seven of us could do—us Futuremen and these three scientists," he said coolly.

Philip Carlin felt an incredulous amazement stiffen his face. "Zamok and Lin and I will go to Roo with you as secret agents? But how—"

"You three have a plausible reason to visit Roo without being suspected," Newton pointed out. "You're the discoverers and developers of vitron, and what more logical than that you should visit Roo again for further research? No one will dream that you're there as Government agents."

"But what do we know about that kind of work?" babbled Lin Sao.

"You know Roo, and that's what will count the most," retorted Captain Future. "Well, will you go?"

Carlin felt stunned. The last thing he had expected was a proposal such as this.

His first impulse was to refuse. He a secret agent? He, the botanist who knew nothing of secret missions, of danger or conspiracies?

Carlin opened his mouth to reject the proposal. Across the desk he met the gray eyes of Captain Future, quietly watching him.

He was never after able to explain it to himself. But with incredulous horror, he heard himself saying, "I'll go, for one."

Zamok nodded in his silent Martian way. And Lin Sao, his plump face eager, added, "I, too! Nobody will profiteer on vitron if I can stop it."

Daniel gazed at Captain Future in distress. "Curt, you Futuremen can't go to Roo," he said. "These three men might not be suspected, but everybody knows that you four are the Government's ace trouble-shooters. If you turn up on Roo, the men behind this thing will know your mission instantly."

"Don't worry, I can dope out a disguise for myself and the chief that'll fool everybody," Otho boasted.

"Yes, but how about Simon and me?" Grag demanded loudly. "You can't disguise us with your make-up tricks."

Newton spoke to the President. "Don't worry, sir—I have a plan by which we Futuremen can go to Roo without arousing suspicion."

"But I still don't see—," Grag began to complain, puzzled.

"I'll explain on the way to Venus, Grag," said Curt Newton.

"Venus?" repeated Commander Anders, his hard face betraying surprise.

Newton nodded. "The supply ships for Roo take off from Venusopolis, don't they? Well, that's where our trail begins."

He gave rapid instructions to Carlin, Zamok and Lin Sao. "You three will go separately from us to Roo, immediately. Take the first ship and announce you've come for research on certain vitron problems."

Carlin nodded. "But what do we do when we get there?"

"Just fake some research until we get into touch with you," Captain Future said. "You'll hear from us, never fear. And— trust nobody."

The rest of their plans were swiftly laid. Newton gave no hint of his own intentions. But

when the Futuremen left, Daniel Crewe voiced another anxious warning.

"Captain Future, you seven will be on your own, there on Roo. We can't send you help, for as I said, that would precipitate the rebellion. And you'll find few there who aren't with the rebels. It'll be you seven against all Roo!"

Newton smiled understandingly. "I know. But we seven know Roo, and we've all got a personal stake in this. I think we have a chance."

Later Carlin stood at the window with the two scientists and Commander and President, watching a small ship streak an arc of rocket-fire toward the zenith above New York. The Futuremen were on their way to Venus—and Roo.

Roo, world of Arkar! His dismayed thoughts leaped out to that far, alien world in whose deadly and secret struggle he too was now involved.

So distant from the familiar Solar System, and so strange, that foreign world. Its unearthly red sunlight and crimson jungles, its ocher seas and brazen sky, its weird night-dragons flitting beneath the dark moon—they rose in Carlin's memory now.

Yet, somehow, Philip Carlin did not feel as appalled as he would have expected. Somehow he felt a buoyant throb of excited confidence, communicated to him by the strange quartet who were to be his comrades in this secret struggle of seven against a world.

CHAPTER II

Night on Venus

UNQUESTIONABLY, the great spaceport at Venusopolis is an epitome of the aspirations and limitations of man.

Here, in breathtaking beauty, the shimmering traffic-tower rises into the night, pointing like a shining finger at the distant planets and the far more distant stars toward which the great ships take off with thunderous crash of rockets. Watching those ships go out, one can believe man is a god.

But leave the spaceport and walk through the sordid huddle of shabby streets around it, and you see the god's feet of clay. Beyond the ring of mountainous warehouses that hold the ores from Mercury and grain and frozen meat from Saturn, the machinery from nearby Earth and the precious vitron from faraway Arkar, lies the zone known as the "Belt."

The Belt is a shabby slum battenning upon spacemen, adventurers, merchants and less-identifiable characters who flow into Venus through the spaceport.

It has seemed incongruous to more than one observer that men who have known the beauty and wonder of the starways should find relaxation in the tawdry drinking-places and amusements of this place.

But human nature changes slowly, too slowly to match the swift, rising beat of a star-conquering civilization.

Rab Cain had some such thought as he unobtrusively made his way along a thronged, mist-choked main avenue of the Belt.

"An ugly, tawdry place," he thought wryly. "Still, it's lucky for me right now that there's such a district as this on Venus."

Cain stiffened suddenly. Two planet Patrol officers approaching along the foggy street. One was a Martian, one a sharp-eyed Mercurian, and they were keenly eying passing faces.

"If they ask to see my papers, I'm done!" Rab Cain started to sweat.

He tried to look as inconspicuous, as law-abiding, as possible. But that was not easy for Rab Cain.

His face was not the face of a law-abiding, commonplace citizen. It was a tough young Earthman's face—the dark features subtly hardened and worn by time, and with a livid straight scar across the left cheek which was only too obviously an old atom-gun wound.

Cain fervently hoped that the deadly little atom-pistol he packed in his jacket was not bulging enough to betray its presence. The two Patrol officers were looking at him very sharply as they closed in.

Fortune favored him. A towering Saturnian spaceman further along the street chose that moment to come to blows with a Venusian whose girl he had been ogling. The small uproar drew the Patrol men forward in a run. Rab Cain uttered a breath of relief.

"If they'd picked me up now, it would sure be tough!" he muttered.

The streets were risky for him, he knew. But just ahead glowed the sign of his destination, the Inn of a Thousand Strangers.

The resorts of the Belt ran to flowery names.

Basically, they were all the same—shabby rooms choked with green rial-smoke, half-drunken patrons and the haunting wail of Venusian music.

They were not as bad as they looked. Slumming parties from the sea-garden suburbs of Venusopolis might find them excitingly suggestive of outlaws and "planet-jumpers". There were a few of these. But most of the patrons were simply space-weary men who craved a few hours fun.

Cain pushed his way into the Inn of a Thousand Strangers, avoided the noisy crowd at the bar and took a small table in a shadowy corner.

No one noticed him in the chatter of loud voices and throb of music.

Four Venusians in the opposite corner picked at their cross-strung guitars and sang swampland songs in a muted undertone.

"Ah, let's have some real spaceman's music instead of that wailing," bellowed a merry, half-drunken Jovian spaceman. "Play 'Wind Between the Worlds!'"

Cain inserted a square coin into the automatic service-pump at the center of his table and turned the selector to "whisky." A plastic tumbler of brown liquid popped out.

As he drank, he kept his eyes on the door. Not too steadily, but he watched it with a furtiveness that made more than one casual observer put him down as a planet-jumper dodging the Patrol.

*"The wind that blows between the worlds
Has carried me from home—"*

They were bawling it out, a dozen motley, merry spacemen who had bought the illusion of good cheer for a brief hour between voyages.

*"It never now will let me go
And till I die I'll roam."*

CAIN smiled mirthlessly as he lowered his glass. The song was peculiarly appropriate in his own case, he thought.

He stiffened to attention. He was looking at the door, and a gush of mist had just come in the door, and someone had come with it.

It was not a Planet Patrol man. It was a tall, brown-faced young Earthman whose torch-red hair was bare, and whose gray eyes were keenly searching the smoke-fogged room.

But behind that tall Earthman were two figures whom everyone in the Inn of a Thousand Strangers recognized at once, even though they had never seen them before.

Not human, those two figures. One, a towering, steely robot, gigantic, awesome, his

metal head swivelling, photoelectric eyes glaring.

The other, a poised, floating box that had watchful lens-eyes.

"The futuremen!" shrilled a voice, incredulous. "That's Captain Future!"

Rab Cain half rose from his chair, his dark face frozen, his glass dropping from his hand. The click of the plastic tumbler on the floor brought the eyes of Captain Future instantly toward him.

Captain Future started across the room.

A hundred pairs of eyes followed him, the gliding Brain, the clanking, towering Grag.

This was an event almost without precedent, this was a thing a man would tell of for years. These people would have been less astounded had the System President walked into the tawdry establishment.

Captain Future was a name, a legend of the starways. He was even more than that, to nine hundred and ninety-nine people out of a thousand.

The distorted, magnified tales of the Futuremen and their exploits on far worlds and stars were told as of an adventurer of another age.

And now, suddenly, here they were—Captain Future and two of his famous band, walking into this commonplace tavern of Venusopolis!

Small wonder that the faces here watched him with intense interest, incredulous astonishment, and in some cases with fear.

Fear! It was naked on Rab Cain's dark face for all to see as the Futuremen came across the room toward him.

Captain Future's gray eyes bored into Cain's face. "You're Rab Cain? We want you."

Cain found his voice.

"I've done nothing!" he said hoarsely.

Captain Future's lips tightened. His voice was a whiplash.

"Nothing that the Patrol can hold you for, maybe. But I'm not the Patrol."

"You've no authority to arrest me!" Cain exclaimed

"Authority?" boomed the huge robot, in disgust, "If the little rat wants authority, I'll show him some."

Grag started forward.

Captain Future shook his head. He did not take his eyes off the cornered man in front of him.

"Cain, you're coming with us."

As he spoke, Captain Future started to draw the atom-pistol at his belt to enforce the command.

Desperation, and raw terror, flashed into Rab Cain's sullen eyes.

"You're not taking me, even if you are the Futuremen!" he yelled.

Now the frozen throng saw Rab Cain do a mad, a suicidal thing. They saw him snatch out an atom-pistol from inside his jacket.

He was crazed with panic to do such a thing, all knew. No man ever had matched blazing atom-guns with Captain Future and won. They knew that the scared young Earthman was good as dead already.

Captain Future's hand moved with blurring speed to bring up his own half-drawn weapon.

More than human seemed the swiftness of the movement—

Then the unexpected, the totally unprecedented, happened! It is said that even the most skillful fighting-man will find some day that the averages are against him, that in time he must make a slip.

Captain Future's clean, swift draw suddenly caught and dragged. Had his atom-pistol caught on the holster? Nobody could see. It was over too soon for that.

Rab Cain's atom-pistol flashed a streak of blinding energy. The redhaired planeteer had his gun only half raised. A thin scorching blast struck Captain Future's side!

THE redhaired planeteer uttered a choking cry, and fell with his weapon dropping from his nerveless hand.

"Chief!" yelled Grag the robot, leaping forward to the side of the fallen leader, a note of awful anxiety in his tones.

Rab Cain stood petrified, looking almost stupidly at the fallen man, as though he could not yet believe he had really done this.

Nor was his astonishment greater than the incredulous amazement that stunned the watching crowd.

"Gods of space, he's dropped Captain Future!" yelled a wild voice.

Then—mad confusion. The Brain rushing forward, and Grag leaping up from his fallen leader with a booming, unhuman cry of rage.

Rab Cain jumped back, the gun in his hand spitting crashes of lightning. He was aiming at the big cluster of krypton-lights in the ceiling. The shattering of them clapped darkness on the room.

Screams of women, hoarse, bawling yells, and over everything the heart-stopping, booming roar of the maddened robot. "Captain Future's been killed!"

Rab Cain plunged through the whirl of dark figures toward the door. He used the butt end of his gun to smack yelling, shadowy figures out of his way.

He burst out into the misty, darkness of the street. Then he was running at top speed through the shrouding fog.

He thanked the stars for the fog which was rolling in thicker from the swamplands as he ran. It blanketed the uproar behind him, made his running figure half invisible.

He headed toward the spaceport. He had to get there, and get there fast before the Planet Patrol could stop him.

CHAPTER III

Secret Stratagem

VENUSOPOLIS lies upon a long, wide ridge between the swampland and the sea. The Venusians, always the most aesthetic people in the System, have preempted its shore for their beautiful floating villas and "sea-garden" suburbs. Mere commercial structures are relegated to the swampward side. Among those structures stood one whose nature would have been instantly recognized by any citizen of the nine worlds. The stations of the far-flung Planet Patrol are always the same in appearance, from Mercury to Pluto. There is always a square, grim black two-storied synthestone building, and behind it a big landing-court for the cruisers that maintain the law in space.

The Patrol station in Venusopolis showed lights from one upper window tonight. In that office, two people were working late. Both were high-ranking members of the Patrol. One was an old man, the other a girl.

Joan Randall did not wear the Patrol uniform. Secret agents of the Patrol's famous Section Four never do. She was wearing a plain white silk zipper-suit that made her dark young beauty incongruous in this place.

Her brown eyes were tired as she looked up from the mass of papers on the desk. "The name of Lu Suur is not on any of these passenger-lists, Ezra."

"You've covered every ship he could have taken?" asked Ezra Gurney, white-haired veteran marshal of the Patrol.

It was significant he spoke to the girl as to another man. The girl had served the great organization of law for a handful of years—the man for a lifetime. Yet in Joan's soft features was the same intent look as in Gurney's weathered face.

"Lu Suur disappeared from Venus eight years ago," she pointed out. "He vanished right after his attempt to create a vitron-monopoly here had been balked. I've checked the passenger-list of every ship that left here at that time. He was not on any of them, but he probably used an assumed name."

She looked disconsolately out the open window from whence came a lilt of gay music from the dance-palaces out in the sea-gardens.

Ezra Gurney was watching her with wise old eyes. "Cap'n Future's still home, isn't he? Wouldn't wonder he'd be droppin' in at Earth, one of these days."

Her brown eyes met his, without attempt at evasion. "Yes, Ezra," she said quietly. "That's why I'd like to get back to Earth."

Ezra dropped his chaffing manner. His face showed contrition. "I'm sorry, Joan. Didn't mean to tease you. You know how fond of you I am."

She smiled. "I know, Ezra."

"And because I am," he continued with sudden feeling, "I wish you'd never met Curt Newton."

She looked surprised and hurt. "Why do you say that?"

"Because if you'd never met Cap'n Future, you'd be married by now to some nice young fellow and have a real home, instead of bein' a number in Section Four of the Patrol, and, eatin' your heart out for a man who'll never marry and settle down like other men."

"Ezra, you're talking nonsense!" she said hotly. "You must be out of your mind, to say that—"

Joan stopped, ruefully. "I'm sorry, Ezra. I know you meant it for my own good. But it's just no good talking. There's never been anyone else for me since I met Curt. And I know he loves me. Someday he'll stop space-roving, someday he'll want a home on Earth like any other man."

"He would, if he were like any other man," warned the old marshal. "But he isn't, Joan. You know as well as I do what kind of an upbringing he had—an orphaned baby, raised there on the wild Moon by a Brain, a robot and an android. A boy who never even saw another man until he was nearly a man himself! He's

different from the rest of us. He'll always be different."

"Is that any way for one of his oldest friends to talk about Captain Future?" demanded the girl.

Her voice seemed to echo back and forth in the room, like a queer reverberation from walls and floor.

"Captain Future—" it whispered.

IT WASN'T an echo! It came from the telaudio loudspeaker down in the station office. Joan jumped to her feet.

At that moment a breathless Mercurian lieutenant of the Patrol burst into the office.

"Marshal Gurney—Agent Randall—a flash just came in from one of our cruiser-cars!" he cried. "Captain Future has been badly hurt in a gun-fight down in the Belt!"

"Curt on Venus?" exclaimed Joan incredulously. "It's impossible!"

"No doubt about it—he and two of the Futuremen went into the Inn of a Thousand Strangers after an Earthman named Rab Cain," rattled off the officer. "Cain shot it out, and Captain Future was hurt. Cain got away."

Ezra Gurney exploded. "Expect us to believe that a cheap crook could match atom-guns with Cap'n Future? It's crazy!"

"Ezra, come on!" cried Joan, urgently.

As a Patrol rocket-car whirled them westward through the mist-shrouded streets of Venusopolis, Ezra was still muttering angrily.

"Some fool officer must have got excited and lost his head to turn in a report like that. Cap'n Future losin' a gun-fight?"

So many times had he and Joan Randall witnessed Curt Newton's phenomenal speed and efficiency in combat, that the old veteran could not conceive the possibility that the famous planeteer could be outmatched in a fight.

But Joan's first similar incredulity was giving way to a frightening foreboding. Always, that foreboding had been at the back of her mind. Always she had recognized the grim fact that even the most courageous and resourceful of men could not forever challenge risks without someday losing.

"Go faster!" she urged the officer driving.

"Use the screamer."

The Mercurian at the wheel flung her a startled look. They were already tearing through the misty streets at a dangerous rate, the infra-red foglamps barely illuminating the way ahead.

Yet he floorboarded the cyc-pedal and pressed a button that flung a shrill, almost supersonic note far ahead of the rushing machine. That screaming vibration, never used by the Patrol except in emergencies, cleared streets ahead of them like magic.

They tore into the shabby slum of the Belt. Far beyond it, the vague, glimmering spire of the spaceport traffic-tower lifted above the heavier ground-banks of fog. A big ship there was rising ponderously out of the mist on flaming keel-jets, disappearing in the sky.

Then the rocket-car's brakes skidded it sidewise as they came upon a crowd jamming the street ahead.

"This is the place!" exclaimed the Mercurian lieutenant as they jumped out. "Make way, there—Patrol business!"

"Captain Future dying! Future—dead!"

They rang in Joan's ears like a knell, those hoarse phrases babbled by the excited crowd through which they pushed. Her cold dread deepened.

Ironically, the krypton sign of the Inn of a Thousand Strangers beamed greeting above the door. She went inside, hardly conscious of the taut-faced Patrol officers already here, their urgent voices, the staring crowd around the wall of the smoke-choked, shabby room.

She could see only the little group in the center of the floor. A lithe, red-haired man who lay face upward. The giant figure of Grag crouched over him, and poised above the prostrate figure was the uncannily hovering box of the Brain.

"Simon—Grag!" She ran toward them.

Big Grag whirled, his glaring photoelectric eyes fixed on her and Ezra in amazement.

"Joan! You and Ezra here?"

She ignored the question. "Let me see Curt!"

Newton lay limp and unresponsive, eyes closed. His face was a waxy white. Then her heart contracted, as she saw the gaping, blackened wound in his side, midway between shoulder and waist.

Simon Wright's lens-eyes looked at her unfathomably. "Steady now, Joan. He's badly hurt but not dead."

The room seemed to waltz slowly around her, and she was grateful for the rigidity of Grag's mighty arm supporting her.

"How did it happen?" Ezra was mumbling, his faded eyes wild and incredulous.

"The chief's atom-pistol caught in his holster and that fellow Cain got the jump on him—"

then shot out the lights and escaped!" raged Grag. "But we'll get him!"

A MARTIAN captain of the Patrol came running across the room, his red face sweating.

"Just got a call from one of our men at the spaceport," he reported. "We were too late. The man Rab Cain got away—took passage in the Starfarer, the emigrant ship bound for Arkar."

"Then order a squadron of cruisers out to bring the Starfarer back!" roared Ezra.

"No, wait!" said the Brain urgently. "You can't do that. Cain would plead self-defense. Technically we had no right to arrest him. We Futuremen will take care of him."

"But he's on his way to Arkar—trillions of miles outside the System!" objected Ezra strenuously.

"Never fear, he can't go so far we can't find him," retorted the Brain, his metallic voice cold with menace. "That can come later. We've got Curtis to take care of now. We'll take him to the Comet—I can treat his wound better there. Our ship's parked out at the edge of the swampland. Get a rocket-car."

The only thing clear in Joan's mind was the still, waxy face of Captain Future as they carried him out through the mist and laid him on the floor of the car. Ezra took the wheel, and they started westward through the misty streets.

She looked up from Captain Future, to find Grag and Simon were looking at her strangely.

"Joan, there's something to tell you," said the Brain. "But first, I want to explain that we didn't know you were here in Venusopolis. Curt thought you had gone back to Earth with your report by now."

"That's why he didn't let me know you were here?" she said. "It doesn't matter now."

"It does matter," insisted Simon. "You see, we couldn't explain things back there in the cafe. Too many people were watching and we had to play the part we had prepared, even when you and Ezra unexpectedly appeared."

"Simon, what are you getting at?" She looked at the Brain with sudden intentness.

"The fact is," blurted out Grag, "that it was all a strategem on the chiefs' part. He wasn't really hurt at all."

"Curt not wounded?" she gasped. "But he--"

Her breath stopped. Curt Newton was sitting up in the floor of the car, looking in a shamefaced fashion.

"I'm sorry we had to give you such a shock, Joan," he said earnestly. "You see—"

"It doesn't matter, you don't have to explain!" she cried. Happiness and relief choked her.

"Curt, just to know you're all right—"

"That's what I'm trying to explain," he persisted in distress. "You see, Joan, I'm not Curt at all."

To her amazement, he put his hands to his face. Waxite plugs came deftly away, elastic flesh smoothed into new features, a false wig of curly red hair came off.

And it was Otho the android who was looking at her with embarrassment!

"It was Otho, disguised as Curtis, all the time," Simon explained. "The 'wound' in his side was faked—he wore a ray-proof vest. We had to do this, Joan. We've got a big job ahead, one of the biggest."

He told her, then, of the threat of rebellion on distant Roo, of what it meant to the vitron supply, and of the determination of the Futuremen and the three scientists to go to Roo as secret agents.

"Curt had to get to Roo in disguise without being suspected," Simon continued. "To make sure nobody would dream he was there, we staged this little drama tonight so that everyone will know Captain Future has been badly wounded and is lying helpless back here in the System."

"No one will dream that Curt is really out on this mission. And when we Futuremen go to Roo, we'll do so secretly. Even if the men we're after there learn of our coming, they won't think we can do much without Curt to lead us."

"But where is Curt, now?" cried the bewildered girl.

"He's already on his way to Roo," was the answer. "Otho worked out an effective disguise for him, too. Curtis is 'Rab Cain!'"

CHAPTER IV

In the Abyss

LIKE a giant, silvery torpedo, the Starfarer lay in its semi-sunken cradle, the streamlined sweep of its hull broken only by the low hump of the bridge and the massive drive-ring at the tail. Porthole lights gleamed through the mist, and light spilled through open space-doors down the busy gangways.

It seemed incredible that this inert mass of metal could of its own power leap trillions of miles to another star. That was why the

departure of one of the big star-ships was still an event, to a generation that was accustomed to ordinary interplanetary voyages. Only in the last ten years had men begun to stride out to foreign stars.

"Twenty minutes to take-off!" shouted loudspeakers across the misty spaceport. "Board at once—Door Two!"

Curt Newton, in his disguise as Rab Cain, raced across the foggy tarmac toward the beckoning second door of the great bulk, after paying emigrant's passage to Roo. There was a little crowd of such emigrants ahead of him, going up the gangway.

"Show your passage papers—and hurry!" shouted a steward at the top of the gangway. "Emigrants' salon just ahead."

From the top of the gangway, Captain Future looked back with a nervousness which was not assumed. If Patrol cars dashed up now, before the take-off, it would ruin his plan.

It was enough for him merely to travel to distant Roo in disguised identity. The conspirators there would sooner or later investigate his back trail. Their thoroughness was proved by the "accidental" deaths of the Patrol secret agents first sent out.

It must look as though he, Rab Cain, had shot Captain Future and boarded the star-ship to escape. Since they had not dared risk leakage of their scheme by telling the Planet Patrol, the Patrol could ruin it now by seizing him before the ship took off.

"We've cut it pretty fine," Newton thought tautly. "But Grag and Simon should be able to delay a Patrol alarm from going out at once."

"All emigrants, this way!" a steward was saying loudly. "Move forward—don't block the corridor."

The emigrants' salon proved a large square room, with portholes at one side, and dozens of recoil-chairs. Corridors branched off of it, where there were many small cabins each accommodating two passengers.

The emigrants in this big room numbered more than a hundred. Curt Newton's eyes ran quickly over them. About three-fourths were men—only a few courageous souls took families with them to Roo. A majority of the men were decent-looking representatives of several of the System planets, but there were a number of tough-looking individuals.

An annunciator on the wall spoke authoritatively. "Captain Kasro speaking! We take off in ten minutes. You must either be in

your bunks or strapped into recoil-chairs, in five minutes. Do not leave your chairs or bunks until further announcement."

Newton found a recoil-chair and strapped himself in. Inwardly he was listening tensely for a Patrol car's screamer.

"I'm John Gordon and this is my wife," said the young Earthman on his right. He stuck out his hand. "Guess we're to be fellow-passengers."

Captain Future liked the look of Gordon, a wiry, pleasant-faced young fellow whose wife was a pale, pretty girl. But he kept up his part.

"My name's Rab Cain," he muttered, looking nervously at the door. "Wish we'd hurry and take off."

The hulking Jovian in the chair on his left guffawed derisively. "You won't be so eager when we do take off! They say the acceleration on these star-ships tears a man apart."

"John, that isn't so, is it?" murmured the pale girl to her husband.

"Of course not," Gordon said, with an indignant glance at the Jovian. "They only use ordinary rockets for the take-off from Venus. Then when we get outside the space-lanes they start the vibration-drive for high speed—but they use a cushioning stasis of force to reduce the drag. The man at the Emigrant Bureau explained it all to me."

Captain Future listened with a wry smile. He and the Futuremen had invented both the vibration-drive and the stasis-cushion.

That seemed a long time ago, he thought, but it was really—only ten years. Yet, those ten years had brought great things from the invention he had given to the System.

NOW he was going starward again. But alone this time, in another identity, bound for a world of deadly intrigue and danger.

"One minute to take-off!" the annunciator said sharply.

A nervous stir ran over the emigrants. A steward darted into the salon, inspected them quickly, then entered his own recoil-chair. Space-doors had shut, oxygenators were throbbing.

The rockets let go with a muffled roar. Hydro-springs screamed protest under their chairs as the Starfarer lurched skyward. The rockets fired steadily. Through the porthole, Newton glimpsed the misty, shadowed sphere of Venus dropping rapidly away.

A half-hour later, the rockets were cut off. They were outside the space-lanes, ready for the real start of the interstellar leap.

"Stasis on!" warned the annunciator. "Keep your chairs!"

A pale glow of force bathed the salon. But it was force, not light—a subtle stasis that now gripped everything in the ship.

"I guess this is where they turn on the drive," John Gordon said uncertainly to his wife. He patted her hand. "It won't bother us."

No rockets roared, this time. But Captain Future heard the low hum of the vibration-drive start a moment before the Starfarer leaped forward with incredible velocity through space.

That sudden acceleration would have crushed them like flies, but for the cushion of the stasis. The protecting aura of force was like a tangible, elastic medium surrounding them, pervading even their bodies to prevent internal injuries.

Newton was used to the sickening drag and shock. But he pretended apprehension and nausea equal to those of his fellow-passengers. He heard a yelp of terror from a Mercurian opposite him, and a woman's choking cry.

The dragging sensation lessened. The eery yellow glow of the stasis dimmed, now they had built up the first high velocity.

"Take-off completed," came the reassuring announcement. "You may leave your chairs until the next acceleration-period."

"Look out the window there!" cried an astounded Martian. "Look at space!"

The emigrants, noisy now with relief and still a little shaky, crowded around the porthole windows, and cried out in wonder.

The Starfarer was plunging at a nightmare rate through a dark and awesome abyss. There was nothing but blackness and emptiness and stars.

The passengers' own Solar System, the yellow spark of the Sun, was almost invisible in a twisted blur of distorted light-rays behind. Ahead, the small red speck of Arkar could just be seen, as remote and detached as the other stars.

"The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament showeth His handiwork," quoted the awed John Gordon, watching with his wife.

The girl shuddered. "It's so empty, so lonely, out here."

Curt Newton knew how these people felt. He had felt it many times himself. Never could

these cold vastnesses become commonplace to him.

"It's so far!" Ruth Gordon was whispering, looking toward Arkar's red spark. "Our own Sun and Earth—trillions of miles away."

"We'll come back," Gordon said stoutly. "In ten years we'll make a fortune growing vitron out there on Roo. Then we'll return."

She smiled bravely up at him. Captain Future, watching, felt a queer envy of their happiness.

It made him think of Joan Randall. He had not seen her before leaving on this dangerous business. Now he wished it could have been otherwise.

Newton brought his mind sharply back to his immediate task. He must lose no time in establishing the new character he meant to assume.

Hating his chosen role, Curt Newton forced himself to speak out loudly and offensively.

"Cursed if I couldn't use a drink, after that take-off! Why the devil won't they let you bring liquor aboard, anyway?"

The big, rough Jovian near him grinned knowingly. "You can bring it if you know how to hide it, Earthman."

The green-skinned man of Jupiter reached into his jacket and brought out a flat bottle. "Marsh brandy—have some."

Gordon frowned with disapproval. "There's strict rules against drinking on a space-ship."

"Rules?" jeered Curt Newton. "I don't live by rules. I'm leaving the blasted System to get away from some of their rules."

The Jovian guffawed. "Me too, Earthman. I'm Jok Korrin. Signed out to Roo as an emigrant. Told 'em I was a farmer—ha, ha!"

THE marsh-brandy stung Newton's throat but he wiped his lips appreciatively as he handed the bottle back. "Same here," he grunted. "I'm hanged if I'm going to grub vitron-plants on Roo."

A scrawny Saturnian with fishy eyes in a dull gray face, who had given his name as Li Sharn, heard this.

"There's lots of planet-jumpers hiding out on Roo, already," he said gibingly to Newton.

Newton swaggered. "I'm no scared planet-jumper," he boasted. "You'd be surprised if you knew just why I'm on this cursed ship." His loud voice, the presence of the bottle, had drawn a dozen of the tougher-looking emigrants around. Gordon and the other men with wives had drawn away in distaste.

Captain Future noticed that, and felt that his efforts were succeeding. He was, from the very outset of the voyage, establishing the character in which he desired to appear on Roo.

"I could tell you something about what I've done that you wouldn't believe," he boasted. "But I'm not one to brag."

"Listen to the Earthman," jeered the Saturnian, Li Sharn. "You'd think to hear him talk he was the Falcon and John Had-don rolled into one."

"Maybe not, but I did something neither of those cursed space-pirates ever was able to do," said Newton wisely. "Only, I'm not talking."

John Gordon pushed his way into the group. His clean-cut face was stern with suppressed anger.

"There are women in this salon," Gordon snapped. "You men can either control your language or go to your cabins."

Jok Kerrin turned on him wrathfully. "Who do you think you are, Earthman? Go to your own cabin, if you don't like the way we talk."

Gordon clenched his fist and swung at the Jovian. Newton grabbed his arm. "You can't hit any friend of mine!" Captain Future blustered.

"What's going on here?" demanded a new, authoritative voice.

The tall, gimlet-eyed Venusian who spoke wore the uniform and insignia of ship-captain. Two other officers were with him, and an excited steward.

The wrangling group hastily split up. The steward was pointing at Curt Newton.

"That's the man, sir—the one called Rab Cain."

Captain Kasro advanced and stared into Newton's scarred, disguised face. "You're Rab Cain? You boarded this ship at Venus-opolis just before take-off?"

Captain Future knew what was coming. He counterfeited mingled sullenness and apprehension. "That's my name. What of it?"

"We just received a message about you from Venusopolis, by undimensional-wave," Kasro said. "You're the man who gravely wounded Captain Future in a fight there just before our take-off."

"Captain Future wounded by this man Cain?" cried John Gordon incredulously.

"Badly wounded—they say he's still living but that's about all," said Captain Kasro.

Newton saw the shock in the faces of the decent immigrants.

"Any rat who would try to murder Captain Future deserves to be lynched!" exclaimed Gordon wrathfully.

CHAPTER V *World of Arkar*

HOURLY Captain Future had expected the news of the "shooting" to catch up to him. Starships these days, even though traveling faster than light, maintained instantaneous communication by the undimensional wave that carried telaudio signals in a short-cut across dimensions.

But Curt Newton hadn't expected such fierce indignation toward Rab Cain. It took him aback, momentarily. Nevertheless, he had to brazen out his part.

"I shot Captain Future in self-defense!" he sneered. "He drew his atom-gun on me—and I protected myself."

"If Captain Future drew a weapon on you, he undoubtedly had good reason," said the ship captain in a blistering tone.

A chorus of agreement came from most of the crowd around them. Newton bared snarling teeth.

"Did the Planet Patrol say they wanted me?" he demanded.

"N-no!" admitted Captain Kasro reluctantly.

"You see?" said Newton in triumph. "They didn't put any charge against me because they knew it was self-defense. So you've got no right to bully me."

The captain bit his lip. "Technically, you're correct. Just the same, Cain, I warn you that we're watching you. The first disorder you cause on this ship, you go into the brig." He turned on his heel and left the crowd. Curt Newton looked around the black faces of the emigrants, swaggering defiantly.

"Nobody can bluff Rab Cain," he boasted. "Not Captain Future, even. He tried it, and he got his."

"Cain, I wouldn't be in your shoes!" said John Gordon, showing his dislike. "The reason the Patrol made no charge against you is obvious—the Futuremen intend to take care of you themselves for wounding their leader. And heaven help you when those three catch up to you some day."

Curt Newton grew boastful. "I'm not afraid of them."

Gordon and most of the other emigrants turned away from him in disgust. But some of

the tougher element remained, eying Rab Cain with new respect.

"You really beat out Future himself in a gun-fight?" muttered Jok Kerrin incredulously. "I can hardly believe that Future couldn't handle you."

"Maybe you think I'm soft?" rasped Curt Newton, scowling. "Maybe you'd like to try me out, Jovian?"

"Take it easy, Cain," advised the fishy-eyed Saturnian, Li Sharn. "Nobody here is hunting trouble."

Newton saw that he had made an impression as a tough, quarrelsome character. That was what he wanted, for his purpose was to penetrate the rebellious conspiracy on Roo as quickly as possible. The best way to do that was to join the rebellious party, to work from the inside. With Rab Cain already a marked trouble-maker, his chances of that were better.

Time after time, in the hours that followed, the emigrants had to return to the recoil-chairs while the vibration-drive again went on. The Starfarer was methodically building up speed. Already it was streaking through the abyss ten times faster than light—a velocity thought impossible a century before, when there had persisted a faulty conception of the relation of velocity to mass.

Captain Future heard John Gordon reassure his wife. "Only four more days of acceleration-periods. Then we get a week's rest before they start decelerating."

"I'll be glad when we're safely in Roo," murmured the girl.

Li Sharn, the Saturnian, heard her and laughed mirthlessly. "Safety? There's no safety on Roo, these days."

"What do you mean?" demanded Gordon. "The Government emigration bureau told us that Roo's natural conditions are good for System people."

"The Government paints a rosy picture to get emigrants," retorted Li Sharn. "They got me to emigrate to Roo, four years ago, but now it's so dangerous I'm trying to sell my holding. I've been back to the System for that purpose."

Captain Future saw dismay appear on the faces of the listening emigrants. "What's so dangerous on Roo?" Gordon demanded.

"The Roons," answered the Saturnian. "The natives of the red jungles are an un-human lot of devils who have turned hostile in the last year. They raid the plantations on the fringes

of the colony, burn and kill and destroy, and then vanish into the jun-gle."

"But surely," put in a slow-spoken, stocky young Jovian emigrant, "surely the System Government will stop all that?"

LI SHARN looked at him cynically. "When you get to Roo, you'll find out the Government won't raise a finger to protect the colony. What do those bureaucrats in Great New York care about our troubles when we're trillions of miles away? Why, they won't even give us arms to defend ourselves."

John Gordon spoke firmly. "I don't believe it. The System Government isn't perfect, but it has always worked for the good of all its peoples."

Li Sharn shrugged. "You'll change your mind when you get to Roo."

Captain Future saw the emigrants were troubled after the Saturnian had strolled away. Li Sharn had sown a seed of doubt.

"And he did it deliberately," thought Curt Newton. "Maybe this Saturnian is a lead to the conspiracy."

Newton had suddenly realized the conspirators on Roo might have agents on these emigrant ships to foster anti-Government sentiment.

"Devilish clever," thought Captain Future. "They start their propagandage before they reach Roo."

He strolled after Li Sharn. "You've lived on Roo four years?" he said. "Maybe you can tell me what I can find to do there?"

"The government office will give you a free land-grant for a plantation, and sell you tools and vitron-seeds at cost," Li Sharn answered.

"I don't want to sweat raising vitron!" grumbled Newton. "I'm only on my way to Roo because this ship was the first craft out of Venusopolis when I was in a hurry."

But the Saturnian remained non committal. "You'll find something to do. There are always opportunities on a world like Roo."

Curt was disappointed. But he still believed Li Sharn was connected with the rebellion party, and watched the Saturnian closely in the next few days.

The acceleration-periods ceased, and the Starfarer now moved silently in what seemed no more than a crawl through these vast spaces. The oppressiveness of interstellar space was telling on the emigrants. They had been excited and noisy the first few days, but that had faded away.

These people, Captain Future knew, were discovering the difference between interstellar and interplanetary travel. There was nothing out here but the vast gloom of darkness and the pinpoint stars. You didn't feel as though you were traveling toward a destination. You felt as though your ship and all on it were falling headlong through an infinite abyss.

Li Sharn increased the depression of the emigrants by spreading his propaganda of fear, until John Gordon flared up at the Saturnian, on the fifteenth day. "Why do you keep discouraging these people? You've got most of them worried sick."

Li Sharn shrugged. "It's not my fault that things are like that on Roo. It's the fault of the System Government."

"The System Government gave us our chance to emigrate to Roo, and I don't want to hear any more criticism of it," snapped Gordon.

Captain Future saw the chance. He strode forward, scowling at Gordon. "Who says Li Sharn can't talk? Do you think you own this ship?"

Gordon eyed him with cold antagonism. "Cain, you stay out of this. You're lucky that you haven't been space-jettisoned by the decent people on this ship."

Newton uttered an angry roar and swung at John Gordon's chin. Gordon ducked back. Next moment, they were exchanging blows.

An excited ring of emigrants formed around them. Nine-tenths of them shouted for Gordon.

Curt Newton meant only to prolong the fight until it was broken up. He didn't really want to hurt Gordon, and purposely missed most of his vicious-looking swings. Gordon was a hard, fast boxer. The young emigrant's fist collided with Newton's jaw and sent him sprawling back on the floor, half-dazed.

A yell of jubilation went up from the throng of onlookers. "That's giving it to the rat, Gordon!"

Captain Future, seething with assumed fury, glared up at Gordon. "It's lucky I ain't got my gun on me!" he yelled.

"That's the only time space-scum like you are ever dangerous, with atom-guns!" said Gordon, turning away in contempt.

CURT NEWTON got up and found himself deserted. Sullenly he slunk out of the salon and he stood rubbing his chin by a corridor porthole. Li Sharn came up to him.

"It was foolish of you to mix into that, Cain," said the Saturnian. "I can take care of my own arguments."

"You and your arguments weren't what got me going," Captain Future growled. "It was Gordon sticking up for the Government."

The Saturnian's fishy eyes narrowed. "You don't like the System Government?"

Newton's reply was a blistering oath. "The cursed Government and its prying officials broke up the best business I ever had. It wasn't enough for them to get holy about what I was doing, they had to send Captain Future to pester me."

Li Sharn's voice was casual. "Well, I suppose I owe you something for your efforts. I may be able to get you some kind of a job on Roo." The Saturnian made no further promises.

But after he had gone on, Captain Future felt a small thrill of hope. He rubbed his chin ruefully and grinned.

"I'm beginning to like that chap Gordon," he murmured.

"Deceleration-period!" warned the annunciators. "All into recoil-chairs!"

They decelerated with increasing frequency in the next few days. For now Arkar, a small, flaring red sun, was becoming visibly larger.

On the twentieth day, Arkar filled a quarter of the heavens ahead. The star, much larger than our Sun, shone with ominous blood-like splendor. Even through the glare-proof windows, its radiance blinded the excited, watching emigrants. But they could make out three planets that circled Arkar like gleaming specks of light.

"Roo is the innermost planet," Li Sharn told Captain Future. "The other two planets are uninhabitable."

Newton nodded. "So I've heard," he said dryly.

He was thinking of the time, ten years before, when he and the Futuremen had first explored this system.

He looked back at the blur of space astern. The Futuremen must be somewhere back there now, secretly rushing on after the Starfarer in their own small ship. And Philip Carlin and the other two vitron-scientists must have already been on Roo for several days, for they had taken the first ship while Newton had been preparing the scene on Venus.

Blood-red light beat fiercely through the portholes as the Starfarer swung in around Arkar. The vibration-drive had been cut off

and the bow and lateral rockets exploded frequently to check and guide their rush.

Roo loomed up big ahead, a dull red ball. Curt Newton's heart beat faster at sight of it. Vitron meant health and life to nine worlds of people, back across the abyss. He mustn't fail here!

The crimson planet was circled by a smaller, dark sphere. It was a little moon, and one whose albedo was extraordinarily low, since it reflected almost no light. Black Moon, the Roons called it.

"So this is Roo?" muttered one of the staring emigrants. "It looks plenty wild."

Wild and forbidding, indeed, was the planet spinning beneath them. Hardly bigger than Earth, its surface was blanketed by dense crimson jungles from horizon to horizon except that part covered by mountain-ringed, ocher-colored oceans in the south and the far north.

"Recoil-chairs!" called the annunciator. "Everybody in their recoil-chairs for landing!" The scream of parting atmosphere came from outside. The Starfarer was rushing down across the jungles of the red world.

"I didn't know the place was as wild as this," Newton growled to Li Sharn. "I wish to space I'd never come."

"You'll get along all right here," assured the Saturnian. "Stick to me when we leave the ship, that's all."

Newton's hopes bounded. But now the keel rockets let go with a deafening roar, as the big ship settled further toward the planet.

Through the portholes, there came into view far ahead a large, roughly oblong expanse of clear land, near the equator. It covered fifty miles, like a great scar in the red jungle.

Captain Future glimpsed tilled fields, small, isolated white plantation-houses. Soon a whole cluster of such white cement structures came in view, a town of some size.

"That's Rootown!" someone called. "That's the colony center!"

THE Starfarer's bow tubes thundered and the big ship hesitated in mid-air. Then, on roaring keel-tubes, it sank slowly down through the sunshine toward a scorched landing-field at the eastern edge of Rootown.

The small shock of landing was followed by a sharp ringing of bells through the ship. There was a grinding sound. Then a peculiar silence clapped down. It took a moment to realize that it was caused by the shut-' ting off of the

throbbing oxygenators, for the first time in three weeks.

"We're here, Ruth!" John Gordon's eyes were shining. "Our new home, our new world!"

"Something's happening!" exclaimed Jok Kerrin, the big Jovian. "What's going on there?"

Captain Future was already at a window. Out on the landing field, men were running excitedly toward the town. Rocket-cars were racing in the same direction.

Li Sharn uttered an exclamation. "That means trouble."

They crowded to get out of the ship.

Weird and alien the new world seemed. The soil under their feet, blackened by rocket-blasts, was dull yellow. The grass that patched it was of the vivid red color of the distant jungles.

The scorching mid-afternoon brilliance of monster Arkar stunned their eyes. Under its glare, the white cement structures of the nearby town stood out against the unearthly brazen sky. The air was hot, damp, heavy with scents.

A dim, rising roar of voices came from the town. Men were still running from the spaceport in that direction.

Li Sharn called to an excited spaceport attendant. "What's up?"

"Big riot of some kind!" yelled the man. "It looks like Harmer's secession party is going to take over!"

Captain Future felt a shock of alarm and dismay. Riot and rebellion already reaching a climax on Roo? Jed Harmer's rebellious followers seizing the rule of the planet? Then! he had reached here too late!

CHAPTER VI

The Roons

DURING the night, before the Starfarer arrived, Dr. Philip Carlin, botanist, sat in a mood of profound discouragement in an isolated plantation-house near the edge of the Roo colony.

This plantation lay miles south of Rootown, so near the jungle that the dank breath of that night hidden forest came through the screened windows in a miasmatic exhalation, freighted with strange scents and spices and rot-smells, bringing murmurs of birds and insects.

Carlin looked across the lighted room at solemn Zamok and worried Lin Sao.

"So it boils down to the fact that we've been here nearly a week without accomplishing anything," he muttered.

Lin Sao shrugged fat shoulders. "We've had to be careful. Scientists can't show too much interest in politics."

"But we still don't know who's behind Harmer's plot, or who or what is inciting the Roons to these raids," said Carlin.

He looked gloomily around the room. They had leased this plantation, with its thousand acres of vitron shrubs, from an owner who was only too glad to leave Roo. They had fitted up the living-room as a laboratory, in line with their announced intention of carrying on research to better the strain of vitron plants.

The tables of apparatus, the delicate microscopes and electro-scanners and testers, had dust on them. They gave Carlin a sick, sudden longing for his own shining laboratory in faraway Great New York.

He shook off the thought. After all, Captain Future had only asked them to establish an isolated headquarters here in the Roo colony and then wait for instructions. They had done that.

Yet he wished they could greet Newton, when he came, with some real information or help.

"That fellow Ka Thaar," Zamok was saying, "the young Mercurian who's constantly with Jed Harmer. Have either of you learned anything about him?"

Lin Sao frowned. "Ostensibly, he's Harmer's plantation overseer. But it's all sham. He doesn't know a vitron shrub from a feather-tree. He looks more like Harmer's bodyguard, to me."

"Wait a minute—listen," said Philip Carlin, staring at the windows. There had been a sound—a faint something that did not fit the pattern of wind and bird and insect noises. "What's wrong?"

"I don't know." Carlin went to the door and stepped out onto the veranda of the long, low plantation house.

Night lay solid over Roo. Black Moon was the merest shadowy ghost of a disk in the western sky. It illuminated the long, low fields of spiky vitron-shrubs beyond.

A distant roaring sound, rising and falling on the breeze, came from the west. The feather-trees whispered to themselves. Then, two tiny jets of white fire low in the western darkness were followed by sharp, ripping sounds.

"Atom-guns!" cried Zamok. "That means—"

The siren came slashing across his words, a faraway keening wail that rose like a shriek of the damned.

It had but one meaning. Every plantation out here on the fringes of the colony had such a siren these days.

"Roon raid!" yelled Lin Sao. "That's Horth Or's plantation they're attacking!"

"Bring out one of the cars!" shouted Carlin. "I'll get the guns!"

He plunged back into the house and hastily belted on one of the heavy atom-pistols that always hung close inside the door. Then he grabbed two others and leaped back out.

Confusion had shattered the night. The sirens were going now to east, north and west, plantation after plantation taking up and passing on the warning.

The low-slung rocket-car roared out of its shed with a blast of fire from its tubes, Lin Sao in the driver's seat. Carlin scrambled in with the Martian and tossed them the gun-belts.

Bucketing along the mud road by the faint splash of the headlamps, Carlin saw other car-lights approaching at high speed. Every planter here was obligated by mutual defense to respond in such emergencies.

"They've fired the sheds!" yelled Zamok. YELLOW flame splashed the darkness a mile ahead, licking up golden tongues from a half-dozen points. They heard shrill cries, and then again the crash of atom-guns. Carlin's heart slugged his ribs. What was he doing here in a speeding rocket-car, clutching the butt of a heavy atom-pistol in his sweating palm, he who knew nothing of battle or conflict?

"There they are!" cried Lin Sao. "See 'em?"

Carlin saw them. Red humanoid figures, outlined against the leaping flames of Horth Or's bunkhouse and vitron-sheds, looking like medieval devils as they battered at the door of the plantation-house.

An earsplitting crash beside him deafened Carlin, and a scorching breath hit his cheek. Zamok was firing at the leaping figures ahead.

Lin Sao had slewed the car around into the zone of fire light. Carlin was dimly aware of the hellish scream of distant sirens, of the roar of other cars coming up the road, of the atom-gun kicking vigorously in his hand.

He had triggered too hard and the weapon kicked up like a bolt of lightning above the Roons outside the house. He piled out of the car with his two friends, as a dozen planters

and workers hastily disembarked from cars now rushing up. Guns crashed deafeningly. "There they go!" yelled the hoarse voice.

The Roons had turned. Carlin glimpsed parrot-beaked red faces, smooth-muscled red bodies clad in soft gray leather tunics, arms raised with queer wooden weapons.

Roon darts pattered around them. The door of the plantation-house opened and Horth Or and another man appeared. The Jovian planter was yelling and firing at the Roons.

The Roons had no intention of facing the gathering forces. A weird signal-call shrilled among them, and they darted back into the jungle.

Carlin found himself running with the others up to the blazing plantation. Horth Or met them, his Jovian green face contorted with rage.

"They killed two of my workers, the devils! Caught us by surprise!"

A stern-faced Venusian planter shouted to the gathering throng of armed colonists.

"Cut them off before they get back into the deep jungle! Horth, you and half the men take the left—the rest of us will take the right."

Carlin and his two companions were swept along by the rush of vengeance-hungry men toward the jungle. They spread out and started to beat the undergrowth.

Everything was still a whirl in Carlin's mind. His feet tripped in loose earth, and crushed spiky little shrubs under his soles.

"We're spoiling one of Horth Or's fields of vitron-seedlings," he thought, absurdly. "We ought to have gone around."

Crashing atom-guns let go some distance to his left, but Horth Or was shooting in mere blind rage. There was a movement of shadows into the dark jungle wall ahead, and nothing more.

"Fan out," yelled their temporary leader.

They were at the edge of the jungle—not the vast impenetrable forest that covered most of Roo, but a region of brush and scrub.

Alone, Carlin shoved through the damp, undergrowth. Yells ripped the night to right and left of him. A startled, demoniac screech came down from the sky as unseen night-dragons flapped away. Carlin's heart was pounding with excitement.

Something shadowy stirred ahead, and Carlin pressed trigger and speared a white bolt of energy into the dark brush.

Then he felt foolish. "Shooting at shadows! I just don't know anything about this sort of thing."

He moved forward. And in twenty steps, he stumbled over the body of a man.

Carlin recoiled with a little startled yelp, got his pocket-flash out and turned its beam down. What he saw made him feel sick.

It was the body of a Roon warrior, crumpled up. The side of his head was freshly scorched and bleeding. Carlin knew then it was no shadow he had fired at.

BUT the humanity of that pathetically limp, curled body! He'd thought of the Roons, always, as something less than human. Their curious red skins, the parrot-beaked faces and big, round eyes—these didn't keep this man now from seeming to Carlin as human as himself.

"Buck fever," Carlin told himself, trying to laugh. "First time I ever killed anyone. An inevitable nervous reaction."

It wouldn't work. He couldn't make himself feel like a tough, relentless fighting-man.

He noticed the Roon's chest was heaving slightly. Bending over, he examined the tribesman. The Roon had been merely grazed by his gun-blast. The fellow was stunned, not dead.

Carlin felt weak with relief. He swore shakily to himself. "I'm just not cut out for this kind of work."

He raised his head to yell to the others. Then a sudden thought kept him silent.

"Why," he thought excitedly, "this fellow would be valuable—to us."

His brain raced. Captain Future had stressed the paramount importance of finding out who was inciting the Roons to these raids. Why not question a captured Roon?

Carlin heard Lin Sao blundering through the brush nearby, and called in a low voice. The Venusian scientist came stumbling to him.

"Devils of Venus—you've killed one of them?"

"Not killed—stunned," Carlin said swiftly.

"Listen, Lin, I want to get this Roon back to our plantation without the others knowing. Tell Zamok and bring our rocket-car. Hurry!"

Darkness and the fact that Horth Or and the others were still searching the brush, aided them. Ten minutes later they loaded the unconscious Roon into it. Carlin had bound the tribesman's wrists.

"Stay here so our absence won't be noticed, Zamok," he whispered. "Then come back as soon as you can get away."

The Martian nodded understandingly.

Carlin drove the low-slung car past the smoldering ruins of the sheds. Two dead workers lay there, with darts sticking in their throats. Dawn was paling the sky as they drove rapidly homeward. Carlin was feeling a curious exhilaration that lifted him above fatigue. For the first time, the sedentary young scientist understood the queer lure of danger.

Their plantation-house, half hidden by the surrounding grove of pinkish feather-trees, glimmered in the full morning light of Arkar when they pulled up before it. Lin Sao grunted as they carried the unconscious Roon into the house. The tribesman was heavy.

They used insulated cable to bind their captive tightly into a chair in Carlin's bedroom. Then the Venusian sterilized and bandaged the scorched wound on the Roon's head.

The Roon awoke under these ministrations. In the parrot-beaked red face, black eyes flashed alarm and he sought to jump up. Then, glaring at them like a trapped jungle-cat, he tried to break his bonds.

Carlin knew the dialect of the Roons. He had learned it on Roo eight years before, when the tribes were friendly. It was, like most languages of humanoid races throughout the universe, based on the language of those ancient Denebian pioneers of space whose descendants all human races were.

"We are not going to hurt you," he told the Roon earnestly. "We want you to tell us things."

The glare in the enormous black eyes of the Roon warrior died down a little, but he regarded them with sullen defiance.

"What is your name?" Carlin asked.

"I am Gaa," said the Roon. "When I get free, I will kill you. You star-men must leave Roo. We shall keep attacking you until all of you go."

"But why, Gaa," demanded the Earthman. "Formerly, your tribes were friendly. Now suddenly you turn hostile and demand we leave. Why?"

Gaa's face became like red stone. "All star-men must leave Roo. If you do not, disaster will overtake our world."

He would not say more. Carlin looked helplessly at Lin Sao. "What do you make of it?"

The Venusian scientist's plump face was thoughtful. "Somehow, their superstitions have been aroused."

They plied the Roon with questions, for hours. But Gaa would not speak another word. He only stared stonily at them.

It was hot afternoon by the time they wearily desisted. At that moment came the roar of a rocket-car stopping outside. The car went on again quickly. A moment later, Zamok burst into the room.

THE elderly Martian was exhausted and worried. "The devil is popping!" he exclaimed. "Horth Or and a lot of the other planters have gone into Rootown. They're wild with rage at this new raid, and swear they'll rouse the whole colony if Governor King doesn't take action this time."

Carlin was dismayed. "This is bad. We'll go into Rootown and see if we can't quiet them down a little some way. You come along, Zamok—Lin, I want you to stay and watch this Roon."

The rocket-car took him and the Martian northward along rude roads that ran between endless fields of spiky gray vitron-shrubs and isolated plantation houses.

Rootown came into view ahead, a low and unimpressive mass of white blocks. A few rocket-fliers were buzzing above the town, and the streets that led to its plaza were streaming with rocket-cars and excited people. As they pulled up their machine and hurried toward the plaza on foot, they could hear a roar of voices.

No one in Rootown was paying any attention to the spaceport a mile away where the weekly liner from the System was berthing. Ordinarily, a crowd would have been there to watch the Starfarer landing.

"There's Horth Or!" exclaimed Carlin as they entered the plaza.

Horth Or stood on the hood of his rocket-car, above the crowd. The Jovian planter's massive face was dark with emotion under the brim of his sun-helmet, as he pointed to two bodies that lay in his car.

"Two of my workers, killed by those murdering red devils!" he was shouting to the crowd. "My sheds burned, my equipment wrecked. How long do we have to put up with these raids?"

A roar of angry voices chorused agreement. "It's time we taught the Roons a lesson!"

"There comes Walker King, the Governor," muttered Zamok to Carlin. "He's a fool to show

himself here now. It will only provoke them more."

Walker King was a thin, aging Earthman whose short-sighted, worried eyes blinked through his spectacles as he pushed through the crowd. His graying hair was uncovered in the red glare, and he had apparently come hurriedly to the scene.

The furious Jovian planter saw him, and pointed to his dead workers. "That's more Roon work! What are we going to do about it?"

King showed he was nervous.

"The Roons must have overpowered the sentinels I posted in the southern jungles," he answered. "We'll try -to devise a better system. You must be patient—"

An angry roar from the crowd drowned his words. The roar changed to one of applause as a pudgy man made his way through the throng.

"Harmer! Jed Harmer! Speak for the colonists, Harmer!"

Jed Harmer was a plump, benevolent-looking Earthman of fifty. He wore the sun-helmet and zipper-suit of a planter, though he was innocent of any stains of toil. His bland, round face and mild eyes mirrored concern as he climbed up beside Horth Or.

Close behind him came a young Mercurian. Boyish in years, there was nothing youthful in his lean face and contemptuous eyes.

"Harmer, and Ka Thaar!" groaned Zamok. "There's going to be a blow-off. This crowd is ripe for action."

Philip Carlin looked around in desperation. He sensed the imminence of immediate rebellion, the thing he had feared.

"—and last night's outrage was no isolated thing," Jed Harmer was saying to the crowd. "It will happen again and again until we organize and go into the jungle and wipe out the Roon villages."

He looked down at Walker King. "We demand that you give us heavy atom-guns and other weapons for such a punitive expedition."

The Governor shook his head. "I can't do that. It's utterly against the System Government's policy to massacre the native inhabitants of this world. But the Government will set up better defenses."

"To blazes with the Government!" flared Horth Or furiously. "If it won't protect us, we should secede and form our own independent government."

"Yes, independence for Roo!" yelled scores of voices instantly.

"Fellow-colonists, it is a grave thing to secede from the System Government," Jed Harmer oratorically told the crowd. "But we must protect our homes and families."

"The rebellion's going to break and Captain Future and his friends aren't here yet!" groaned Carlin. "I've got to try to stop it."

"Ka Thaar will stop you before you can say a word!" warned Zamok.

But Philip Carlin was already striding desperately forward. Useless as the attempt might be, he couldn't stand by and do nothing.

CHAPTER VII

Planet of Intrigue

AS SOON as he emerged with the other emigrants from the Starfarer, Captain Future realized he had arrived on Roo in the middle of a crisis.

There was almost no one at the spaceport to greet the ship. Everyone was streaming excitedly toward the white buildings of Rootown, a mile westward. One of the running colonists, to whom Li Sharn called a question, shouted a reply that inflamed the Saturnian. "Jed Harmer's speaking to the colonists now. There was another Roon raid last night, and the whole colony is seething!"

Li Sharn's pale eyes glittered. He grabbed Curt Newton's sleeve. "Cain, come with me. The rest of you people—you'd better come along, too. This concerns all of you."

He was addressing the emigrants who were bewildered by the turmoil into which they had come.

Curt Newton followed the excited Saturnian across the spaceport toward the town. John Gordon and his wife, and the other emigrants, uncertainly followed. A few officials on hand to check the passenger lists tried to restrain them, but were swept aside. They were running now, unfamiliar sun-helmets bobbing. Captain Future was dismayed. "If the rebellion breaks now, nothing can stop this planet from becoming a devil's playground!" Newton thought, groaning inwardly-

No secret agents' work would be of any avail then to stem the torrent! Either the System Government must admit the independence of Roo, and permit a fatal monopoly of vitron, or use force to quell the rebels.

Li Sharn was talking rapidly as they ran. "Stick close to me, Cain. This may be the blow-off, though I hadn't figured it was time yet."

They had now entered the circular plaza. Here were gathered several thousand colonists.

They were a hardy-looking crowd, these men and women. Many were Venusians, the race most at home in the scorching sunlight and damp heat of this world. But also there were large numbers of Earthmen, the proverbial pioneers and trail-blazers of the Solar System.

Newton's eyes lifted to the pudgy, pompous Earthman whose oratory was arousing the crowd—Jed Harmer. His eyes flicked to the young man standing just behind and below Harmer.

"Dangerous!" rang the thought in Captain Future's mind.

That cool, bored young Mercurian had something in his tight, dark face that Curt Newton had seen in killers' faces before.

"He's Ka Thaar, one of our party's top men," muttered Li Sharn in reply to his question. "The skinny man's Walker King, the Governor."

He was referring to the man now trying to make himself heard against Harmer—a spectacled Earthman with uncovered gray hair.

"I admit that my plan of defense against the, Roons has failed, but in time I'll work out a better defense-system," King was saying.

"In time, all our families will be murdered by the Roons!" Jed Harmer retorted, with fierce agreement from the crowd. "We've got to smash the Roons."

A shrill voice screeched through the red afternoon sunlight.

"You go into the jungles and you won't come back! You'll die! Stay out of there! Leave Roo to the Roons!"

It was a strange figure who screeched that warning from the crowd. A hunched, grizzled Earthman who wore a battered sun-helmet and ragged zipper-suit. His face was gaunt and unshaven, with mad blue eyes that glared at the angry colonists.

"Remember I warned you all!" he shrilled. "Remember that Jonny warned you! The Roons will keep coming and keep killing you, until you all leave Roo!"

His shouts added fuel to the anger of the crowd.

Rough hands pushed the hunched, grizzled figure out of the plaza.

"They won't hurt him," said Li Sharn. "Even the Roons won't hurt Crazy Jonny."

"Crazy Jonny's right, in one thing," Jed Harmer shouted to the crowd, adroitly utilizing the interruption. "The Roons will keep coming

and killing us unless we stop them. Secession is the only way we can protect ourselves."

Captain Future saw a crisis at hand. Somehow, it must be averted. Desperately glancing around, Captain Future's eyes fell on John Gordon and the other newly-arrived emigrants from the Starfarer. Curt Newton instantly saw a possibility.

He jumped up onto a rocket-car.

"Me, I just got here but I'm for secession!" he shouted. "And so are the rest of us new emigrants!"

LI SHARN angrily plucked his ankle. "Get down, Cain! Let Harmer run this!"

A cheer from Jed Harmer's supporters had greeted "Rab Cain's" declaration. But that declaration was instantly challenged by John Gordon, as Captain Future had well known it would be.

"This man has no right to speak," Gordon cried, his clean-cut face flushed with anger. "He's a criminal!"

Curt Newton uttered a roar of pretended rage. "You can't call me a criminal, just because I gunned down Captain Future in fair fight."

Excitement increased. "Is that true?" a man asked. "Did this Earthman shoot Captain Future?"

"Yes," rasped Gordon. "On Venus, the night we left. Future was badly hurt in the fight."

The news created a sensation in the crowd. Curt Newton had known it would. He was counting on that sensation to divert the crowd's attention.

His scheme worked. These people on Roo were news-hungry. And here was a stunning piece of news!

"Will you get down?" Li Sharn said furiously to "Rab Cain." "You're spoiling everything!"

Newton dropped back to the ground, but was surrounded by a big section of curious persons.

"A two-by-four Earthman like that beat our Future?" growled a big Neptunian. "I don't believe it."

"If he did, he ought to be shot!" flashed a Venusian girl.

Newton glanced swiftly toward the center of the plaza. Standing up there, Jed Harmer was vainly trying to recapture the crowd's attention.

But Ka Thaar, the young Mercurian, was glaring at Newton with a murderous hatred.

Curt Newton was puzzled. "What in space makes him hate me like that? Is it possible he's seen through my disguise?"

Li Sharn had Newton by the arm.

"We're getting out of here," snarled the Saturnian. "Come on, Cain."

They forced a way out of the crowd. Li Sharn led along a street to a hangar in which rocket-cars were stored, and brought out his own machine.

As he got into the car, Captain Future looked back toward the plaza. The crowd had broken into groups, and Jed Harmer and the Mercurian had disappeared. At least, Curt Newton thought, he had succeeded in postponing a dangerous crisis.

Li Sharn drove westward along a muddy road that ran between gray vitron-fields. The enormous red disk of Arkar, declining toward the horizon, poured down merciless heat. Not until they were well out of the town did the Saturnian turn and speak.

"You blundering idiot! Why the devil did you sound off? Harmer had them all worked up."

Captain Future scowled. "How was I to know? I thought I was helping you."

"You're a fool!" snapped the Saturnian. He looked at Newton sharply. "You're too-hot-headed. Why should we trust you?"

"Aw, don't talk dumb," scoffed Captain Future. "You didn't pick me up because you liked my looks. I'd rather throw an atom-gun for your bunch than earn a living grubbing vitron-plants. Give me a good cut and I'll play your game."

For a while Li Sharn drove in silence.

"You're not as dumb as I thought, Cain," the Saturnian said at last. "Maybe we can use you. But that's up to the chief, not me."

"Do you mean Jed Harmer?" queried Captain Future. "Don't tell me that fat politician is the real head of your party?"

Li Sharn gave him a level glance. "Cain, remember one thing—don't try to learn too much. Got it?"

"Rab Cain" shrugged. "Sure. I don't care who the real boss is."

They drove on, and Li Sharn continued his grumbling. "The way you messed things up in the plaza, I don't know whether or not Harmer will take you in."

More than ever now Curt Newton realized how desperate was the chance he was taking. If the rebellious party didn't accept him, he would be ruthlessly silenced forever! His gaze rested on the long rows of spiky gray shrubs, baking in the glare of sunset. That vitron was the real stake for which a deadly game of intrigue and violence was being played in this remote star-colony. Those gray shrubs meant

health and long life to the System peoples—but also they meant fabulous riches to the man who could monopolize them.

"My holdings begin here," grunted Li Sharn as they passed a boundary marker in the fields.

LI SHARN'S plantation was not a large one. Half-mile fields of vitron, badly weed-grown and neglected, surrounded a squat, bare cement house to which were attached warehouse and bunksheds.

A couple of yellow-faced Uranian workers lolling lazily on the unswept veranda rose to greet their employer. Curt Newton followed the Saturnian into a slovenly living-room.

"We'll have dinner and then go over and see Harmer," said Li Sharn. "His plantation is the next one north of here."

As the brief twilight of Roo darkened, Captain Future lounged around the plantation. The warehouse was empty of dried vitron. The plantation was a mere mask for Li Sharn's real activities.

He, the Saturnian, and the two Uranians shared a carelessly-cooked dinner which had been cooked by a stringy, sullen Neptunian. Then Newton followed Li Sharn out into the darkness to the rocket-car.

"Keep your mouth shut and let me do the talking with Harmer," warned Li Sharn as they started. "And keep clear of Ka Thaar. He's dangerous."

Night stretched over wild Roo in a velvety darkness gemmed with a million stars. The ghostly, glimmering sphere of Black Moon was rising, a satellite so dim that one could barely distinguish the outlines of its shadowed surface.

Jed Harmer's plantation was only two miles north of the Saturnian's. Their rocket-car pulled up in front of a square cement house set amid a grove of grotesque labyrinth-trees, whose myriad limbs intertwined inextricably a few yards above the ground.

A Venusian servant, who looked far too burly to be a mere houseman, let them into the place. They found Jed Harmer bent over a desk of papers in a comfortable room, explaining something to Ka Thaar. Harmer scowled as he looked up and saw "Rab Cain." "Why did you bring that idiot here, Li?"

"Rab Cain wants to work for our party," Li Sharn said. "He's been of good service to me, Jed."

"This afternoon he spoiled things in the plaza!" exploded Jed Harmer. "If he hadn't

interrupted, I'd have had those people in open rebellion."

"I'm sorry—I didn't know the score," mumbled Captain Future. "I was trying to help you."

"He's a handy man with an atom-gun, Jed," said Li Sharn meaningly. "Anybody who could best Future is good."

Harmer looked at "Rab Cain" curiously. "Did you really outdraw Captain Future in a fair fight?"

"Sure I did," boasted Curt Newton. "He was bullying me in Venusopolis that night, and started to draw his atom-pistol, but I was too fast for him."

"You're lying!"

Newton turned, startled. Ka Thaar was looking across the desk at him with an expression that held the quintessence of hatred.

The young Mercurian's thin, swarthy face was dark, his tawny eyes slitted. "There never was a day when a space-tramp like you could outmatch Captain Future in fair fight! You played some cowardly trick on him if you did beat him."

Newton let out an angry bellow. "That's not so! What the devil are you—a friend of Future's?"

Ka Thaar rose to his feet, his face seeming to freeze. The youngster spoke in a whisper. "Don't talk to me in that tone, Cain."

His hand hovered beside his jacket, inside which the outline of an atom-pistol was plain. Death loomed menacingly, there in the lamp-lighted room.

Jed Harmer hurriedly intervened. "Take it easy, Ka! And you, Cain—you watch the way you talk here."

"All right, but he can't bully me," grumbled Newton. "I don't like Future and I don't like his friends, either."

Inwardly, he was puzzled by Ka Thaar's bitterness. The Mercurian youngster was a killer, an outlaw wanted in the System under another name. Why should he take this attitude?

"I'm not a friend of Captain Future's," Ka Thaar said raspily. "I only saw him once, ten years ago when I was a boy on Mercury. I know that Future's a man. If a cheap ruffian like you managed to shoot him, it was in the back. We can't use men of your type. I advise you to leave Roo."

"Now wait a minute, Ka," complained Jed Harmer. "It's not yours to decide. After all, I'm the leader of this movement."

Ka Thaar looked at the pudgy politician and laughed ironically. "You're really beginning to think you are, aren't you?"

CURT NEWTON did not miss the implication. Then Jed Harmer was only a figurehead of the conspiracy, as they had calculated?

But who, then, was the real leader of the plot? Ka Thaar himself? Captain Future did not think so.

"We will need every loyal supporter we can get when the rebellion begins," Harmer was declaring. "You, Rab Cain, can be useful to us. Li Sharn will hire you as one of his plantation workers. You will comprehend our movement better when you have been with us a little. We are only seeking the good of the people of Roo. The remote control of the System Government is stifling this world. We must set it free of those shackles."

Captain Future perceived that Jed Harmer was the type of hypocrite who can deceive even himself.

"If you insist on taking him in, all right," Ka Thaar conceded sullenly. "But keep out of my way, Cain!"

"Are there any orders for me?" Li Sharn asked.

"We'll inform you in the morning," said Harmer non-committally. "Better get back to your plantation, now."

Captain Future was thinking fast. If they expected to have orders for Li Sharn by morning, it meant they were to see the unknown leader of the conspiracy tonight. "Here's a chance to learn the identity of the man behind this thing at once!" Newton thought.

He left the house with Li Sharn. As they drove back to the Saturnian's plantation, Newton's brain was busy with a plan.

The plantation was dark. Newton retired to the dusty bedroom assigned him, and stretched out on the cot. After an hour, he silently arose. From his space-bag he fished out a tiny instrument. He stuffed this into his pocket, silently opened the screen of his window, and stole across the dark veranda.

Captain Future moved straight across the starlit vitron fields toward Harmer's plantation. He had soon covered the two miles and was warily approaching the rear of the house.

He slipped from shadow to shadow through the grotesque, twined labyrinth-trees, alert for automatic alarms. Light was gleaming from the shuttered window of the room in which he had

met Harmer and Ka Thaar. They were still there, then. Who was in there with them?

Curt Newton did not approach the window. He knelt near it and affixed to the cement wall the instrument he had brought. It was a super-stethoscope, invaluable for eavesdropping.

He dimly heard Harmer's voice. "—But it wasn't my fault!"

Suddenly the muzzle of an atom-pistol jabbed Curt Newton's back. Startled, he turned his head. Li Sharn stood behind him.

In the starlight, the Saturnian's face was furious. "A spy then, after all?" he growled. "You might have known I'd watch you at first, Cain! You fool!"

Captain Future knew the man was on the point of pressing the trigger, and knew too with icy certainty that he could not possibly move in time to escape instant death.

CHAPTER VIII

Alien Mystery

PHILIP CARLIN remained stunned by dismay in the plaza of Rootown after the crowd began to break up. Though relieved that open rebellion had been temporarily averted, the young scientist was now prey to a greater anxiety.

"You heard, Zamok?" he gasped. "Captain Future's been shot, badly hurt. That's why he hasn't arrived on Roo!" "I can't believe it," said the elderly Martian.

"You heard what that fellow Rab Cain said," Carlin reminded him.

Zamok's wrinkled red face wore a frown.

"Let's find out more about this."

They started across the plaza to where the group of emigrants from the Starfarer stood bunched together.

Walker King, the Governor, had approached them and was speaking earnestly to the bewildered group of newcomers.

"You people have had an unfortunate introduction to Roo," King was saying. "But don't let it worry you. Things will quiet down. You'll be assigned temporary quarters here in town until your land-grants can be surveyed and your new homes constructed."

"Will our land be out on the edge of the colony?" asked a serious-faced young Jovian emigrant.

Walker King reluctantly admitted it. "You see, we continually clear more land from the jungle, and of course that's what is granted."

"But from what we heard, the Roons raid the outer plantations?" persisted the Jovian, uneasiness in his face.

"The Roons'll come and kill you, sure!" cackled a shrill voice from behind the group.

It was "Crazy" Jonny. The hunched, grizzled madman was wagging his head wisely as he surveyed the startled emigrants.

"You don't know what a Roon raid is like, do you? You'll find out, if you stay on Roo. Better leave!"

"Jonny, shut up and get out of here before I have you locked up," said the governor angrily. He added to the emigrants, "Don't pay any attention. The fellow's been out of his mind for years."

He went to summon the officials who would assign them to temporary quarters. The discouraged emigrants looked at each other.

Carlin approached John Gordon. "We're research scientists working here on vitron," Carlin introduced himself and Zamok. "Is it true Rab Cain shot Captain Future?"

"I'm afraid it's true," Gordon nodded. "Cain admitted it when our ship's captain, got an undimensional-wave message. The rat must have some basis for a self-defense plea, for the Patrol sent no order to detain him."

Carlin's heart sank. When Gordon and the other emigrants moved off to their new quarters, he remained looking morosely at Zamok.

"Zamok, what are we going to do?"

"The Futuremen may come, anyway," Zamok said thoughtfully. "Though if he's badly wounded, they wouldn't leave him."

Carlin rallied his courage.

"We've got to go on, anyway. We've still got the Roon we captured last night. We still may be able to learn something from him."

"I hope so," muttered the Martian. "Let's get back to the plantation and find out."

The red disk of Arkar had already set, and darkness was complete when they reached their own plantation. Not a light showed from the house.

"Why doesn't Lin Sao have a light?" murmured Carlin uneasily. "You don't suppose anything has happened?"

He entered the house and found the living room-laboratory in complete darkness. Before he could find the switch, Carlin heard a heavy, clanking sound beside him. Gigantic arms encircled him in a crushing grip.

"Zamok, get back!" he yelled. "Someone is--"

"Quiet!" rumbled a deep voice. "It's all right, Ezra. Turn on the lights."

The krypton-bulbs in the ceiling exploded brilliance. In the daylight glare, Philip Carlin looked around, stunned.

He was being held by an incredible metal giant whose shining photoelectric eyes looked down at him from a seven-foot height.

Opposite him, a lithe, white-skinned man, in close-fitting drab zipper-suit, held an atom-pistol raised, covering them.

THE third person in the room, the man who had just switched on the lights, was an Earthman, iron-haired, elderly, with faded blue eyes in a weatherbeaten face.

Carlin did not know him but he knew the others.

"The Futuremen!" he choked. "Thank God you're here! We were afraid you wouldn't come."

Grag released him. "Sorry to startle you," boomed the big robot. "But we couldn't be sure who was coming, in the dark."

"We got here less than an hour ago," Otho explained swiftly. "On the way here, we'd picked up the undimensional code-message you sent back to the System as planned, giving the location of this place. We landed the Comet under cover of darkness in the trees behind the house."

Carlin felt a rush of relief. His discouragement vanished. They weren't going to have to fight this battle unaided, after all. They were going to have the mightiest of allies.

He gaped, as a slim young Earthgirl, dark haired and dark eyed, wearing a simple jacket and space-slacks, came from the back of the room.

"This is Joan Randall, Patrol agent," Otho said. "And that old buzzard there is Marshal Ezra Gurney." Carlin knew her now. He had heard of both her and Ezra.

He looked around eagerly. "And Captain Future? He's here?"

"With us?" retorted Otho. "Don't be foolish. The chief came on to Roo in disguise. He'll meet us as soon as he can."

Joan explained to the bewildered scientists. "Curt had to come in as assumed identity if he was to accomplish anything. He built up a notorious new character for himself. He is now called Rab Cain."

"Rab Cain?" The name burst from the lips of Carlin and Zamok. "He got in on the Star-farer this afternoon." "

He told them rapidly of the scene at Roo-town when Harmer's harangue to the rebellious colonists had been interrupted by Rab Cain's swaggering boasts.

"And he bragged he shot Captain Future!" finished Carlin. "Then he went off with Li Sharn."

A flash sparked from Joan Randall's dark eyes, and was mirrored in the slanted green eyes of Otho—a vivid electric excitement.

"Then Curt's on the trail!" she exclaimed.

"That's why he isn't here now. But it's dangerous, working under cover by himself."

"Where is Li Sharn's place?" Otho demanded of Carlin.

The botanist told him. "And Jed Harmer's plantation is only a mile or two north of it. Li Sharn is known as one of Harmer's party."

"I'll go in there and find the chief, and see what he wants us to do," Otho declared, starting toward the door.

Grag interposed his metal bulk. "No," the robot boomed. "You stay here. The chief said we were to wait till he got word to us."

Otho flared at the metal giant. "Can't you see that the whole set-up's changed? That mechanical brain of yours must have stripped a gear."

Grag uttered a howl of anger and strode forward. "I'm a peaceful individual," he announced loudly, "but there's a limit to the insults I'll take from this synthetic rubberoid imitation of a man."

Philip Carlin was startled by the bellowing voice and unhuman wrath of the towering robot. But Joan's quick smile reassured him.

"Will you cut out this bickerin'?" old Ezra was demanding. "All the way out here in the Comet I had to listen to you two arguin', and I'm tired of it."

"I still think I ought to find the chief," Otho persisted.

"You're just huntin' trouble," grunted Ezra. "We'll see what Simon says about it."

"Simon Wright—the Brain?" echoed Carlin. "He's here too?"

Joan nodded. "He's back with Lin Sao questioning that Roon you captured."

They went to the back room. When they entered, an astonishing spectacle met Carlin's eyes. A spectacle that had brought beads of perspiration to Lin Sao's plump face as he stood in a corner, watching.

Gaa, the captive Roon, still sat bound in the chair. His parrot-beaked red face was stiff with fear and his black, enormous eyes stared

fascinated by the Brain, hovering above him in the metal box. He was a terrifying spectacle to the barbaric tribesman, a box that spoke and watched him with unwinking lens-eyes.

Fear and awe were plain in Gaa's red face, a fear which flared higher when Grag's enormous metal figure came clanking into the room.

"Why have you Roons been attacking the colony?" asked the Brain's rasping voice.

"I have already told you," faltered Gaa, "You star-men must leave Roo before disaster comes."

"What disaster?"

GAA hesitated, then answered. "The Old Ones will come back in wrath."

"The Old Ones?" There was a sharp, startled quality in the way the Brain echoed it.

"What is it, Simon?" whispered Joan, impressed by his reaction.

Simon Wright did not answer her. He spoke again to Gaa. "The Old Ones cannot come back. They died a million years ago."

"No!" Gaa's voice rang with superstitious fervor. "They did not die. They are too mighty for death. We have seen the omens with our own eyes! You must go away before you wake them and bring horror upon us. That is why we must drive you from Roo."

The Brain swung toward the others. "There's much behind this," he said. "These tribesmen have not turned hostile for ordinary reasons. Their superstitions are involved—superstitions based on one of the most ancient cosmic mysteries in the universe."

They looked at him, puzzled yet vaguely alarmed. In the silence, they could hear the feather-trees outside stirring in the breeze.

The Brain had turned back to their captive. "Tell me, what are the omens you saw that made your people think the Old Ones are stirring?"

Gaa's parrot-beaked red face stiffened, and a defiant look came into his black eyes.

"That I cannot tell. It is a secret of our worship which you strangers may not know."

"More superstition," muttered old Ezra. "Now I wonder—"

There was a lolloping sound, and Carlin turned sharply. A small animal galloped into the room and flew toward Grag in terror.

Carlin had never seen such a creature. A gray, bearlike little beast with sharp, beady eyes and a wide mouth set with enormous grinding fangs. He vaguely recognized it as a moon-

pup, one of the half-mythical species of telepathic, non-breathing creatures native to Earth's satellite.

Grag picked up the trembling creature. "Eek's scared to death. When Eek's scared it means danger. Something's happened out there."

Simon Wright looked sharply around.

"Where's Otho?"

It suddenly dawned on Philip Carlin that he had not seen the android for the last ten minutes. Neither, it now transpired, had any of the others.

They searched the house, and then the little space-ship hidden in the dark trees outside. But the search revealed nothing. Otho had disappeared.

CHAPTER IX

Star-World Peril

EVER since he had heard that Captain Future was already playing his lone hand in disguise, here on Roo, Otho had been chafing for action. The fact that he had been forbidden to try to join the leader had only increased Otho's impatience.

The android was always the most restless of individuals. The long trip to Roo in the Comet had worn his patience thin. As always, he wanted to get into action.

Otho saw his chance when the others went into the back room. Here, thought the android, was a golden opportunity to take French leave.

The thought was enough. Otho slipped out into the darkness and started back through the feather-trees toward the shed in which he had previously noticed two rocket-cars.

Before he could reach the shed, two small animals bounded out of the darkness and clawed playfully at his legs. It was Eek, Grag's moon-pup mascot, and Oog, the fat little white "meteor-mimic" who was Otho's own pet.

Otho tried to shoo them away but they insisted on following. He didn't want them. Eek, especially, might prove a serious embarrassment to his plans. But how could he get rid of Eek?

Then Otho grinned fleetingly. "There's one sure way to shake Eek."

Otho stopped and thought. He thought of hundreds of Roon warriors silently approaching the house, warriors who wanted to kill everyone here.

Eek received that thought! The moon-pup had a highly developed sense of telepathy, but was renowned for his lack of valor. That frightening telepathic impression completely unnerved him and he bolted toward the house.

Chuckling, Otho ran on and ran the rocket-car softly out of the shed. He did not cut off the baffles until he was a mile from the house.

Running without lights, Otho drove northward along a high-ridged, muddy highway. The drift of stars and Black Moon together afforded him hardly enough light by which to steer.

"Lot of good a moon like that is," he complained to Oog, who had snuggled up in the seat beside him. "A cursed desolate kind of satellite, Roo has."

Otho's spirits rose as he raced across the face of darkened Roo. He began to plan. He planned rapidly.

"The chief went with this fellow Li Sharn, Carlin said. He'll be at Li Sharn's place now. I ought to be able to slip in and find out what he needs me to do. Maybe he'll want me to kidnap this fellow Harmer."

That prospect pleased Otho's action-loving soul.

Otho cut the lights and pulled the car into a field near Li Sharn's plantation. Then he loosened the atom-pistol in its holster, and started on foot across the dark fields.

Oog trotted at his heels. But Otho knew his devoted little pet would implicitly obey every command.

Suddenly Otho stopped and bounded backward.

"Devils of space!" he exclaimed, his hand darting to his atom-pistol.

A bunched, obscene shadow had stirred from behind a vitron-shrub a few feet ahead of him—a many-legged thing with huge, faceted, phosphorescent eyes. It was two feet in diameter.

The thing was a paralysis-spider, the most dreaded and venomous of all poison-insects on Roo. Its bite did not kill. It did worse—it locked the victim's body in irremediable paralysis, a living death.

"Better not shoot the little horror or my gun-flash might be seen," Otho muttered. "Come here, Oog—we'll go around it."

He looked in vain for Oog, who had vanished. But then a big lump of soil at his feet suddenly writhed, changed, became Oog.

The meteor-mimic, frightened, had used his perfect ability for camouflage to make himself as inconspicuous as possible.

"Cursed if Roo doesn't have a lot of nasty things," Otho muttered as they gave the creature a wide berth. "Paralysis-spiders, hunting-worms—it's awful!"

He soon encountered an even more terrible denizen of the planet. The tree-bats, that had been rushing wildly overhead, swooped frantically low over the starlit field.

"What the devil!" swore Otho, startled. "Something's scared them."

HIS keen ears caught the flap and thrash of great, leathery wings overhead. Two monstrous, reptilian flying shapes sailed down. They had been pursuing the tree-bats—but now had sighted Otho.

"Night-dragons!" he yelled, his atom-pistol jumping into his hand.

The two creatures were circling close overhead, small red eyes glaring down at him, great fangs and talons gleaming in the starlight.

There were no more dreaded creatures on Roo and Otho fully realized his dire peril. Yet if he fired his weapon, the crash of it would give away his presence.

In this extremity, the resourceful android turned swiftly to his mascot. Oog was cowering, apparently too frozen by fear even to attempt one of his marvelous camouflages.

"Spider, Oog!" Otho hissed to the little animal. "Paralysis-spider!"

He pointed, as he spoke, back toward the place where they had encountered the great venomous insect.

Oog understood and instantly acted. His fat white body twisted, flowed with protean rapidity into a new shape. He became, to all appearances, one of the many-legged poisonous horrors.

The night-dragons were rushing downward. But, sighting the repulsive, many-legged shape beside Otho, the huge creatures darted upward again with squawking cries of alarm. Even the terrible night-dragons dreaded the giant spiders!

As the leathery wings receded into the darkness, Otho patted his metamorphosed mascot and Oog promptly resumed his natural shape.

"Nice work, Oog," chuckled the android. "I'll bet those things won't stop in a hurry."

He went on across the starlighted vitron fields toward Li Sharn's plantation house. It showed no lights, nor any sign of life.

"All asleep," muttered Otho. "But I'll bet the chief isn't asleep if he's in there. I'll soon find out. You stay here, Oog."

He started forward, then stopped.

A dark figure had stealthily emerged from the house. It moved swiftly off across the fields.

"Who in blazes is that, and why's he slipping out?" Otho wondered, puzzled.

He was starting to follow when a second stealthy figure emerged from the house and began to trail the first.

Otho swore. "What's going on here anyway?"

He went silently forward, trailing the trailer. The man ahead was too intent upon his quarry to look back.

They approached a plantation which Otho knew must be Jed Harmer's. The first shadowy figure approached the house, and crouched down near a lighted, shuttered window. As he stopped over, a ray of starlight momentarily illumined his face.

"I might have known it!" muttered Otho. "But who's the other?"

The man crouching by the wall of the house was "Rab Cain"—Captain Future. He appeared to be unaware of the fact he had been followed.

His trailer was advancing now, an atom-pistol gleaming in his hand. Otho saw this second man come up behind Curt Newton, and saw Newton turn his head in surprise.

There was no need of words to tell the quick-thinking android that Captain Future had been surprised spying on Harmer and that the man who had surprised him was about to shoot.

Otho could move faster than any other individual in the System, when the necessity arose. The necessity was urgent now. He covered the distance to the two men in three great leaps, his atom-pistol raised.

—a spy, then?" he heard the second man. "You might have known I'd watch you, Cain!"

Otho came up behind the man and brought the barrel of his atom-pistol down on the other's skull.

The man sank limp and silent. "Rab Cain" whirled, startled.

"Otho!" he whispered. "What in space are you doing here?"

"Is that all the thanks I get?" said the android with a grin. "Who is this fellow, anyway?"

"Li Sharn," answered Captain Future, frowning. "He must have watched me all the way. This messes up everything for me." He

bit his lip. "You've got a rocket-car? Take him to it and wait for me. I've got to hear what's going on in this place."

OTHO dragged away Li Sharn's limp form, after hastily telling the location of his car. Captain Future again applied his super-stethoscope to the wall of the house.

He distinguished Jed Harmer's voice again. "—tell you, I could get the colonists to declare for secession right now."

"No." It was Ka Thaar's level voice. "The boss is right. They need more provocation before they'll reach the pitch of outright rebellion. Today showed that. But one more big Roon attack will fix it. You heard his orders."

"All right, I'll hold off as he says until one more big Roon raid heats them up to the boiling point," Harmer grumbled. "Though I still think I could sway them into secession now."

"You're too confident of your powers of oratory," glibed the young Mercurian. Captain Future heard a chair scrape. "I'm going to get some sleep."

Captain Future felt sharp disappointment. He had learned almost nothing. From the conversation it was evident the mysterious leader of the conspiracy had already been here and had gone.

Newton pocketed the super-stethoscope and soon joined Otho at the rocket-car.

"Don't know whether it's good news or bad, chief," Otho greeted him. "Li Sharn is dead. I hit him too hard in my hurry."

"The devil!" exclaimed Newton. "That complicates things further. When did you and Grag and Simon arrive on Roo?"

"Tonight. We landed near Carlin's plantation. He'd sent a code message giving us its location."

"Drive there in a hurry," Curt Newton told him. "It's time we held a council of war."

The rocket-car flew along the lonely roads, with Li Sharn's body lurching in the back seat, until Otho sighted the plantation lights glimmering through the grove of feather-trees. The occupants were watchful. Zamok harshly challenged them as they ascended the veranda.

"Everything's all right—it's the chief and I," answered Otho.

Grag's giant frame bulked in the lighted doorway. "So you went after all? You disobeyed orders. I hope the chief bawled you out plenty."

Newton grinned. "I couldn't do that, for he saved my neck by showing up when he did."

He went inside. In the lighted room, Philip Carlin and Lin Sao looked at him in amazement.

Carlin could hardly believe that this was the same man he had talked with on that night in Great New York. Curt Newton's tall, lithe figure seemed somehow shorter and stockier—the red hair was now black and close-cropped, the frank, handsome face of Captain Future was the scarred, tough face of Rab Cain.

Newton started to speak, then stopped and stared at Joan Randall and Ezra Gurney. Then he turned angrily to Otho.

"I—er—forgot to tell you, chief. Joan and Ezra came along," Otho said hastily. "You see, they were on Venus that night—"

Joan spoke quickly. "It's not their fault, Curt. They didn't want to bring us. But anyway, aren't you glad to see me?"

Curt Newton fought to keep his temper. "Joan, you knew I didn't want you mixed up in this mess. Why did you insist on coming?"

She tossed her dark head. "After all, Curt, I'm a Patrol agent. I was sent to Venus to discover the whereabouts of that Venusian vitron profiteer, Lu Suur. His trail led to Roo. So I had to follow."

"Did you receive any authority from the Commander?" he demanded.

Her brown eyes faltered. "Well, no explicit authority."

Ezra Gurney uttered a disgusted snort. "Fine thanks we get for comin' all this way to help you."

Curt Newton exploded at him. "You space-struck old idiot! Are you trying to get Joan killed? You knew this was the most dangerous mission I've ever undertaken."

Philip Carlin had been astonished by Captain Future's anger at the girl's presence. But now he understood. There was an overpowering anxiety for Joan's safety in Newton's voice.

"Since you're here, Joan, see that you follow orders and stay out of trouble," Curt Newton finished.

Joan laughed at him. "That's what I like about you, Curt," she said. "Your tender gallantry, your courtly style of wooing are the things which make me run after you half across the universe."

"Oh, cut your rockets," he said, with assumed impatience. But as he said it, a warmth in his eyes answered her impish smile.

THE scene was interrupted by the appearance of the Brain. Simon Wright came gliding in from the rear of the house.

His lens-eyes met Curt Newton's gaze. "They told you about the Roon captive?" he asked.

It was characteristic that he offered no word of greeting. There were those who said the Brain had no emotions. Captain Future knew otherwise. But he had almost never known Simon to display any emotion.

"Yes, and that may help us—and we're going to need all the help we can get," Newton said. He told them briefly of his falling in with Li Sharn, his entry into Harmer's party, and then the near-disaster brought about by Li Sharn's suspicions.

"From what I heard tonight," he went on, "they figure that just one more big Roon attack will excite the colonists to the point of secession."

"It will," affirmed Philip Carlin soberly. "I've been here long enough to know how these people feel. And you can hardly blame them."

"The conspirators are counting on a big Roon attack soon," Captain Future continued. "This shows somehow they're responsible for these attacks by the tribesmen. I've believed that from the first. What does this Roon captive say about the reason for the raids?"

Simon Wright answered in his metallic voice. "I've found out a little from him. It's superstition that's driving the Roons to attack the colony. A superstitious dread connected with the Old Ones."

"The Old Ones?" repeated Newton sharply, his eyes narrowing.

"Yes," said the Brain. "The Roons say there are omens of the waking of the Old Ones, that it is the colonists' coming that has stirred them up. The colonists must go or the Old Ones will truly awake."

Captain Future's face grew somber. "I never dreamed that that was behind the Roons' hostility."

Carlin asked a hesitant question. "Just who or what are the Old Ones? I've been wondering."

"They're the name given by most of the galaxy's races to the Kangas."

Carlin looked blank, but Joan Randall was startled by that name and so were Ezra and the Futuremen.

"The Kangas!"

CHAPTER X

Cosmic Shadow

CAPTAIN FUTURE gave a rapid explanation to the bewildered young botanist.

"I don't suppose interstellar archaeology is your field. You know, however, that a million years ago our human race had its fountainhead on the worlds of the star Deneb, and that those ancient Denebians conquered all the galaxy? That we of the Solar System and all other human and humanoid races in the universe, are their remote descendants?" Philip Carlin nodded uncertainly. "Everyone has heard of the Denebians who were our remote ancestors."

"According to archaeological researches," Newton continued swiftly, "before their time the galaxy was ruled by a great pre-human race. We know almost nothing about them except that they were a powerful, wholly alien, star-traveling race. They are generally referred to as the Kangas, though the legends of many star-peoples speak of them as the Dark Ones or the Old Ones.

"The Kangas ruled this galaxy more than a million years ago. It is thought that they were not many in number. They exerted their sway through a subject race of proto-zooan creatures whom they had created. But the star-conquering men of ancient Deneb found scientific means to defeat the Kangas and their creatures. We learned about that when we visited Deneb. The Kangas vanished, became extinct.

"But the superstitious dread of them still haunts many worlds. It's present even in the distorted legends of the Solar System. And the Roons believe it utterly. They have an ancient dread of the Old Ones. Now something has made them believe that the coming of the colonists is threatening to awake the Old Ones. That's why they've turned hostile."

He frowned. "I believe that Harmer and the other conspirators here are inciting the Roons by arousing their superstitious dread of the Old Ones."

"But how?" rasped the Brain. "Gaa would tell nothing except that there had been omens of the Old Ones' awaking."

"Let me see the fellow," Captain Future asked. "We may be able to get a little more out of him."

They went into the back room. Gaa still sat bound in the chair, and his red face expressed stony defiance still as he eyed them.

Curt Newton spoke fluently in the Roon dialect to the captive tribesman. "You fear the waking of the Old Ones?"

Gaa answered sullenly. "We have reason to fear it. Long ago, we were a mighty people who conquered the Old Ones by means of magic Wands of Power. The Old Ones so feared us then that they hid from us in sleep. But my people now no longer have the secret of our ancestors' Wands of Power. If the Old Ones wake now they will destroy us."

"This superstitious legend of theirs is directly based on tradition," muttered Simon, in English. "You recognize the 'Wands of Power'?"

Captain Future nodded. "It's a legendary description of the psycho-amplifiers the ancient Denebians used to conquer the Kangas."

"Where do the Old Ones lie sleeping?" he asked Gaa.

Gaa's lips tightened. "We tell that to no one. If star-men like you knew, they would tamper with the Crypt of the Old Ones and unloose disaster."

Captain Future tried a different tack. "What are the omens which you said convinced your people the Old Ones are stirring?"

Gaa would not answer that, either. The Roon simply sat glaring at them. They gave it up and went back into the bigger room.

Simon Wright summed up the mystery. "There is a Crypt of the Old Ones. That much is certain. But where is it?"

"Why do the tribes think that driving out the colonists will placate the Old Ones?" Joan Randall asked keenly.

Curt Newton nodded. "You've put your finger on the crux of the thing. The Roons wouldn't evolve that idea out of nothing. They've been told that by someone, someone who wants them to raid the colony."

"And that someone is the conspirators here," exclaimed Otho. "Undoubtedly, the same plotters deliberately caused the mysterious 'omens'."

Philip Carlin felt admiration at the way the keen minds of this strange group were cutting to the mystery at the heart of the problem.

Captain Future paced the lamp illuminated room, then spoke rapidly. "One more Roon attack means rebellion in the colony. So the Roons must be quieted, their fanatic fears allayed, at any cost.

"That means that some of us have got to go into the Roon country and find this Crypt of

the Old Ones around which their superstitions center, and stop the 'omens' there."

"Say, that's a job for me!" exclaimed Otho. "I'll make up as a Roon, and—"

"I've another job for you," Newton interrupted. He turned toward Philip Carlin. "Doctor Carlin, you know the Roons and the jungles fairly well from your former visit here. You and Grag should have a good chance of success in this search. Will you try?"

CARLIN did not hesitate. He nodded quickly. "I'll try."

"That jungle runs from here to the Austral Ocean," Grag exclaimed. "How are we going to find this secret Crypt of the Old Ones in all that?"

"It must be near Gaa's village," Newton said. "Otherwise his people wouldn't have been able to observe the 'omens' at the Crypt, as he told us."

"But where's Gaa's village?" Grag demanded. "None of us know."

"Gaa will guide you there if you tell him you want to talk peace with his people," Newton retorted. "Of course, Gaa will be figuring to lead you there and then have his people seize you. It will be up to you to turn the tables and beat him at his own game."

Carlin caught his breath at the calm audacity of the plan. But the others seemed to take it as a matter of course.

"Shall I go with them?" asked the Brain.

Curt Newton shook his head. "I want you to stay here and construct a thing for me that will help to allay the Roons' superstitious fears, in case we fail to find the Crypt and stop the 'omens'."

"Just what do you have in mind?" asked the Brain keenly.

"Simon, you heard what Gaa said about the magic Wands of Power his ancestors used to conquer the Old Ones? We know that's a legendary description of the psycho-amplifiers the Denebians used against the Kangas.

"Remember, the Denebians gave us a detailed description of them which is still in our file. If we could show them we had one of those Wands of Power, the Roons would believe we could protect them from the Old Ones and thus we could quiet them down even if we failed to stop the 'omens'."

"I understand," said the Brain thoughtfully. "You want me to construct one of the instruments to impress the Roons. Yes, I can do that."

"We must also discover and seize the leader of the conspirators behind this whole business," Captain Future continued. He turned to Joan Randall. "Joan, you said that you learned on Venus that the trail of Lu Suur led to Roo?"

Joan nodded. "Lu Suur came here to Roo."

Newton pondered. "Lu Suur was a brainy, dangerous man, from what I've heard. Only the establishment of vitron growing on Roo broke his Venusian monopoly. He might have decided to come to Roo and repeat his scheme on a bigger scale."

"You mean Lu Suur may be the real leader of Harmer's secession conspiracy?" queried the girl.

"There's a strong possibility," Newton said. "Of course, he'd be using an assumed name. Have you a picture of him, Joan?"

She nodded. "An old one we got on Venus. Here it is."

Lu Suur, in the photograph, was a middle-aged Venusian of average stature, with sleek, dark hair and a smooth, handsome face. The face was unremarkable except for the ironical intelligence in the eyes.

"I haven't seen any Venusian here who looks like that," said Philip Carlin.

"Otho, do you think he could pass himself off as an Earthman?" Captain Future asked thoughtfully.

"Sure, it would be easy," said Otho.

"Venusians and Earthmen are both white-skinned races. The only pigmentation difference is that all Venusians are dark-haired, and don't grow gray with age like Earthmen."

"Then Lu Suur might have changed his planetary nationality as well as his name after he came to Roo," Curt Newton pointed out.

He turned to the girl. "Joan, I want you and Ezra to go in to the Governor's office tomorrow and check the records of all Venusians and Earthmen who came to Roo at the time Lu Suur left Venus. Try and get on Lu Suur's trail. As for me, I'm going to keep on searching for that man in my own way, as 'Rab Cain', new member of the secession party."

"But you can't go back to them now!" Joan protested. "Li Sharn is dead. How are you going to explain that?"

Captain Future grinned. "I won't have to explain it. Li Sharn will be with me. From now on, Otho, in disguise, is going to be Li Sharn."

Philip Carlin stared incredulously. "Can he do it? Make up enough like the Saturnian to pass for him?"

"Can I do it?" Otho echoed loftily. "Listen, I once made up as an undersea sea-man of Neptune and got away with it. You are looking at the greatest master of disguise in the System, the man of a thousand faces."

"That's right," Grag put in. "Otho's always showing up in a completely new face. I don't blame the poor fellow—I would too, if I had a face like his."

Otho jumped. "Why, you miserable automaton, I suppose you're goodlooking? Listen, folks, and I'll tell you something about Grag. Every year regularly he gets his face lifted—with a welding-torch."

EZRA started to laugh but Captain Future cut in impatiently. "More speed and less horseplay from you two! Otho, I've got to get back with you to Li Sharn's plantation before dawn. You've an hour and a half."

To Carlin and the others who had never seen Otho assume one of his disguises, the next hour was a revelation. The android could twist his mobile countenance of synthetic flesh into almost any desired features. Skillfully placed rubberoid pads completed the work. With smooth gray pigment, Otho then stained his body and face. A thin fringe of false hair went onto his hairless skull.

He put on Li Sharn's clothing, after they had buried the Saturnian back in the grove. When he finally made his appearance, his cadaverous face, fishy eyes and suspicious expression were identical with those of the late conspirator.

"It'll pass," Curt Newton approved. "I'll have to coach you on his voice on the way over. We've no time to lose!"

At the door he turned, his eyes sweeping them. "I'll get into communication with you here as soon as I can. And Grag, you and Carlin take no unnecessary chances. As soon as you find the Crypt of the Old Ones out there, report back here to Simon."

Pale red streaks of dawn were rifting the sky as Captain Future and Otho drove up to Li Sharn's seedy plantation. Hastily, they ran the rocket-car into one of the sheds behind the cement house.

Curt Newton hoped that the machine would not be identified as one of Carlin's. He made a mental resolve to get rid of it as soon as possible, and would not have come in it had it not been for the lack of time.

All the way, he had coached Otho upon Li Sharn's voice and mannerisms, and the layout of the plantation.

"Here come the workers," muttered Newton a few moments after they entered the house. The two Uranians and the Neptunian who were the late Li Sharn's vitron workers had emerged from a bunkhouse and were lazily approaching.

Otho eyed them with the fishy stare of the Saturnian he impersonated, and spoke in Li Sharn's whining voice.

"Time you were getting up, if you're going to do anything out in the fields today," he complained.

The men stared at him, surprised. "Do we really have to start vitron-grubbing?" grumbled the Neptunian. "You said we wouldn't have to do field-work unless someone was around."

Captain Future realized that Otho had made a slip—these man had not been hired as vitron-grubbers, that being only a blind. And the quick-thinking android realized his mistake at the same time.

"You've got to do something!" he snapped. "People will get suspicious if they see all our vitron-seedlings being choked out by weeds."

"Oh, all right," grunted the man. "Does this fellow Cain help us?"

"I've got other things for him to do," Otho retorted.

After the men put on their sun-helmets and went sulkily out into the baking vitron-fields, Otho mopped his brow.

"Nearly blew our tubes that time," he muttered.

"You'll have to do better than that with Harmer and Ka Thaar," Captain Future said. "One of them should hunt you up today—they were to give Li Sharn new orders from the leader."

Curt Newton was bone-weary from lack of sleep, but seized this opportunity to start a thorough search of Li Sharn's plantation buildings.

"The rebellion party must have a store of weapons hidden away somewhere in preparation for the outbreak," he explained. "They wouldn't keep them at Harmer's place. Maybe they're here."

"If Oog were around, he'd smell them out no matter where they were hidden," Otho said.

It had been necessary for Otho to leave his pet at Carlin's plantation, a decision which Oog had thoroughly protested.

Their search found nothing but a few atom-guns such as every plantation kept for defense against Roon raids or prowling night-dragons.

"If they have a secret arsenal, it's somewhere else," Newton muttered. He stretched warily. "I've got to catch some sleep. Wake me before those workers come back in."

Captain Future slept in the dusty bedroom. Strangely, his dreams were of the Old Ones. He seemed once again at distant Deneb, that remote star to which he and the Futuremen years ago had ventured. Again he was listening to Khor the Denebian tell of the alien Kangas who reigned before men came. There was awe in Khor's voice as he talked to the Futuremen—

"—Futuremen are taking a hand in this!" That voice was not in any dream. It came from the next room and had awakened Newton. He jumped up, discovering that it was now midday.

SUDDENLY he recognized the voice that had awakened him. Ka Thaar's voice! And Ka Thaar was saying something about the Futuremen!

Was it discovery? Newton shoved his atom-pistol into his jacket for instant use before he went out into the living-room.

Ka Thaar, standing facing "Li Sharn," turned and looked at him with cold dislike as he entered. The Mercurian youngster's thin, dark face was ominous.

"It's this fellow Cain's fault that they've come," he rasped.

"What's my fault?" demanded Curt Newton, yawning.

"That the Futuremen are mixing into things here!" snapped Ka Thaar. "I told Harmer he was a fool to take you in. The Futuremen are probably here to track down the man who shot their leader."

Curt Newton felt dismayed and puzzled. How could the conspirators have guessed that the Futuremen were on Roo?

"What makes you think the Futuremen are taking a hand?" asked Otho skeptically.

"A couple of hours ago, this morning, two secret agents of the Planet Patrol conferred with Walker King, the Governor," answered Ka Thaar. "They're not just two ordinary agents—they're that girl Joan Randall and the old marshal, Gurney. Everyone knows that they associate with the Futuremen."

Captain Future began to understand. Joan and Ezra, in their search for Lu Suur's trail, had been recognized.

Newton took an incredulous tone. "Those two coming to Roo doesn't prove the Future-men are going to follow," he asserted.

"That girl and old Gurney are two stormy petrels, warning of the coming of the Future-men," exclaimed Ka Thaar. "I'm sure of it."

"So what if the Futuremen do come?" bluffed Newton. "They're not invincible. I'm no more afraid of them than I was of Future himself."

Ka Thaar looked at him with cold hatred. "Cain, a man of your stripe wouldn't have a chance against Captain Future or his bunch, except by trickery."

"Rab Cain" sneered. But inwardly, he was wondering. Ka Thaar had evidently a queer, deep respect for Captain Future—but that made the Mercurian none the less dangerous!

"Our orders are to get the Randall girl and old Gurney out of the way at once," Ka Thaar said incisively. "They're too close to a hot trail for comfort."

Captain Future stiffened. Did the conspirators mean murder? If so, he'd have to fight it out with Ka Thaar here and now.

To ascertain their intentions, he made a suggestion to Ka Thaar. "We'll cut 'em both down with a couple of gun-blasts, eh?" he asked, meaningly.

"No!" hissed Ka Thaar. "They're not to be harmed, get that. You use your gun on them and I'll blast you down myself. We're to grab them and take them out to the Valley until after the blow-off. Li Sharn knows where to go."

Otho nodded, pretending understanding. "Oh, sure. That's the best place."

Captain Future breathed a little more easily. He rapidly made up his mind. He didn't want to expose his imposture yet, for that would ruin his chances of discovering the unknown head of the conspiracy in time.

Therefore, he must go through with helping kidnap Joan and Ezra! They'd be in no danger, with Otho and him among the kidnapers.

"We start now," Ka Thaar said, turning toward the door. "Harmer's men will have the Firebird waiting at the Rootown spaceport. We must hurry."

A few minutes later, Curt Newton and Otho were speeding with the Mercurian toward Rootown on their strange mission.

CHAPTER XI

In the Red Jungles

FAR into the jungle, south of the colony, the captive Roon tribesman led Philip Carlin and Grag.

Gaa's hands were bound behind him. And big Grag walked closely beside him, while Carlin had his atom-pistol holstered at his belt.

The Roon stopped suddenly in the dim trail they were following. "Now what's the matter?" Grag demanded suspiciously.

Gaa looked at the robot. "The trail forks here. We must strike a little westward, toward Yellow River."

They looked doubtfully at the red tribesman, and then around the strange scene. Carlin took off his sun-helmet, mopping his brow.

The young Earthman botanist and the gigantic robot stood with their captive in a reddish gloom. All around them towered the massive trunks of great trees, supporting high overhead a whole faery, crimson world of foliage and flowers. A world of teeming life whose many leafy levels reached a hundred feet above them, filtering the mid-day radiance of glaring Arkar.

For six hours, Carlin and the robot had followed their captive guide into the jungle. Gaa had readily agreed to lead them to the village of his people so that they might talk peace.

"He has agreed too readily," the Brain had warned. "Curtis was right—the Roon intends to trick you. You'll have to take care. Remember, your mission is only to find the Crypt of the Old Ones which is the center of the Roon superstitions. It must be near their chief village. If you discover it, reconnoiter it without letting yourselves be seen and then come back here at once."

"Don't worry, we'll find it," Grag had promised confidently. "This Roon thinks he's going to doublecross us, but he's due for a double-doublecross."

"I hope so," said the Brain dubiously. "But I'd feel easier about it if I were going along."

"Are you implying that I'm a dope?" bristled Grag. "Besides, the chief left you a job here. Just trust this to us."

So Carlin and Grag had started with Gaa into the red forests. They had no sooner got out of sight of the plantation, than Grag stopped.

He fumbled in the small haversack slung over his shoulder. He had explained that it

contained his atom-pistol. But now, to Carlin's surprise, he drew from it the little gray, beady-eyed moon-pup that was his pet.

"I brought Eek along," rumbled Grag, fondly perching the animal on his shoulder. "I had to hide him, or Simon wouldn't have let me bring him."

Carlin looked doubtfully at the moon-pup, squirming eagerly on the broad metal shoulder of its master. "Maybe it's not a good idea, at that. He might make a racket just when we need to be quiet."

"Eek can't make any sounds," Grag informed him. "Moon-dogs have no vocal apparatus, for they evolved on the Moon where there's no air. They don't even breathe. They have a telepathic sense for communication."

"Still, he won't be any help to us," Carlin said.

"Help?" Grag boomed. "Eek can be a lot of help! He's the greatest danger-barometer there is. Eek can scent danger miles away, by his telepathic sense. When he acts badly scared, look out for trouble."

Carlin glanced curiously at his giant companion as they went on. Until now, despite his awareness of Grag's intelligence, he had been unable entirely to accept the robot as a living personality.

But he was now discovering, as other people had discovered, that acquaintance with Grag dispelled all notions as to his being an automaton. Grag's ways of thinking might be simpler than those of ordinary men. But the robot possessed pride, loyalty, and that perception of contrasts which is the basis of the sense of humor.

It was now mid-afternoon. Gaa had led them into the jungle along a network of dim trails made by "shufflers". And twice, so far, they had been forced to dart hastily into the brush to avoid "shufflers" coming along the trail. The enormous sextupedal hairy creatures, elephant-high and dragging their short legs in the peculiar gait that gave them their name, were granivorous and harmless, but Carlin was not glad to meet them.

Quickly Gaa led the way southwestward in the new direction. The Roon had been stoically quiet all the way so far. Now there was a hint of expectation in his bearing.

"Look at him, the false-hearted son of a liar," muttered Grag to Carlin, in their own language. "He just can't wait to get within shouting distance of his village. Then he thinks he's going to raise a yell that will bring them all out on our necks."

CARLIN was anxious. "We'll have to gag him before that. But we may not know we're near the place until we come right on it."

"Sure, we'll know," said Grag. He patted the moon-pup riding his shoulder. "Eek will warn us. When he senses the Roons, he'll raise a rumpus miles before we reach them. I told you he'd be useful."

Philip Carlin almost forgot their mission, in the scientific fascination of what lay about them. This jungle was a planetary botanist's wonderland. The vast majority of its plant species had never been classified.

He had spent months here on Roo, years before when its suitability for vitron plantations was being tested. But he had been too busy on the urgent vitron problem to spend time in purely academic explorations. Now an even more urgent mission precluded such studies.

Grag suddenly stopped, his giant metal hand also halting Gaa. "Eek's getting nervous already," he said doubtfully. "Yet it can't be that we're near the Roons yet."

Carlin looked skeptically at the moon-pup. Eek had begun to shiver.

"Probably he's scared of some animal he senses in the forest," suggested the botanist. "Maybe, but—"

Grag never finished. At that moment, Gaa wrenched suddenly from beside them and started running forward along the trail.

"Get him!" yelled Grag. "Don't use your gun—we can catch him!"

Carlin had whipped out his atom-pistol, but he refrained from firing as he and Grag plunged down the trail after the escaping Roon.

Gaa, his arms bound, could not run fast enough to escape. Carlin wondered fleetingly why the Roon had made the hopeless attempt.

Gaa looked back over his shoulder at them, then slackened speed. But now they were within reach of the frantically stumbling tribesman. Grag's great hand reached vengefully for him.

At this moment Carlin felt the ground cave in under his boots, and plunged downward. He struck a soft dirt surface in jarring fall, and heard two other heavy bodies thud beside him.

Carlin picked himself up, feeling dazed. He was standing at the bottom of a conical pit, whose floor was the base of the cone. The pit was ten feet across and its dirt sides sloped steeply upward more than twenty feet to a

small, ragged hole through which they had fallen.

Grag was picking himself up, and Eek, who had clung to him in the fall, seemed frantic now with terror. But Grag turned with a roar on Gaa, who like themselves had been unhurt by his fall to the soft dirt floor.

"You dirty red son of perdition!" roared the robot, grabbing their bound captive. "I'll twist your head right off your shoulders."

"Wait, Grag!" said Philip Carlin. "Don't hurt him."

"Hurt him?" retorted the wrathful robot. "I'll reduce him to atoms! He led us right into this hole."

"What is this place? A pitfall built by your tribe?" he asked Gaa.

Gaa stood, coolly surveying them without a trace of fear on his parrot-beaked red face. "No, this is a hunting-worm's pit. I saw the traces of a chain of them as we came along the trail, and knew there'd be another ahead."

"A hunting worm?" roared Grag, looking around. "Where is he?"

Gaa nodded toward two six-foot round tunnels that opened into opposite sides of the conical pit, just above the floor.

"He will come," said the Roon. "Hunting-worms hollow out many such pits, in a connected chain. They leave only a thin mask of dirt above, not sufficient to support an animal's weight. They go through their pits regularly, looking for prey. When he comes, he will kill and devour us all. Then you star-men will never reach my village to spy on my people."

"You block-headed lummo, he'll devour you, too, in that case!" bellowed Grag.

Gaa nodded. "Yes, I will die, too. But I am not afraid of death."

At another moment, Philip Carlin would have admired the Roon's loyalty to his people.

But now he had too imminent a sense of danger for such reflections.

"We've got to get out of here!" he exclaimed. "I've heard stories of the size and ferocity of these hunting-worms."

Grag looked upward. "Blast me if I see how we're going to climb out of this hole."

THE dirt of the pit sides was soft. But the inward slant of the high, steep walls made it impossible to dig out steps,

"This is what I get for not paying attention to Eek," Grag went on ruefully. "He wasn't scared for nothing, I should have known."

"He's certainly plenty scared now," Carlin observed.

Eek was in a very frenzy of fear, clawing at Grag's legs, dashing to the wall, then running back to the robot. Eek, it was easy to deduce, wanted nothing more than to leave the pit.

"The hunting-worm is coming," Gaa explained calmly. "It will be here soon." Carlin reached instinctively for his atom-pistol. Then he remembered, appalled, that he had had it in his hand when he crashed into the pit. It had been jarred from his grasp when he fell. Hastily he searched the pit floor.

The weapon was not there. It had fallen on the trail above.

"It's all right, I've got my gun," Grag said. "We'll make short work of the beast when it comes."

Grag reached into his haversack and drew out his atom-pistol. Then he uttered an exclamation of dismay.

"Devils of space, look at this gun! Eek's been at it!"

The hard metal of the atom-pistol barrel was gnawed away. The gun would back-blast if it was fired.

Grag uttered a groan. "I might have known Eek would start chewing on it when he was in the haversack with it. He can't resist metal. It's my fault for putting him in there."

Carlin heard a faint, faraway rustling. It seemed to come from one of the tunnels that opened into the pit.

His heart hammered. The fantastic predicament loomed now with a brutal horror. It would be a messy way to die, he was thinking.

"We can't get out, and we have no weapons," he said. "What can we do?"

"If the hunting-worms are as big as Gaa says, I couldn't kill the beast with just my hands," Grag muttered. "The thing would be sure to kill you and the Roon, in this narrow hole."

Grag suddenly turned. "There's a chance, if we can get your atom-gun. It must be lying right up there beside the mouth of the pit."

The robot picked up Eek and showed him the gnawed atom-pistol. Eek, even in his terror, cowered a little, expecting reprimand.

"You want a nice gun to eat, Eek?" Grag said. "All right, there's one up there on the trail. You bring it back and you can have it."

"How can he understand when he can't speak or hear?" said Carlin.

"He doesn't hear my words but he senses my thought," Grag explained hastily. "Here you go, Eek—get the gun and bring it."

With the words, Grag tossed the moon-pup accurately up through the hole twenty-odd feet above. They heard Eek fall with a thump on the trail.

They heard also, more loudly, the ominous rustling from the tunnels. Carlin felt an icy chill along his spine.

Eek reappeared above, peering down at them. Carlin could have kissed the moon-pup. For in his jaws, Eek held Carlin's atom-pistol.

Grag held up his arms. "Jump, Eek! Grag will catch you."

Eek very definitely did not want to jump. Eek's hesitation showed he'd had quite enough of the pit.

Grag cajoled him. "You jump, Eek, and I'll give you a nice big piece of copper to eat. All the copper you want."

Eek seemed to be drooling mentally over that inducement, but still was restrained by an overpowering terror of the pit.

Gaa uttered a low exclamation. Carlin turned and froze as he saw, far back in one of the tunnels, two cold, glittering, lashless and enormous eyes that advanced softly like twin pale fires.

He could sense, rather than see, the enormous looping, rippling white worm body behind those monstrous eyes. He heard Grag yell.

Eek jumped! Grag grabbed him, snatched the atom-pistol from his jaws, and whirled with incredible rapidity.

The blunt, enormous head of the hunting-worm was swaying up as the first ten feet of the monster body uncoiled from the tunnel. Grag's gun blasted a streak of blazing energy that severed the head and turned it into a charred mass. The monster coils twitched wildly far back into the tunnel, making the whole pit vibrate.

"That was too close for comfort!" said Grag.

Then he picked up the quaking moon-pup.

"Eek, you were responsible for my gun being useless but you redeemed yourself. I wish Otho had been here to see it."

CARLIN stared at Otho. "How are we going to get out now?" he asked. He was shaken by the close call, sickened by the stench from the dead monster's charred body.

"Cut our way out with the atom-pistol, of course," said Grag. "Stand back."

CHAPTER XII

Valley of Dream Flowers

He turned the thin blast of the pistol on one side of the slanting dirt wall. Using it like a giant knife of fire, he undercut the side so that a whole mass of dirt slid downward, half burying them.

"Go ahead," Grag told Carlin. "You can climb out now, with me boosting. When you get up there, let down a vine for me—I can't climb in that soft dirt."

Carlin found himself, light as he was, sinking to the knees in the sliding yellow soil as he clambered upward. He was breathless when he reached the surface.

He soon had cut a massive vine and lowered its end to Grag. First he hauled up the bound Roon captive. Then Grag himself clambered toilsomely out, hauling his weight up the tough vine rope.

"Now shall we fix this fellow Gaa for his trick?" Grag demanded, looking wrathfully at the Roon.

"Listen!" Carlin said suddenly.

Dusk had come during their struggle to escape the pit. Arkar had sunk beneath the horizon and shadows were running through the jungle.

From southward there came a dim pulsing of persistent sound. It was too rhythmical to be any natural sound of the jungle.

"That may be from the Roon village!" Carlin exclaimed. "No, don't hurt Gaa. But we'd better gag him before we go any farther."

Grag efficiently gagged their captive. Gaa's black eyes were glittering with fierce excitement. He, too, had heard the dim pulse of sound from the distance.

Roughly thrust on by Grag, he stumbled with them along the dim trail. And now darkness had come down on the jungle. Through a rift in the trees ahead, they glimpsed the vast, vague expanse of a night blanketed ocean, heaving beneath the great drift of stars and the shadowy rising sphere of Black Moon.

They came to that point where the trees ended. Instantly, Grag and Carlin shrank back, dragging their captive back with them.

"Down behind these bush-orchids!" Grag muttered. "Quick!"

Dropping behind the shelter of the shrubs, they peered tensely at the unearthly and astounding spectacle ahead.

JOAN RANDALL and Ezra Gurney had started for Rootown soon after Grag and Carlin followed their captive guide into the jungle. They took the remaining rocket-car, leaving the Brain with the other two scientists at the plantation.

As she expertly steered the car along the rude road, Joan expressed doubt of the mission with which Captain Future had entrusted them.

"Curt just wanted to get us out of the way," she said. "He doesn't think we can find Lu Suur."

Ezra grunted. "Prob'ly think I'm too old for real action. Me, that held my own in the old wild days on the interplanetary frontier, long before the Futuremen were heard of." The flat white roofs of Rootown glimmered through the mass of pinkish feather-trees that lined the streets. Over on the spaceport, the massive bulk of the Starfarer was rising thunderously into the red sunlight for the long return voyage to the System.

The ship, Joan knew, was loaded now with bales of dried vitron that would be processed and distributed in the System. The importance of their mission here came home to her with increased force. Those cargoes that meant so much to the life and health of the System peoples must not be halted by chicanery and greed! There must be no rebellion!

They drove into Rootown's plaza and parked the rocket-car in front of the unpretentious cement building that held the System Government's offices. As they approached the building, they met a curious, noisy little procession.

A gaunt, unshaven Earthman in battered sun-helmet and tattered clothing was shuffling southward through the town, followed by a rag-tag of children who were shrieking delightedly at his heels.

"Crazy Jonny!" they were yelling joyously. "Where you going, Crazy Jonny?"

The odd-looking man paid no attention to his tormentors.

"It's the lunatic that Doctor Carlin told us about," Joan said pityingly. She interposed to stop the children.

"Aren't you ashamed of yourselves?" she told them.

They scattered, still derisively hooting the tattered figure. Joan turned to find the madman peering at her with a queer, filmy stare.

"Thanks for driving away the imps," he muttered. "They won't bother me much longer. The Roons will kill everybody here, pretty soon."

"Nice, sweet character," grunted Ezra Gurney as Crazy Jonny shuffled on. "Anyplace else but out here on the frontier, he'd be rounded up and taken care of."

They went into the offices of the Governor. A bored young Martian clerk informed them that Walker King could see no visitors.

"I think he'll see us," said Joan, tossing a metal disk onto the desk.

It was the emblem of Section Four, secret service of the Planet Patrol, and bore her name and number. Martian eyes bulged.

"I'll tell the Governor at once!"

When they entered the inner office, Joan studied Walker King. He was an elderly, friendly man who obviously had found the anxiety of his official position too critical for him. The jerkiness of his movements told a story of overpowering worry.

"I never expected to see you two here on Roo!" he exclaimed. "Does this mean that the Futuremen are on the way?"

"Haven't you heard that Captain Future was shot on Venus?" Joan answered. "You don't think the Futuremen would leave him?"

Walker King seemed disappointed. "I was hoping the Government was sending the Futuremen to help restore order. You don't know how upset and dangerous things are right now on Roo!"

"We've got a hazy idea," drawled Ezra Gurney.

Joan leaned forward. "We're trying to find a Venusian named Lu Suur."

King appeared startled. "Lu Suur? What makes you think he's here?"

"You know the man then?" Joan asked quickly.

"I never met him but I've good reason to remember his name," Walker King answered bitterly. "I had a vitron plantation on Venus ten years ago. Lu Suur's company swindled me." He sighed. "I wish I'd stayed there. When the System Government wanted to name a colonist here as Governor a few years ago, my friends petitioned for my appointment. I wish now they'd never done so. This Roon trouble has made the job a nightmare."

JOAN cut off his complaints by showing him the old photograph of Lu Suur. "Is there

anybody in the colony who resembles this picture?"

Walter King shook his head. "No one I've seen."

"I'd like to see your records and pictures of all the men who arrived here in the first few years of the colony," Joan requested.

She and Ezra spent the next few hours carefully examining the records. But then-hunt was futile. By now Walker King had grasped the implications of their search.

"You don't think Lu Suur could be behind all our trouble here?" he asked anxiously. "Can this be the result of a deliberate plot? I thought Jed Harmer and his party were simply making political capital of the Roon raids."

"They'll start a rebellion if they're not stopped," Ezra warned him grimly. "They've got the Roo colonists on the brink of secession. One more Roon attack will decide them."

"I know that, but what can I do to stop the Roons?" King exclaimed. "I've only got a handful of Patrol officers to police here. I've tried to use them as sentinels to give warning of Roon raids, but it hasn't worked out."

"Why haven't you sent scouts into the Roon country to find out just what's stirred up the tribesmen to these attacks?" Ezra asked.

King shook his head helplessly. "That's impossible. Nobody can go into those jungles now without being killed by the Roons."

Joan remembered something Carlin had said. "Doesn't Crazy Jonny, the madman we met outside this morning, still go in and out of the jungles?"

"Oh, yes, Jonny still wanders everywhere, but the Roons wouldn't hurt him," King said.

"They've always had a superstitious regard for him because of his madness."

"How long has he been mad?" the girl asked thoughtfully.

"For seven or eight years," was the reply.

"Jonny was a fine, upstanding planter in the pioneer days here on Roo—had one of the first vitron plantations. Then one night, a sudden attack by night-dragons shocked him out of his sanity. He's been a hopeless madman ever since, endlessly wandering through the colony and the jungles."

Joan frowned. "I'd like to question Crazy Jonny. Do you know where we could find him now?"

King looked surprised. "His only home is still his old wrecked plantation-house, on the south edge of town. People bring him food and

things. But I can't understand what you hope to learn from him."

"If he still goes in and out of the jungles, he might be able to tell just what has stirred up the Roons to hostility," Joan pointed out.

Walker King looked dubious. "I doubt if he's sane enough to answer your questions intelligently, but of course you can try."

"In the meantime," said Joan as she rose to go, "you can help us by assembling every possible scrap of information about the colonists who came here in the first two years. I still think Lu Suur is here!"

When she and Ezra Gurney emerged from the building into the hot red afternoon glare, the old marshal plainly was puzzled.

"Why all this interest in Crazy Jonny?" he demanded.

"King said that the Roons venerate the madman," Joan explained. "Who better than Crazy Jonny could stir up the Roon's superstitions as someone has done?"

Ezra scratched his chin. "It don't make sense. If the fellow's crazy—"

"He could still be used as a tool by someone who is not crazy," retorted Joan. "Come on—we're going to find out."

It took a couple of hours' searching at the edge of town before they finally found Crazy Jonny's old plantation house. It was a crumbling cement structure half hidden in an unkempt grove of feather-trees which was choked with high red weeds and wild bush-orchids.

The door sagged open on broken hinges. Joan stepped into the place. The afternoon sunlight that filtered through dust-thick, cracked windows, disclosed unswept, littered rooms. There was a rude pallet in the corner of one. But the madman was not in the house.

"Ten to one he's gone back into the jungle," growled Ezra. "When we saw him this mornin' he was headin' southward, remember."

Joan's fine brows drew together. "Ezra, I'm sure now Jonny is the instrument the conspirators are using to incite the Roons to attack. The tribesmen would kill anyone else. Someone has sent Crazy Jonny into the jungles again today. We've got to overtake and stop him!"

"With his headstart if he's in there, we won't have much chance of findin' him," muttered Ezra. "But we can try."

They turned to the door, then stopped suddenly. Two men, holding atom-pistols, now stood in the open doorway.

THE foremost was a lean, thin-faced young Mercurian whom Joan instantly recognized from description. Ka Thaar—Jed Har-mer's lieutenant!

The other man was "Rab Cain"! Captain Future himself in disguise, standing there with his weapon trained upon herself and Ezra!

"Please make no outcry," Ka Thaar said urgently, almost anxiously, to Joan. "I don't want to be forced to hurt you."

"What does this mean?" Joan demanded.

Ka Thaar had a curious respect in his manner as he answered. "You will not be harmed, either of you. But you have been prying into matters that must be kept secret, and so for the time being you must be held in a safe place under guard."

Joan Randall's mind raced. Captain Future was scowling at her as though he had never seen her or Ezra before. Evidently "Rab Cain" had been ordered to assist in seizing them. She realized at once she must not disclose Curt Newton's true identity. Ezra had given no sign of recognizing "Cain". There was no danger to either of them, they knew, with Captain Future himself among their abductors.

"We can't argue with two atom-pistols," Joan said in a bitter voice to the young Mercurian.

Ka Thaar looked relieved. "I'm glad you're sensible. I give you my word you won't be hurt. But you must come with us."

Captain Future approached the girl and the old marshal, with a sneer on his disguised, scarred face.

"So you're the friends of Captain Future they talk about?" he giped. "How's he getting over that blasting I gave him on Venus?"

"Cain, shut up and leave those people alone!" Ka Thaar's tawny eyes had flared and there was a frozen anger in his thin, dark young face.

Joan guessed that Captain Future had been seeking an opportunity to whisper to her, but he could not do so now under the Mercurian's eyes.

The compact atom-pistol in Joan's pocket and Ezra's holstered weapon were taken from them, and then Ka Thaar motioned them outside.

In the red glare of setting Arkar, a rocket-car waited outside the crumbling house. At its wheel was a cadaverous gray Saturnian. She knew him to be Li Sharn—Otho.

They got in and the car raced away. It was twilight by the time they reached the spaceport. Ka Thaar pointed through the dusk to a big

rocket-flier waiting at the deserted, farther end of the big field.

"There's the Firebird," he said, and Otho drove toward it.

Curt Newton had guessed by now that the Firebird was Jed Harmer's craft. It was waiting unlighted, a torpedo-shaped craft that was in reality a small space-ship with retractable - wings for atmospheric use.

A half-dozen of Harmer's motley "plantation workers" greeted them inside the little ship. They were a brutal-looking lot, all armed.

"Start at once," Ka Thaar ordered the Uranian at the controls. "We're going to the Valley."

The Uranian sent the flier winging up rapidly into the twilight. They banked over Rootown's scattered lights and then darted off at high speed through the gathering dusk.

Joan did not look at either Curt Newton or Otho, not wishing to arouse the Mercurian's suspicions. She must wait for a better chance to speak to Captain Future.

In a half hour the Uranian pilot brought the little ship down in a long glide. A narrow valley, hardly more than a cleft in the dense jungle, opened below them.

Joan looked down and saw that the valley was dotted with clumps of tall, pale flowers, nodding in the starlight. They looked like giant orchids, inconceivably lovely. But they had eyes, noses and mouths, and actually seemed to breathe!

"This is the Valley of Dream Flowers," Ka Thaar told her. "You will have to remain here, but will be quite safe."

Valley of Dream Flowers! It fitted the name, thought the girl, this lonely place of unreal, beautiful blossoms buried deep in the wild jungles of Roo.

"Careful, you idiot!" Ka Thaar snapped to the pilot. "You're bringing us right down on one of those clumps."

The Uranian hastily changed their course of descent by a blast of the lateral rockets. The Firebird swerved to avoid the tall clumps of flowers, and landed in deep grass.

Joan and Ezra stepped silently out, with the others following closely. In the starlight, a little stream chuckled down the center of the valley. Not far away stood a large hut outside which they could glimpse an armed man waiting.

"This way," said Ka Thaar, and started toward the hut. Joan noticed that he gave a wide berth to all the tall, nodding flowers.

Stumbling a little, Joan brought her foot down upon a tiny seedling flower and its white bud. Instantly such a drugging breath of overpowering perfume assailed her nostrils that her senses reeled.

She felt herself falling. As she staggered, a larger blossom reached forth with an arm-like petal and seized her about the waist. To her fading consciousness time seemed to drag out, seconds became hours. Vaguely she saw the disguised Otho whip out his atom pistol and fire, destroying the stem of the plant that was dragging her to a horrible doom. Then Ka Thaar leaped forward and snatched her to safety.

Then her senses cleared. Ka Thaar spoke to her in sharp warning.

"Never go near any of the flowers, or step on even the tiniest of them!" he warned. "These flowers give out an exhalation of narcotic vapors which overcomes any living thing—a natural defense against browsing animals. A man, stupified by one of the flowers, can lie senseless till he dies. Even the Roons are afraid to come here, and that's why we use this place."

CHAPTER XIII

Quest for the Crypt

WHEN they came nearer, the armed man who stood waiting in front of the hut greeted them. He was a stocky, stolid - looking Venusian, who was obviously on guard here.

"Anything happened, Quord?" asked Ka Thaar. The Venusian shook his head. "Not a thing. Even the night - dragons stay away."

They entered the hut, the Venusian turning on a self-powered krypton-lamp. The building was a ramshackle one hastily constructed of logs, and was half filled with stacks of long plastic cases.

"Atom-guns and shells," commented Captain Future, instantly identifying the cases. "So this is your arsenal for the rebellion, eh?"

Ka Thaar nodded, then spoke earnestly to Joan and Ezra. "You two will have to remain here for some days. But as soon as the rebellion is over, you'll be released unharmed."

Joan was convinced that the young Mercurian was sincere.

"Of course you realize that then you'll be liable for the forcible seizure of two Planet Patrol officers," she said.

Ka Thaar was unfrightened. "By that time, Roo will no longer be under the law of the

System Government, Miss Randall." He turned to Captain Future. "Cain, you and Quord have the men bring in some food and bedding from the Firebird."

As Curt Newton supervised the carrying out of the order by the brutal-looking crew of the little ship, he was hoping desperately for a chance to speak surreptitiously to Joan. She and Ezra had discovered something important or their abduction would not have been ordered. But what was it?

To Newton's dismay, he had no chance yet to speak to the girl. For Ka Thaar was now questioning Joan and Ezra.

"Where are the Futuremen?" he demanded.

"You ought to know," she retorted. "It was your friend Rab Cain here who shot down Captain Future on Venus."

"Cain is no friend of mine, he's simply a hired gunman our party is using," Ka Thaar said glancing at Curt Newton with bitter dislike. "I'd hate to be him when Cap'n Future gets better and he and the Futuremen come after him," drawled Ezra Gurney.

"So the Futuremen are staying with their leader on Venus?" said Ka Thaar. "Yes, I suppose they would. Everyone knows their loyalty." He lighted a rial cigarette and looked at Joan through its curling green smoke. "You know Captain Future pretty well, don't you? Everybody tells of the adventures you and Marshal Gurney have shared with him."

There was an oddly eager curiosity in his question, something almost boyish that was incongruous in this thin-faced, deadly youngster.

She could not keep her glance from straying to "Rab Cain", lounging sneeringly in the background.

"Yes, we've worked often with Captain Future," she answered. "You never met him."

"I saw him, once," Ka Thaar said thoughtfully. "It was twelve years ago on Mercury, when I was just a boy. It was when he and the Futuremen came back from their first star-trip with the creation converters that were to replenish our world's dying atmosphere. People almost mobbed the Futuremen in their crazy joy. I never forgot it." He laughed mirthlessly. "Like every other boy on Mercury, I took Captain Future as my hero. I was going to be a spaceman just like him, when I grew up."

Joan felt strangely touched.

"Why don't you be like him, then?" she asked him. "Drop this intrigue you're mixed in. You're wrong to follow Jed Harmer."

Ka Thaar snorted contemptuously. "Harmer? I care nothing about him and the others and their schemes. But they hired my skill with an atom-pistol when I came to Roo. I've taken their pay and I stick with them. It's too late for me to turn honest now, anyway. The Patrol wants me back in the System, under another name. I started out to be a spaceman like Captain Future, but a brawl one night on Saturn and a too-ready atom-pistol in my hand made me an outlaw, and so I wind up here working against Future's friends. Strange, isn't it?"

Curt Newton had listened with deep interest. He understood now that queer attitude of Ka Thaar's which had puzzled him. A boyhood hero-worship of the Futuremen still lingered in the young outlaw's mind.

Ka Thaar turned. "I've got to go, for I and the men have work to do. You two will be quite safe here as long as you don't attempt to escape. It'd be quite useless, anyway, for I'm leaving Li Sharn and Cain here with Quord to guard you."

Curt Newton protested. "Aw, don't leave me here in this forsaken hole? I signed up with your bunch for action."

NEWTON secretly wanted to go back with Ka Thaar, hoping to be led to the mysterious leader of the conspiracy. Joan and Ezra would be safe, for Otho would be with them. Otho, he knew, could find out what Joan had learned.

But Ka Thaar overruled his protest. "You're staying here, Cain! And you and Quord are under Li Sharn's orders."

Captain Future was stymied. What was he to do? Throw off the mask and overpower Ka Thaar and the others here and now? No, the risk in a showdown here was too great—the risk not only to his mission but also to Joan's safety. He could not afford to challenge Ka Thaar and the whole crew.

"All right, I'll stay," Newton grumbled.

Ka Thaar signed to "Li Sharn" to accompany him as he left the hut. Captain Future, edging unobtrusively toward the door without arousing Quord's notice, heard the Mercurian speaking in a low voice outside.

"Li, I'm leaving Cain here because I still don't entirely trust him. Those two prisoners must not be hurt. You and Quord watch him."

"I'll keep Rab Cain in line," Otho promised. "How soon is the break coming?"

"You know that as well as I," retorted Ka Thaar. "We're going in the Firebird to set off the last blasts tomorrow night. By that time, Crazy Jonny will have the Roons all primed for the blow-off."

Curt Newton did not understand the references any more than Otho, and Otho dared not ask for explanations without betraying himself.

Ka Thaar and his crew entered the Firebird, and it took off from the Valley of Dream Flowers with a low roar of tubes.

Otho re-entered the hut. Newton glanced significantly at Quord, and the android understood his meaning. He addressed the Venusian.

"Ka Thaar left orders for you to take a look along the Valley each night and day to make sure no one is spying on us," Otho said. "You'd better start now."

The stocky Venusian was disgusted. "It's a lot of foolishness," he said. "There hasn't been even an insect come here all the time I've been guarding the arsenal. And it's tricky avoiding those flowers at night."

Nevertheless, he stalked outside to carry out the order. As soon as his steps receded, the tension of the four comrades relaxed.

"Will somebody tell me just what's goin' on?" Ezra Gurney demanded of Captain Future. "First you and Otho join Harmer's bunch in disguise. Then you help the rest of the bunch run off with us?"

"We had to obey, Otho and I, or betray ourselves," Newton declared. "Even so, our plan's gone wrong. Otho and I are left here, while Harmer's secession scheme is rushing toward a climax. Joan did you find Lu Suur's trail?"

Joan told of her talk with Governor Walker King and of its fruitless result.

"But, Curt, we did learn something," Joan went on. She described her encounter with Crazy Jonny and her suspicion that the madman was being used as an instrument to incite the Roons. "We tried to find Crazy Jonny but he's gone into the jungle again."

Captain Future nodded thoughtfully. "I believe you've got something, Joan. The conspirators may be using this madman, who can go in among the Roons unharmed, to arouse them."

"And because Joan and Ezra got too interested in Crazy Jonny, the order went out to get rid of them,"! exclaimed Otho.

"It all adds up," said Captain Future. "And it means that things are near a crisis. Crazy Jonny has been sent in to the Roons again. And you heard what Ka Thaar said—that by tomorrow night, Jonny would have the Roons ready for final action."

"Then the madman is on his way now to stir up the Roons to a final attack on the colony—an attack that'll mean secession," cried Ezra.

Joan Randall paled. "Curt, we've got to stop that somehow or our whole mission is failure."

"Grag and Doctor Carlin ought to be near the big Roon village by now," suggested Otho hopefully. "Maybe they can halt Crazy Jonny."

Curt Newton shook his head. "No, they don't even know about Jonny. And their errand was simply to find the Crypt of the Old Ones. That madman is our job. But we don't even know the location of the Roon village he's going to."

Otho's eyes flashed. "We don't know, but there's somebody here who should know. That Venusian Quord!"

Newton had almost forgotten the Venusian guard whom they had temporarily got rid of so they might talk.

"Quord must be one of Harmer's trusted men, left here to guard the arsenal," he muttered.

"He must have information that would help us. We'll have to squeeze it out of him. The main thing, the allimportant thing right now, is to keep Crazy Jonny from unloosing another Roon attack. If we can learn enough to do that, then we can turn and hunt down Lu Suur."

"Listen! I hear Quord coming back now," whispered Otho.

CAPTAIN FUTURE gave directions in a few swift words. A moment later, the stocky Venusian entered the hut. It proved absurdly easy. Quord had not the least suspicion when "Li Sharn" approached him. In a flash, Otho had snatched the Venusian's atom-pistol from his holster and was jamming it against the man's ribs.

"Back against the wall, Quord," hissed Otho. "Ezra, tie him up."

Before Quord realized what was happening, he had been disarmed and bound hand and foot. Then he recovered from his bewilderment.

"Then you and Cain have turned traitor?" he bellowed at Otho. "What are you—spies of the Patrol?"

Captain Future let him think so. "Quord, you're going to tell us what you know," he said grimly. "Who is behind Jed Harmer's plot?"

Quord's lips tightened. "I'll tell you nothing."

For hours, Curt Newton and Otho tried by threats and reasoning to open the Venusian's lips. Their efforts were unavailing. Morning came and they had still learned nothing.

"The rest of you go out and leave him to me," Otho said darkly. "I know a few old Martian tortures that will make him talk."

"You know better than that," snapped Newton. He had a sudden thought. "But maybe you're right, in a way."

"You wouldn't really torture the man?" Joan said incredulously.

"Not physically," Curt Newton answered. "But I have an idea. Cut his bonds, Otho."

Captain Future drew his atom-pistol and covered Quord with it as the Venusian was cut loose. The captive stood up, rubbing his arms.

Newton motioned toward the door. "Outside," he ordered. "We're going a little way down the valley."

A little fearfully and puzzledly, Quord stepped out into the morning glare of the great red sun. Newton followed him closely, his atom-pistol raised, the others coming after them.

Quord moved down the Valley of Dream Flowers through the hot, brilliant glare until a clump of the tall, poisonous flowers was just ahead. The Venusian started to detour around the flowers.

"No—walk right up to those flowers!" Curt Newton barked.

Quord turned, protesting in horror. "But that drugged perfume of the flowers will get me if I do!"

"Exactly," said Captain Future grimly. "And you wouldn't like to lie for an endless-seeming period tortured by ghastly dreams, would you?"

He had seen enough of the Valley of Dream Flowers to realize that Quord deeply dreaded the torment of timeless nightmares experienced by anyone who fell prey to the poisonous breath of the great blooms.

His surmise proved correct. Quord, confronted by the thing he feared most, lost all his defiance. Even in the hot blaze of the glaring red sun, he seemed to shiver.

"Don't make me do that," he said hoarsely. "The dream-flowers nearly got me once before,

and it was horrible. I'll—I'll tell you anything I can."

"Under what identity Lu Suur is masquerading?"

"Lu Suur?" Quord looked blank. "I never heard of him."

"You know who the man is that's behind Harmer and the whole secession conspiracy. Who is it?" snapped Newton.

"I don't know!" exclaimed the Venusian. "Harmer and Ka Thaar never told that to any of us."

Captain Future was inclined to believe the man spoke truth. It was not unreasonable to suppose the secret had been closely kept.

He took another tack. "You do know about Crazy Jonny, though? Harmer and the rest have been using him to incite the Roons, haven't they?"

Quord nodded. "Yes. The Roons have always had a superstitious veneration for Crazy Jonny. The tribesmen think he's sacred to the Old Ones."

Joan uttered an exclamation. "Why should they think that?"

"From what I heard, it's because Jonny years ago lost his wits when attacked by night-dragons," was the answer. "The Roons believe the night-dragons are the messengers of the Old Ones. That's why they've revered Jonny—they think the mark of the Old Ones is on him."

"How do they use him?" asked Captain Future.

"Crazy Jonny was somehow influenced by them," Quord continued. "They sent him to the big Roon village which lies where the Yellow River flows into the southern ocean, to tell the Roons that there was danger of the Old Ones awakening. He showed the Roons that the Crypt of the Old Ones was already opening."

"Where is this Crypt?" Captain Future interrupted to demand.

THE Venusian shook his head. "I don't know. But I do know that Ka Thaar and his crew have tampered with the Crypt so it would look as though it is opening."

"It must be near the Roon village if the tribesmen could see it," muttered Curt Newton. "Go ahead, Quord."

"That's about all I can tell you," Quord declared. "You see, I was left here to guard the arsenal and—"

At that moment, a sudden inexplicable dizziness swept Captain Future. He staggered, fighting that unexpected weakness.

And as he staggered, Quord snatched at the atom-pistol in his hand!

"Look out, chief!" yelled Otho, whipping out his own weapon.

Quord was tearing the weapon away from Newton, and Otho could not shoot because Captain Future was between him and the Venusian.

Newton rallied his dizzied faculties to avert the tragedy. Quord already had the butt of the gun and his finger was tightening on its trigger. Dazedly, Captain Future lunged forward, twisting the Venusian's arm around at the moment he pulled trigger.

There was a scorching blast almost in Newton's face, a scream of agony, and Newton went reeling backward. Quord had taken the pistol-blast in his own face and was falling in a scorched, dead heap.

"Chief, are you hurt?" cried Otho, bending over Newton. "What happened?"

"I don't know—I suddenly got dizzy," Curt Newton muttered. "Maybe we were too near the dream-flowers."

"Dream-flowers nothing—it was the sun hit you!" Ezra Gurney declared. "You came out without your helmet. I'll get it for you."

Sudden understanding came to Captain Future. When he had marched Quord out of the hut, he had been so intent that he had not stopped to put on his sun-helmet as the others had done. The fierce, scorching blaze of monster Arkar was overpowering for any unprotected Earthman. It hadn't bothered Quord because Venusians were accustomed to powerful actinic radiation on their own planet, and did not need to wear sun-helmets on Roo.

Captain Future remembered something else, too. "What a fool I've been! All this time we've been hunting Lu Suur, I had the clue to his identity right in front of my eyes!"

"Curt, you mean that you know now who Lu Suur is?" cried Joan, astonished.

"I'm sure of it. This touch of sun that hit me without bothering Quord has made me see what I was blind to before," Newton declared. "But Lu Suur is not the most immediate problem now. The most urgent necessity is to prevent the Roons from making a final big attack on the colony, for if they do, secession is inevitable. Crazy Jonny has been sent in there to stir up the Roons to a final pitch of superstitious fanaticism."

"And that fanaticism will boil over into attack when Ka Thaar and his crew use some device to make it seem that the Crypt of the Old Ones is opening, that the Old Ones are awaking!" exclaimed Joan.

Newton nodded grimly. "That's the setup, and we've got to work fast to smash it. Which means we've got to get to the Roon village. The Crypt must be near there. If the Roons can see it, as I said. Ka Thaar and the others will be going there."

Ezra looked dubious. "Then we've got a long way to go through the jungle. According to Quord, the big Roon village lies where Yellow River flows into the Austral Ocean. That's plenty far away."

"And we haven't got the Comet or any way to call Simon to bring it," groaned Otho. "It'll be a two-days' march on foot, in these jungles."

"No, I've a better idea than that," contradicted Captain Future. "Before we start, though, we're going to take time to disable all the atom-guns stored in that arsenal. Harmer's not going to use them."

Hastily, they sabotaged the cases of heavy atom-guns by removing the tiny injector-tube from each, and throwing it into the stream that ran down the center of the Valley of Dream Flowers.

When they started, Newton steered a course through the jungle due west.

"But the Roon village must be almost straight south!" Otho protested.

"We'll make faster time by going this way," Captain Future answered.

They had to follow the windings of "shuffler" trails through the thick crimson forest. The trails led them finally to the shores of Yellow River.

The tawny flood, rolling turbidly through the wild red jungles of Roo on its way to the great southern ocean, was a majestic sight.

"This is our quickest way to the Roons," Newton declared. "A raft will take us down this stream far faster than we can march in the jungle."

Their atom-pistols quickly felled and stripped tall feather-trees. These were rolled into a quiet eddy and bound strongly with vines. *

Soon after midday, the raft was pushed out into the current. Under the scorching blaze of red Arkar, it bore them with dangerous rapidity southward through the wild jungles of the forbidding world.

CHAPTER XIV

Dragon Sacrifice

ON the preceding night, Philip Carlin and Grag had remained frozen with astonishment as they gazed forth from their hiding place at the amazing scene ahead.

They had dragged Gaa down with them into the concealment of the bush-orchids. Though his hands were bound and his mouth gagged, their captive Roon guide made fierce efforts to escape.

"It's the Roon village," whispered Carlin, staring. "But what in the world are those tribesmen doing?"

"It's a ritual of some kind," muttered Grag. "Hear that drum?"

Carlin's eyes swept the unearthly scene. They were crouching at the very edge of the jungle. Before them in the thin starlight lay a crescent-shaped area of open ground.

The curved side of this bow-shaped plain was bounded by the dark jungle in which they crouched. Its straight side was the brink of a long cliff beyond which glimmered the vast, heaving expanse of the mysterious Austral Ocean. Just to their right, there yawned a deep canyon in which the wide Yellow River flowed out into the sea.

To their left along the curve of the crescent lay the big Roon village. The low, thatched huts of the red tribesmen had been built back under the trees, for concealment and shelter. Out in the open in front of the village were now gathered thousands of the Roons.

"But what are they doing?" whispered Philip Carlin. "They look as though they were waiting."

The Roons were all facing southward, toward the cliff-edge and the glimmering ocean over which Black Moon was rising.

A massive drum that hung in a framework in front of the jungle village was being sounded at regular intervals by two Roons who beat upon it with heavy clubs.

Boom—boom! The drum-beats rolled out like low thunder, echoing out over the cliff and the restless, starlighted ocean.

Philip Carlin's bewildered gaze fastened upon an even more puzzling feature. Near the mouth of the river, the cliff jutted out in a bold, narrow promontory whose surface was a hundred feet above the sea.

Upon this promontory, he made out the shapes of several animals—a small "shuffler" and two jungle-deer and other beasts he could

not identify. These animals were living, but were tightly tied to stakes set in the rock.

Boom—boom! Black Moon was rising higher above the sea, its shadowed, mottled face seeming to stare down at the weird scene.

"I don't know just what this is all about but I do know it's creepy," muttered Grag. "Eek is scared to death."

"Grag, listen!"

Between the thundering notes of the drum, Carlin's ears had caught a faraway rustling in the sky.

It was the thrash of great, flapping wings. He looked upward.

"Night-dragons!"

The Roons were hastily drawing back beneath the shelter of the trees at their village, from which they continued to watch intently.

Two great, flapping black shapes came gliding swiftly down from the southern sky, silhouetted against Black Moon. And there were others of the dreaded creatures up there, wheeling and descending.

The sky seemed alive with threshing wings. The drum boomed frantically. And then Carlin saw a horde of the winged terrors swoop down upon the animals tethered on the top of the little promontory.

Fangs and claws of the night-dragons flashed as they ripped and tore their helpless prey. Grunts, squeals and screams came hideously through the starlight.

"Grag, I believe we're seeing a propitiatory sacrifice to the Old Ones!" exclaimed Carlin, shakenly.

"What makes you think that?"

"I've heard that the Roons consider the night-dragons to be the messengers of the Old Ones," said the botanist. "It's clear that they make regular offerings to them, using that big drum to call the flying reptiles."

The drum had stopped. The night-dragons were rising lazily into the starlight and flapping away. Only fragments of flesh and bones remained on the promontory.

Carlin's mind was racing. Captain Future had sent him and Grag to learn the location of the Crypt of the Old Ones. Here was a clue.

"Is it possible that the Crypt we're looking for is in that promontory above the ocean?" he whispered. "If it is—"

A harsh, shrill voice suddenly spoke loudly behind them in the darkness.

"What are you doing here?"

They swung around, thunderstruck. A man had come up the trail through the jungle behind them, and was standing over them.

IT WAS a gaunt, unshaven Earthman in battered sun-helmet, his eyes glaring strangely at them in the shadows.

"Crazy Jonny!" exclaimed Carlin, stupefied by the madman's appearance.

"Carlin, the Roon's getting away!" cried Grag.

Gaa, their captive, instantly had seized his opportunity. As his two captors momentarily forgot him in their surprise at the madman's appearance, Gaa scrambled up and ran out through the starlight.

He was running directly toward the distant village. Though his hands were bound and he was gagged, he was already a hundred yards away.

"I'll get him!" Grag cried, starting forward.

"Too late—they've seen him!" yelled Carlin.

"We've got to run for it!"

Yells of excitement had come from the Roons of the village, and dozens of warriors were dashing out toward the stumbling Gaa.

Carlin grabbed the madman's arm. "Back along the trail quick, Grag! Come on, Jonny!"

Crazy Jonny tore away from his grasp. "Let me go! I bring a warning to the Roons!"

Perceiving that the mad Earthman would struggle rather than accompany them, Carlin abandoned the attempt and plunged back along the trail with Grag.

The jungle was weird in the darkness. They heard one loud explosion of yells behind them, and then an uncanny silence.

"They're coming after us, never fear," rumbled Grag furiously as he ran with Eek clinging scaredly to his shoulder. "I wish to space I had my hands on that cursed Gaa for one minute."

"Grag, we can't outdistance these tribesmen in the jungle," panted Philip Carlin. "We've got to hide, or—listen!"

Swift, stealthy rustlings were all about them in the jungle. The Roons could move like shadows in the dense forest. They were closing around the two.

Carlin clutched his atom-pistol tightly as he ran, ready to fire at the first dart that whistled toward them. But no darts were shot. Catastrophe came in a different form.

Pounding along the dim trail, Grag suddenly tripped and fell with a resounding crash that sent Eek flying catapulted into the brush. At almost the same moment, Carlin's ankles hit

the tough vine that had been stretched across the trail, and he fell across the robot.

Before either of them could rise, yelling tribesmen piled upon them. Nets of tough vine ropes, strong as steel cables, wrapped around them clingingly. As they floundered in the meshes, thicker and even stronger vine ropes were quickly trussed around them in many thicknesses.

Grag's furious bellow reverberated as the robot strove to free himself. Even his giant strength could not snap the many tough bonds.

Carlin heard Gaa's excited voice, addressing his fellow tribesmen.

"You will have to drag the metal one back to the village. The other one can be carried."

Doubt and fear were in the voice of one Roon who answered. "But this metal one is no star-man like the others. Maybe he is a demon?"

For a moment, Carlin had a wild hope that Grag's superhuman appearance would swing superstition to their aid. But Gaa shattered that hope.

"The metal one is of the star-men," Gaa asserted firmly. "He is not a man, but he and the other forced me to guide them here for an evil purpose. They were searching for the Crypt of the Old Ones!"

Exclamations of fanatic anger greeted that information. The Roons roughly picked up Carlin and started back with him to the village.

He could hear a group of them dragging Grag's mighty, trussed form along the trail behind him. Grag kept up a running fire of furious threats, for his pride had been pricked by Gaa's statement.

"Not a man, am I? You bird-beaked son of perdition, if I get my hands on you, I'll choke that insult back down your throat!"

A dense crowd of excited tribesmen swarmed around them as they were hauled into the village and dropped roughly inside one of the huts.

"Remain here and watch them closely," Gaa snapped to the warriors who had brought them.

"The Sacred One is here!" exclaimed a Roon, in tones of awe.

Carlin, looking up from where he lay bound, saw Crazy Jonny staring down at them. The mad Earthman, whom the Roons surrounded at a respectful distance, gave Carlin a faint new hope.

"Jonny, can you get them to let us go?" he asked earnestly. "They'll listen to you."

THE madman shook his head. "Not even I can save you now, for they know you have committed the sin of seeking the Crypt of the Old Ones." His voice rose, shrill with insane fervor. "You were fools to come here searching for the Crypt! Didn't I warn all in the colony to keep out of the jungle? Didn't I warn you all to leave Roo before your presence awoke the Old Ones?"

Carlin, hearing that mad voice, gave up all hope of assistance from the crazed Earthman. Jonny was as fanatically superstitious as the Roons.

Crazy Jonny had turned and now he was loudly addressing all the awe-stricken Roon people who had gathered in front of the village.

He pointed up into the southern sky. "You have seen for yourselves that the Crypt of the Old Ones already has begun to open?"

A shiver of superhuman fear went through the parrot-beaked red tribesmen. "We have seen."

"I bring you final warning!" shrilled the madman. "Warning that tomorrow night the Crypt will open completely!"

A gasp of horror came from the Roons. Crazy Jonny raved on. "You will see it happen with your own eyes. And you will know then that unless you act swiftly to drive the star-men from Roo, the Old Ones will come back to this world and will again establish their dark domain of dread."

"But each night we are offering sacrifice to the Old Ones," a Roon chieftain exclaimed. "Will that not assuage their wrath?"

"Nothing will prevent their waking but the driving of all strangers from Roo!" declared the insane Earthman. "Tomorrow night when you see the great Crypt open, remember that."

Crazy Jonny stalked away without further speech, and disappeared into the dark jungle. The Roons looked after him in fearful silence.

It was clear now to Philip Carlin that the crazed Earthman had become obsessed with superstition about the Old Ones, to the point where he was urging the tribesmen to drive his own fellow-colonists from Roo. How had that obsession become planted in the madman's mind?

The Roons out there were talking in awed voices, and looking fearfully up into the southern sky where Black Moon was rising higher. Seeing that, and remembering the madman's words, Philip Carlin suddenly experienced a blinding enlightenment.

"Grag, I've got it at last!" he gasped. "I know now where the Crypt of the Old Ones is. Good grief, we were fools not to see it before!"

"What do you mean? Where is the Crypt?" demanded the bound robot.

"It's on Black Moon, the satellite of Roo!" exclaimed the botanist.

"You're out of your mind!" exclaimed Grag. "But wait—maybe it's possible, at that."

"It's the answer, I'm certain," declared Carlin. "We thought the Crypt must be near this Roon village because we knew the Roons were able to observe the 'omens' of its opening. We never figured it might be on Black Moon, which they can look up and see in the sky each night!"

Before Carlin could elaborate on his stunned surmise, he was interrupted by the loud voice of Gaa speaking to the tribesmen. He was haranguing the fearful crowd, and presently they spoke loud assent.

Gaa came into the hut a little later with horrifying information for the two captives.

"You are to be sacrificed tomorrow night to the Old Ones," the Roon said. "Despite the warning of the Sacred One, we still hope that the Crypt will not open, that they will not awake. Since it is you star-men whose presence is stirring them to wakefulness, the sacrifice of two of you may appease them."

Carlin felt the muscles around his heart contract at the hideous prospect. "You're going to give us to the night-dragons, you mean?"

"Of all the crazy nonsense I ever heard, this stuff about the Old Ones is the wackiest!" roared Grag. "Don't you know that the Old Ones, as you call them, disappeared from the universe a million years ago?"

Gaa nodded somberly. "Yes, they were vanquished and destroyed on many worlds by our ancestors of old. But here on Roo they were not entirely destroyed. They merely retreated into a sleep like death, from which they planned some day to awake and re-establish their ancient domain."

"You believe that the Crypt of the Old Ones is on Black Moon, do you not?" Carlin asked him.

Gaa nodded again. He pointed through the doorway of the hut at the shadowed face of the rising satellite.

"Do you see that round white spot near the center of the moon's face? That is the Crypt of the Old Ones, where they sleep."

"How, then, can you believe that it is opening?" Carlin argued. "You can't see from here."

"Yes, we can see," Gaa contradicted. "Look, and you will see dark cracks on the face of the white Crypt. They appeared there only months ago, and have widened several times. They mean the Crypt is opening."

CARLIN, straining his neck to peer up-ward, did faintly make out the horizontal dark cracks across the face of that white patch on the moon.

"The cracks are there, all right," he said to Grag when Gaa had gone. "Some accidental landslips, I suppose."

"Landslips, nothing!" Grag retorted. "I'll bet a planet against a meteor that those cracks were made to appear, just to excite the Roons. They're the 'omens' with which Harmer's bunch have incited the tribesmen."

Carlin felt the force of the robot's reasoning. He felt a bitterness to think that they had finally penetrated the mystery, too late.

Darkness finally gave way to dawn. The long hours of the hot day dragged by without presenting the slightest chance of escape. They were never unbound, and Roon warriors watched over them every minute.

Grag broke the silence in the late afternoon with a troubled comment. "Do you know, I'm worried."

"I don't blame you, in a fix like this," said Carlin dully.

"Oh, it's not that I'm worrying about— it's Eek," said the robot. "The poor little fellow must be lurking out there in the jungle, afraid to come to us. Suppose one of those hunting-worms gets him?"

Carlin could not repress a half-hearted grin. It seemed weird for his companion, in their present situation, to worry about Eek.

Night came, and the Roon village stirred with a fever of fearful anticipation. The great dragon-drum began to throb in a muted grumble as the shadowy face of Black Moon rose out there above the ocean once more. It was only a low, foreboding pulsing, not the thunderous drumming that called the night-dragons. But Philip Carlin's skin crawled as he realized what soon was coming.

There was a sudden uproar a little later at the jungle edge of the village. He glimpsed Roon warriors running, and heard the distant crash of an atom-pistol.

"That was an atom-gun!" Grag exclaimed hopefully.

Then Gaa and a small crowd came excitedly dragging a prisoner into the hut.

"Another spy of you star-men whom we have caught!" cried Gaa fiercely. "There will be three sacrifices to the Old Ones tonight!"

CHAPTER XV

Satellite Secret

BOUNCING and dipping on the rushing flood, the rude raft that bore Captain Future and his three comrades was racing down the broad current of the jungle-bordered river of mystery.

"Is that critter still followin' us?" asked Ezra, looking anxiously back into the yellow flood. "Yes, I can just see the ripples of it—I guess it still hopes one of us will fall overboard," replied Otho.

Just behind the raft, low ripples in the yellow river told of a big, swimming body that was trailing them beneath the surface. They had glimpsed it once or twice and had recognized it as a cyclopscrab, a giant, sluggish crustacean monster that lived in sea and river.

Otho drew his atom-pistol. "I'll try to kill it."

"No, let it alone," Curt Newton said. "The thing is too big. You might only infuriate it."

For hours, they had been trailed by the sluggish, unseen monster. The Yellow River was bearing them swiftly southward in their quest for the Roon village and the mysterious Crypt. The river now ran between shallow, sloping rock of a canyon.

The red disk of Arkar was sinking behind the horizon. In the gathering darkness, stars began to appear. Newton estimated that they must now be approaching the sea. That meant they were near the Roon village, and the mysterious Crypt of the Old Ones. "We've got to reach the Crypt, before they create more omens there and excite the Roons to boiling-point," he muttered.

"Listen!" said Otho suddenly. "Do you hear that?"

Darkness had fallen. The river was running between sloping rock walls. The lessening of its turbulent roar enabled them to hear the sound Otho mentioned.

"Boom—boom—"

A low, deep grumbling sound, it throbbed faintly to their ears from somewhere ahead, in a regular rhythm.

"Roon drums," Captain Future said. "We're near their village and the sea. We daren't go farther on the open river. Push to shore!"

They urged the clumsy raft toward the bank and, once ashore, Curt Newton rapidly mapped his plan of action in the darkness.

"The Roon village is on the cliff above the sea. We'll go downstream along the river bank and reconnoiter. It'll be less risky than going through the jungle. Joan, you stay here. No, I don't want any argument! You're not going along."

Joan Randall was still protesting as the three left her. Despite her indignation, she made no move to follow Newton. She knew that Captain Future had only her own safety in mind.

She sat down on the edge of the beached raft in the darkness. A few minutes later a rustling in the shadowy bushes caused her to leap to her feet and draw her atom pistol. Then she laughed in nervous relief. Out of the darkness scuttled a small animal which flung itself upon her ankles in an ecstasy of joy.

"Why, it's Eek!" Joan exclaimed, astounded. "Grag must have taken you with him. But where is Grag and Dr. Carlin?"

Eek got her thought, if not her words. The moon-pup pawed her feet, then ran a little way up the bank, then came back and repeated. It was obvious that he was anxiously trying to get her to follow.

"He wants to take me to Grag," Joan thought. She quickly made up her mind. "All right, Eek—you lead the way and I'll follow."

Joan delayed only to scribble a few words of explanation on a sheet from her pocket-pad. She put the leaf in a cleft stick on the raft, where Newton would find it if he returned here before she did.

"Now go ahead, Eek," she told the moon-pup. "Take me to Grag."

Eek eagerly obeyed, starting up the bank. She followed him into the jungle. Eek led southeastward through dim game trails. The distant pulse of drumming came louder.

Before long, they came suddenly to the end of the jungle. Joan looked out in amazement at the Roon village. Torches were alight among the distant huts. She could see the big drum that was being solemnly pounded by a tall Roon warrior.

Eek was now acting tremendously excited. Joan understood now.

"You mean Grag and Carlin are in the village and in trouble," Joan said. "What shall I do next."

She soon made up her mind. "I'll find out just where they're being held, and go back for the others."

SHE started slipping through the dark jungle at the edge of the clearing, but Eek ruined her plan. The Moon-pup figured that now that he had brought Joan here, everything was clear sailing. He ran out of the jungle toward the huts.

She motioned for the moon-pup to come back, but the damage was already done. A Roon warrior had sighted the little animal, and as he ran back toward Joan, the warrior saw her also.

The Roon uttered a yell of alarm. Instantly a score of warriors were pouring through the jungle. Realizing her rashness too late, Joan turned to flee. Before she had gone ten yards, dark forms rose around her.

She drew her atom-pistol, but brawny arms seized her from behind. Then, as she was dragged out into the clearing, she recognized Gaa's fierce face.

"I know this girl—she is another of the star-men who captured me, another of them who has come to spy on us!" Cried Gaa. "Bind her!"

They lashed Joan's arms and legs with tough vine ropes, dragged her to one of the huts, and flung her down upon its dirt floor. Nearby she glimpsed Grag's mighty form and the prostrate figure of Philip Carlin, both tightly bound.

"There will be three sacrifices for the Old Ones tonight!" exclaimed Gaa.

"Joan, how did you get here?" cried Grag.

"That precious moon-pup of yours showed me the way here, got me discovered, and then escaped," she answered indignantly.

In a few further words, she told them of the quest for the Crypt which had brought her with Newton and Ezra and Otho.

"But the Crypt isn't near here at all—it's on Black Moon!" groaned Carlin.

She stared, incredulous.

"Then the chief and Otho and Ezra will be here soon to spy out this place?" Grag was saying hopefully. "They'll get us out of this jam—if we're not sacrificed before they get here!"

Joan heard an ominous, gathering uproar of fierce voices outside their hut, and her heart sank.

"Grag, it looks as if the sacrifice is now."

A crowd of the tribesmen had now entered the hut to drag the three captives forth. Some

of the Roons looked doubtfully at Grag's metal figure.

"Maybe the Messengers of the Old Ones will not be able to eat this one," suggested one.

"He is not of flesh."

"If they cannot, we will destroy him ourselves after they go," shouted Gaa. "Thus the sacrifice will still be consummated."

Joan and Carlin and the big robot were dragged out onto the little promontory that jutted over the sea. She had a glimpse of the deep waters that washed the base of the cliff, far below.

The Roons left the three lying bound and helpless, side by side. Hastily the tribesmen returned toward the village. In a few moments, the great drum that had been throbbing so long now began a thunderous summons.

"Boom—boom—boom—"

Joan felt an unreality that almost robbed her of fear. The weirdness of the scene was like that of a nightmare.

Carlin felt it too.

"Surely this is all a crazy dream," she heard him saying in a dazed way. "I'll wake up back in my Great New York rooms!"

It was no dream! For over the now thunderously loud booming of the dragon-drum, their ears caught the flap and thrash of great wings up in the sky. Joan's veins seemed to flow ice-water as she glimpsed a dark, hideous shape gliding down across the shadowed face of Black Moon.

"They're coming," she breathed.

Grag was making herculean efforts. Joan thought he was making a vain attempt to break his bonds. But the robot had another idea.

"Brace yourself, you two," Grag muttered as he strained. "I'm going to try to roll on top of you. Protect you from the dragons."

Almost with the words, Grag's attempt succeeded. His giant metal figure rolled almost crushingly on top of Carlin and Joan.

Next moment, the night around them seemed alive with threshing wings and screeching, demoniac cries. The night-dragons were swooping to claim their victims.

Joan and Carlin, almost crushed by the bound robot's weight, heard the clash of teeth and talons on Grag's metal body. But that giant metal form protected the girl and the botanist from the ravaging horde.

"Hope they keep it up," rumbled Grag. "They can claw at me all night without doing anything more than break their talons."

The night-dragons' onslaught had become furious as the winged horrors found that their fangs and claws made no impression on the metal body of Grag. They clawed and tore with screeching rage at the robot.

Grag suddenly uttered an exultant cry. "That did it! I was hoping for it!"

He got to his feet, his bonds dropping from him. Joan understood. The claws and fangs of the night-dragons had finally severed the robot's bonds.

GRAG leaped erect, bestriding Joan and Carlin protectingly, and striking with his huge metal hands at the flapping horde around them. He gripped two of the dragons' necks and twisted them, flung them away and smashed another of the swooping horrors with his fist.

Until she died, Joan would not forget that nightmare scene of epic combat—the giant robot towering over her against the shadowy sphere of Black Moon, bellowing as he fought the swooping dragons—the screeching of the attacking monsters—the thunder of the dragon-drum.

The winged horde retreated momentarily from the robot's flailing arms. Grag seized the chance to reach down and snap Joan and Carlin's bonds.

"We've got to get out of this cursed spot!" he roared. "The dragons will get you two sooner or later." He pointed down at the deep waters surging far below. "That's our only escape. Jump!"

Joan hesitated not a moment. With Carlin and the robot, she leaped clear of the promontory and hurtled toward the waters far below. . . .

When Captain Future and his two comrades took leave of Joan, they pressed rapidly southward along the river. They followed the strand of beach at the foot of the sloping canyon wall.

Ezra Gurney suddenly pointed at a smooth ripple in the brighter waters of the river, a little way out from shore.

"That blasted cyclops-crab is still followin' us! The brute must have a one-track mind. I don't like it. It's a bad omen."

The canyon wall in whose shadow they tramped became steadily higher and steeper as they followed the long, circuitous route of the river. They had traveled for less than an hour when Curt Newton suddenly stopped.

"Listen to that!" he exclaimed.

The drum-throb they had been dimly hearing for some time had abruptly become much louder. It was now a deep, rolling thunder.

"We're getting near the village," Newton declared. "We'll circle and approach it from the seaward side."

They tramped on with quickened strides, and the smooth ripple of the unseen crustacean monster still kept pace with them out in the river.

A half-hour later, they followed the beach around a wide turn in the river. Now they glimpsed ahead of them the vast bosom of the southern ocean, heaving under the dim light of Black Moon.

"Look up there!" cried Ezra, pointing wildly. "On that cliff—it's Grag!"

Curt Newton glanced upward and saw a sight he would never forget.

On a promontory jutting out a hundred feet above the mouth of the river, Grag's giant metal form stood outlined against the face of shadowy Black Moon. And Grag was fighting—battling a horde of flapping night-dragons that screeched down on him in ferocious attack.

"Come on!" Captain Future cried. "We've got to get up and help him. Look! There's Carlin!"

The booming of the drum was thunderous above, and they knew the Roons were somewhere close up there. But nothing counted in this moment but the fierce loyalty of the Futuremen to each other in time of danger.

"Holy sun-imps, there's Joan up there with them!" cried Otho. "She somehow found Grag and Carlin!"

"Cap'n Future, they're going to jump!" exclaimed Ezra.

Up on the promontory, Joan and Philip Carlin had risen beside Grag as he momentarily drove away the winged horde. Curt Newton felt a frantic anxiety as he saw all three of them leap and hurtle downward, to disappear in the deep waters beneath the promontory.

"That cyclops-crab is out in those waters!" Newton exclaimed hoarsely. "It'll get them!"

He dived into the dark water as he spoke, and Otho followed. As they started to swim outward, they saw the heads of Joan and Carlin emerge above the surface and start moving toward them.

Newton also saw the ominous ripple of the giant crustacean moving toward Joan's head. He tried to cry warning to her.

He knew he could not reach her in time. But then an amazing thing happened. There was a mad flurry in the waters where the cyclops-crab had been. The sea there foamed, and then became still again.

Newton got his arm around Joan and swam with the exhausted girl toward the bank, while Otho towed Carlin ashore.

"Joan, you're not hurt? How the devil did you get up there when we left you at the raft?"

She explained breathlessly, and then exclaimed, "But Grag?"

"Here he comes," Otho declared. "Water don't bother Grag, when he doesn't breathe."

IT WAS true—Grag was striding up from the waters to join them. The robot seemed for once to be exhausted.

"You were the one who drove off the cyclops-crab?" Newton asked.

"Drove him off?" grunted the giant robot. "I blamed near tore him in half! I was starting to walk ashore when I looked up and saw the beast swimming toward Joan, so I reached up and grabbed him."

"Quiet!" Captain Future warned. "The Roons up there mustn't hear us."

Fortune favored them in that the night-dragons, still screeching in balked fury around the promontory, prevented the Roons above from approaching the cliff to look downward.

Curt Newton rapidly led the way back up the beach along the river. Not until they were well away from the Roon village did he stop.

"Now tell me what happened to you," he said to Grag and Carlin. "Most important, did you find the Crypt of the Old Ones?"

Grag nodded. "We found out where it is."

"Good!" said Newton. "We've got to get there fast."

"Chief, we can't get to the Crypt quickly," Grag replied. "It's on Black Moon."

Captain Future was stunned. "That's impossible!"

"It's the truth!" Philip Carlin said. "That round white area on the face of the moon is the Crypt! And the cracks in it are the 'omens' which have so excited the Roons."

Newton was aghast. "Then that's where Ka Thaar and the rest are going tonight in the Firebird—to Black Moon. And we can't follow to stop him without the Comet—and it will take at least a night and a day for us to tramp back to the colony and our ship!"

The chill of defeat, almost of despair, contracted his heart. There seemed no way

now to prevent the fruition of the coldblooded plot.

"It's my fault," he said bitterly. "I was so dead sure that the Crypt of the Old Ones was near this place. It's too late to get back to the Comet in time, but we've got to try. Come on."

They went upstream along the river bank for some distance further, and then climbed the sloping rock wall to the jungle.

It took minutes of struggling through the jungle before they found a "shuffler" trail that led northward toward the colony. They started with urgent haste on the long, desperate trek.

Before they had gone far, Grag uttered a joyful exclamation as Eek came scuttling out of the brush in an ecstasy of rejoicing.

"Depend on Eek to find me sooner or later!" he boasted.

"Hurry!" exclaimed Captain Future.

His voice was raw with desperation, and the pace he set was almost frenzied. Yet in his heart, Curt Newton had the freezing knowledge that all their haste was really futile.

For as he looked up through the trees at Black Moon, slowly rising toward the zenith, he knew that Lu Suur's men must already be there or on their way there to set off the final "omen."

And that would rouse every Roon of the planet's wild tribes to superstitious, fanatic attack on the colony, an attack that would inevitably bring secession and disaster.

And the Futuremen were two hundred thousand miles from Black Moon, and a dozen hours' march from the ship that could take them there!

CHAPTER XVI

To the Dark Moon

IN ACCORDANCE with instructions, the Brain had remained at the Carlin plantation two mornings before, when Carlin and Grag had gone into the jungles in their search and Joan and Ezra had departed to confer with the Governor.

Simon Wright had acceded to Newton's request that he stay here and construct one of the Wands of Power which might so impress the tribesmen as to check their superstitious fears if the other plan failed.

He explained his intentions to Zamok and Lin Sao, who remained with him.

"We learned the details of those so-called Wands of Power which the ancient Denebians used against the Kangas, when we visited

Deneb years ago. The diagrams of the instrument are in the file in our ship. By constructing an exact duplicate of one of those ancient instruments, we can convince the Roons that we can protect them even if the Old Ones awake. That will allay their superstitious fears."

"But you won't need it if the others find the Crypt and stop the 'omens,'" pointed out Zamok.

"No, we won't need it then, but we Futuremen are not in the habit of leaving anything to chance," replied the Brain.

Simon Wright glided out ahead of them through the hot sun glare to the Comet, parked in the concealment of the feather-trees. The main cabin of the streamlined little ship was in effect a compact flying laboratory, whose facilities had more than once been invaluable to the Futuremen.

The Brain floated to a compact cabinet which held a large reference library reduced to micro-film. It contained not only the scientific studies of other men, but also the notes of every important experiment and voyage which the Futuremen had ever conducted.

Using his magnetic tractor-beams as deftly as arms and hands, the Brain searched an index and then drew out a micro-film spool which he placed in the projector. On a small, square screen, it flashed enlarged reproductions of many pages of closely written notes.

These were the notes of the Futuremen's early star-voyage of exploration. He flashed pages past until he came to the record of their memorable visit to distant Deneb. Here was all the information the Denebians had given them about the ancient, dreaded Kangas.

"Ah, this is what I wanted," murmured Simon Wright, as another page came into view.

It was the complete diagram of a highly complex instrument of the ancient Denebian scientist. The Brain studied it carefully.

"Yes, I remember the wiring plan now," he muttered. "We built the thing once in the moon-laboratory as an experiment, and it worked then. But it won't be an easy job alone."

He assembled tools and materials and then started work. The two vitron-scientists were biologists, not physicists, and they watched with baffled incomprehension as he shaped and fitted tiny coils, condensers and wiring.

The hot hours of the day passed as the Brain labored untiringly. Night had fallen by the time Simon finished his task. He showed them the

instrument he had built. It consisted of a headset of flat, complex induction coils, which were connected by a multiple cable to a cone-tipped tungsten rod.

"And that thing is the Wand of Power?" asked Lin Sao.

"That's merely the legendary name given it by the Roons," Simon answered. "The Denebians who invented it called it a psycho-amplifier. Its induction coils pick up the encephalic-electric currents of the human brain, amplify them mechanically many times, and project the powerful, concentrated electric vibration from this rod."

"You mean that that thing amplifies thought?" Zamok asked incredulously. "But how could it be used as a weapon?"

"The Kangas of long ago had alien bodies but giant minds," Simon informed him. "They used mental attack as their chief weapon. To counter their hypnotic attack, the Denebians invented this instrument." He put the contrivance away. "If we have to utilize the thing to impress the Roons, we can use it on one of them. Then they'll believe we can protect them from the Old Ones."

Night was well advanced, and Black Moon was near the zenith as the Brain and the two scientists issued from the Comet.

"We'd better wait in the house," said Simon. "Joan and Ezra should be back soon with their report."

But the night passed without the appearance of the girl agent and the old marshal. When morning came, Simon was uneasy.

"Even if they found a clue to Lu Suur's trail, they should have returned to inform us," he murmured. "But they'll be here shortly."

Yet by the hot noontide of this second day, Joan and Ezra still had not returned. The Brain finally voiced an anxious conviction.

"Something's happened to Ezra and Joan! They would surely have returned or sent back word to me, otherwise."

"What could happen to them in Rootown?" Zamok asked doubtfully.

"I don't know, and I can't go into the town by daylight to find out without being recognized and giving away our presence on Roo," said Simon. "Will you go in and look for them?"

The Martian scientist acceded, and left immediately. Not until soon after nightfall did he return.

He confessed failure. "I couldn't find them, or any trace of them. I did manage to ascertain

that they had called on Governor Walker King yesterday morning, but after they left him they disappeared."

Simon Wright's foreboding deepened. "Then something has happened to them. They must have got too close to Lu Suur's trail."

He made up his mind. "Curtis should be told at once. He would never forgive us if Joan were in danger and we didn't let him know."

"But he and Otho are disguised as Rab Cain and Li Sharn," objected Lin Sao. "If you, one of the Futuremen, are seen talking to them, it would ruin their plans."

"I won't be seen," the Brain assured. "Under cover of darkness, I can get to them quickly. You two wait here."

The Brain glided out of the house into the darkness. Jetting a powerful but almost invisible magnetic beam from his strange, square "body", he swept swiftly up into the night sky.

His lens-like eyes studied the terrain. Black Moon had not yet risen but he knew his bearings. He started hurtling speedily northwestward through the upper darkness toward Li Sharn's plantation. Its location was clear in his mind from the previous discussions.

He soon swept down toward the plantation. It lay dark and silent in the starlight. Gliding soundlessly around its windows, Simon Wright soon assured himself that the place was deserted.

Poised in the darkness, he swiftly considered the situation. "Curt and Otho may be at Harmer's place."

He knew where it was. Rapidly, the Brain glided through the darkness.

Soon he saw lights at Harmer's plantation. The place was a hive of activity. Outside the grove of trees that surrounded the house lay a small, swift-looking rocket-cruiser with the name Firebird on its bows.

Hurrying men were carrying small, square black cases aboard the cruiser. They were superintended by a lean young Mercurian whom Simon knew must be Ka Thaar. Nearby stood the plump, worried-looking Jed Harmer.

A man's voice came sharply from the door of the cruiser. "Hurry with those charges! We've little time as it is."

"It's your own fault we're late, Lu Suur," Ka Thaar answered. "We were waiting for you as you ordered."

The Brain, hovering unseen above them in the darkness, felt a thrill of excitement when he heard that name. Lu Suur?

He glided a little lower, peering down at the man who stood in the door of the lighted Firebird, the man who was Lu Suur. It was an Earthman, to all appearance. Simon had never seen him before. But he thought he recognized him from his comrade's descriptions.

"But that's impossible!" thought Simon Wright, staggered. "He can't be Lu Suur?"

"I couldn't get away sooner without arousing suspicion," Lu Suur was replying angrily to the young Mercurian. "You should have had everything ready. You disobeyed my orders. You should have killed the Randall girl and old Gurney at once!"

Ka Thaar's voice had a dangerous edge in it. "You said to get them out of the way. I didn't suppose you meant me to murder an old man and a girl."

Jed Harmer intervened diplomatically. "It's all right—they'll be safe enough out in the Valley of Dream Flowers with Li Sharn and Cain to guard them."

"I'll worry about them later, but right now we've got to get started for the Crypt if we're to be in time," snapped Lu Suur.

"The last charges are aboard," reported Ka Thaar.

"Come on, then!" exclaimed the other man, turning and disappearing into the ship.

KA THAAR and the other men entered the cruiser, while Harmer stepped back.

The Brain, hovering up in the darkness, had been feverishly wondering what he could do. It was clear that Lu Suur and his followers were starting for the Crypt of the Old Ones to set off the final "omens."

Simon had no weapon, nor would any single weapon have been enough to overcome the powerful little band of Lu Suur. Neither could the Brain enter the cruiser, with the others in its doorway.

The door of the Firebird closed. The little rocket-cruiser blasted fire from its keel tubes and rose into the air. Then it darted away into the starry sky at an immense rate of speed. And it headed straight toward the dim sphere of Black Moon, just rising above the horizon.

"Is it possible the Crypt is there?" Simon Wright thought, incredulously.

He jettied his driving-beams and flashed back through the darkness at his highest speed, returning toward Carlin's plantation.

The Brain had decided on the only hopeful course of action. He explained it swiftly to Zamok and Lin Sao, when he reached the plantation.

"The conspiracy is rushing toward its crisis and we'll have to strike fast now! I'm going to take the Comet and go for Curt and Otho. Do you know where the Valley of Dream Flowers is?"

Lin Sao shook his head blankly.

"I've heard of such a valley filled with poisonous, dangerous flowers," Zamok said. "It's said to be in the jungle between here and the Austral Ocean. But no one knows just where."

"Then we'll have to search for it," Simon declared indomitably. "We must warn Curt and Otho at once."

A few minutes later, the Comet rose out of its concealment and roared away above the jungles at an altitude of a thousand yards.

The Brain was piloting the super-powered little craft. Simon's square "body" rested on the pilot-chair, his tractor beams gripping the space-stick, his lens eyes peering ahead and downward.

"We'll sweep out in widening circles over the jungle," he rasped. "If we don't find the Valley in a half-hour, we will have to forget the others and to follow Lu Suur to the Crypt."

He and the two scientists peered downward tensely as the Comet swept over the dark jungle in widening circles. Hordes of tree-bats startled by the roar of rocket-tubes swept up around them. Night-dragons flapped away from the thundering little ship, in frantic flight.

But by the dim starlight, they could see no such valley as they sought. Simon Wright's hopes were waning fast. The search was an almost impossible one. He dared waste no more time in it.

"Look down there behind us," exclaimed Lin Sao. "A fire is springing up."

Simon swept the ship sharply around. A pinpoint of red flame had appeared in the jungle over which they had flown a few moments before. It was spreading out into an irregular patch of fire.

"It's a thicket of reeds and brush burning," said Zamok. "Maybe a spark from our rocket tubes—"

"No! That's a signal!" exclaimed the Brain. "See those gun-flashes!"

The tiny, brilliant streaks of atom-gun blasts had spurted in the dark jungle close by the spreading flames. The flashes made a code.

He sent the Comet roaring downward without hesitation, for he knew that code. The ship landed between two giant trees. When they opened the door, they had the welcome sight of Captain Future and the other two Futuremen, and Joan and Ezra and Carlin, running toward them.

"Simon!" cried Curt Newton. "Thank space you saw our signal! We heard and recognized the rocket-tubes of the Comet, and set fire to the reeds and brush in the hope you'd see. How did you come here?"

The Brain's explanations were quickly made as they piled aboard.

"Lu Suur and Ka Thaar and their men are on their way to the Crypt, Curt! They headed in the direction of Black Moon."

Curt nodded. "That's where the Crypt is, and that's where the showdown is going to be. We've got to overtake them before they create more omens."

NEWTON sprang for the pilot-chair. Now he shouted for Otho to close the space-door, and at the same moment jammed down the cyc pedal and yanked back the space-stick.

The Comet screamed up out of the jungle and tore out through the atmosphere of Roo on wings of flame and thunder. Straight toward the rising sphere of Black Moon it shot, accelerating at a nightmare rate.

As the little ship tore out into space, Joan Randall was excitedly questioning the Brain.

"Then you saw Lu Suur? Who was he? What did he look like?"

Curt Newton, hunched over the space-stick, said over his shoulder: "He was an elderly-looking Earthman, wasn't he? Gray-haired, with a wrinkled face and heavy spectacles?" "Yes," said Simon.

"But that's a description of Walker King, the Governor!" exclaimed Joan incredulously.

Newton nodded grimly. "Joan, Walker King is Lu Suur. I guessed it hours ago, and should have known it from the first."

He explained in rapid, jerky sentences as his haggard eyes searched the sphere of Black Moon, expanding across the sky ahead.

"We figured, remember, that since no Venusian remotely resembling Lu Suur was known here, Lu Suur must be posing as an Earthman. I should have surmised Walker King was an imposter that first afternoon I

arrived, when King came out into the sunbaked plaza and expostulated with Harmer.

"King wore no sun-helmet! No Earthman can stand the full glare of Arkar on his unprotected head for more than a few minutes without collapsing. You saw it happen to me. But a Venusian can stand that glare. I should have known then King was a Venusian; Lu Suur in disguise.

"But I didn't see it, until that touch of sun I got in the Valley made me remember. Then I realized something else. It must have been King who informed Ka Thaar that you and Ezra were looking for Crazy Jonny. He was the only one who knew you were. King had to be our man!"

"But the man's a System Government official!" protested Ezra. "Government officials don't betray their trust and throw in with traitors!"

"No regular Government man ever does," Newton rapped. "But Walker King was not a regular Government officer. He was, as he told you, simply a colonist here whose friends petitioned his appointment as Governor when New York decided to appoint a colony man who knew local conditions."

"Of course, and it would be easy for Lu Suur to make up as an Earthman when he first came to Roo!" exclaimed Otho, "A chemical bleach to turn his hair gray, an astringent to wrinkle his skin, and thick spectacles for his eyes were all he needed."

"Then King is the one who sent poor Crazy Jonny in to the Roons with that mad story to arouse their superstitions?" questioned Joan.

Newton nodded somberly. "Jonny's dimmed mind would be impressed and convinced by the assertions of the Governor. It would be easy. We've faced no more dangerous antagonist than this man. When Lu Suur's vitron monopoly on Venus was broken years ago, he came to Roo. And he came with just one purpose—to set up a new monopoly here and absolutely control the vitron supply.

"Step by step, he's followed a path to that purpose. Harmer has been merely his figurehead, Ka Thaar and the others his hired gunmen. His has been the brain and will behind the whole black scheme. When he had worked himself into the key position of Governor, he could start to act. In that position, he could do everything that would provoke revolt even while he pretended to be trying to repress it."

Black Moon now loomed huge ahead of them, its shadowed rocky hills and plains wearing the round white central plateau on their breast like a dazzling jewel.

Black yawned the ominous cracks and chasms in the plateau, the omens that had touched frenzied fear in the tribes back on Roo. And now their ship was rushing down toward the mysterious satellite.

CHAPTER XVII

Crypt of the Old Ones

SPITTING jets of yellow flame, the Comet screamed down through the thin atmosphere of Black Moon, and scudded low across the face of the shadowy satellite.

The planet Roo, like a giant ruddy moon in the heavens above them, cast a pink glow upon the whole wild scene. This weird planet-glow illuminated arid, lifeless plains and low rocky hills, and was reflected brightly by the round white plateau at the center of the moonscape. The plateau was dozens of miles in diameter, of a white rock quite different in appearance than the dark stone of the rest of the satellite. The yawning cracks across the face of the white area were clearly visible from here as deep chasms. Around the plateau lay low, black rocky hills.

"That white plateau is the legendary location of the Crypt," Captain Future said. "Lu Suur's ship, the Firebird, will be somewhere nearby. Watch for it."

He steered their own rocketing craft around the rim of the white plateau. Their eyes tensely searched the planet-lighted defiles and shadowy gorges of the surrounding hills.

They were skirting the eastern rim of the white area when Otho's sharp eyes detected what they sought. The android uttered a cry.

"There's the Firebird! In that little valley back in the eastern hills!"

Curt Newton instantly glimpsed the ship of their enemies. The rocket-cruiser was parked in the deep shadows, a mile from the plateau in the hills.

"Stand by our guns!" he shouted to Grag and Otho. "If they try to escape, we'll have to shoot them down."

"No, we've caught 'em by surprise," yelled Grag. "Look there."

Two men were running frantically across the valley toward the Firebird as the Comet roared down and landed beside a crumbling rock monolith. The Futuremen burst out of their

ship and Curt Newton fired his atom-pistol in a crashing blast that ripped up the ground beside the two fleeing men.

"Stop and raise your hands or you get the next blast in your backs!" he shouted.

The two turned wildly. More than by the menace of the leveled atom-guns, they seemed overwhelmed by the inhuman appearance of Grag and the Brain as they advanced through the pink planet-glow.

Newton recognized the men as two yellow Uranians who had belonged to Jed Harmer's hirelings.

"Otho, take their guns. Then watch them while we rush the ship."

But the Firebird, when they approached it, proved to be deserted. Captain Future returned to his two captives. The two Uranians seemed stunned by the fact that "Li Sharn" and "Rab Cain" were allied with the Futuremen and their comrades.

"Where are Lu Suur and Ka Thaar and the rest?" snapped Newton.

The men maintained a sullen silence. Captain Future spoke to Grag. "You can make them talk, I know. You have my permission."

"With pleasure," exclaimed the robot. He stalked forward.

The sight of the giant, menacing metal figure approaching them broke the nerve of the captives as Newton had thought it would.

"Wait, we'll tell you," babbled one of the Uranians. He pointed westward. "Ka Thaar and the others are over there by the edge of the plateau, planting explosive charges to blow the whole plateau. They left our cruiser here to avoid risk of damaging it. Those trinite charges are so powerful they didn't want to take any chances."

Curt Newton swung toward his friends. "Then we've got to hurry. Otho, tie those men up. Joan, you stay here with Zamok and Lin Sao to guard them."

"I won't stay!" Joan retorted. "You know I can handle an atom-gun better than most men, and you'll need every weapon."

Curt Newton turned to expostulate with her. But the words never left his lips. For as he turned, his eyes had fallen upon the massive, crumbling stone monolith beside which the Comet had landed.

The monolith was no work of nature. It was too squarely symmetrical in outline for that. And upon its face were graven long rows of half-crumbled hieroglyphics of curious shapes.

"Why, that's ancient Denebian writing!" exclaimed Captain Future, amazed.

"What if it is?" cried Otho. "This is no time to be thinking of planetary archaeology. We're ready to start, chief!"

NEWTON paid no attention to the protest. He strode toward the monolith. The presence of the ancient hieroglyphics on this lonely moon had suddenly brought the whisper of a terrible suspicion into his mind.

His eyes tensely scanned the half-crumbled inscription. Captain Future was one of the few people in the universe who could read the ancient Denebian writing — he had learned to do so at Deneb itself.

As he read, he was seized by an apprehension close to horror. And the Brain, who had glided to his side and was also searching the writing with his lens eyes, seemed frozen by an equal emotion.

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Curt Newton, thunderstruck. "We never guessed, we never dreamed."

"Curt, what is it?" cried Joan.

Newton's brow was damp despite the chill of the thin air and his eyes had a dazed look.

"This inscription—it proves that the belief of the Roos about the Old Ones is true!"

Joan and the others stared incredulously.

"Curt, you can't mean that some of the ancient Kangas are really sleeping in that Crypt?"

"The Kangas all became extinct a million years ago," protested Ezra.

"We always thought they did," Newton said hoarsely. "But the evidence of this inscription is incontrovertible. The ancient Denebians placed it here as a warning. Listen!"

Huskily, rapidly, he translated aloud the half-defaced inscription upon the monolith. His lips moved with words:

"—disturb not the white plain, for beneath it... crypt in which lie the last of the Kangas. We of Deneb . . . fought and conquered them on many worlds, but on this world a remnant of them fled from us and . . . buried themselves in hiding here, passing into suspended animation by their power of self-hypnosis.

"These were the most powerful of the dark ancient ones and we thought it wisest not to attempt to destroy them lest we wake them and be unable to overcome them. It was safest . . . let them sleep on, and place . . . warnings for those of future ages.

"Heed the warnings! Disturb not the buried dark ones! They will not wake until ages from

now this moon approaches so close its planet that it breaks up and thus uncovers the crypt. When . . . far future day comes, be on guard then against the waking of the dark ones.

"Until then, seek not to unearth them! Let this moon be deserted and shunned of men. Let the dark ones sleep on until the far future break-up of this moon, for by then . . . our race will be powerful enough to be in no danger from them."

Captain Future's hoarse voice seemed to have cast a spell of horror on the others. They stared at him wildly in the pink planet-glow.

"Then, if Lu Suur and the others blow the plateau and uncover the Crypt, the Kangas inside it will awake?" cried Joan.

"Yes, and that means awful danger for all humans on Roo, perhaps for all the humans in the universe," Curt Newton said thickly.

"Those monstrous survivals of the dim past, those alien ones whom even the mighty Denebians of old could hardly conquer, coming forth—"

He broke off, his face glistening with perspiration. "No time to lose now! Lu Suur's got to be stopped before he blows the plateau."

Newton dived back into the Comet, came bursting out in a moment. He was hastily shoving an object into his blouse. He ran forward.

"Come on! And if we have to shoot, shoot to kill! We can't take any chances now!"

In the terrible urgency that drove him, he made no protest at Joan Randall accompanying them. He led the way in long, running strides eastward through the low rock hills toward the plateau.

Grag and Otho kept pace with him despite his fierce haste, the Brain gliding beside them. And Ezra and Joan and the bewildered, stunned Philip Carlin were close behind.

Newton's soul was a turmoil of ancient and awful fears, fears that had stalked the shadowy history of the universe for ten thousand centuries.

They ran through the rocky defiles, and approached the last ridge between them and the plateau.

"Up this way!" Captain Future said hoarsely. "We should be able to spot Lu Suur and the others from that ridge."

"Look out!" cried the Brain sharply, at that moment.

FROM behind the crest of the ridge toward which they had just started to climb, a small,

square black object hurtled up into the air. It curved up and outward and then started to fall directly toward them.

Newton instantly recognized the terrible nature of the missile. It was a sealed charge of trinitite, most powerful of explosives. It would fall directly among them, and the resulting blast would obliterate them.

Captain Future took the only action possible. The atom-pistol in his hand came up with blurring speed, and from it a streak of white fire lanced upward.

"Down, all!" Newton yelled at the same moment he fired.

His aim had been unerring, and the concentrated atom-blast from his pistol hit the trinitite charge falling toward them.

Next moment, a terrific blast exploded in the air above them. The tremendous wave of compressed air from it smashed down at them in a stunning shock.

Curt Newton had thrown himself flat, protecting Joan with his own body. But the smashing shock smacked his head against the ground with such force that consciousness flowed out of him. As he fought fiercely to retain his reeling senses his atom-pistol had been snatched from his hand. Realization of the fact spurred his stunned mind back to clarity. He scrambled wildly to his feet.

Too late! As they had lain stunned, a half dozen men had seized all their weapons and now confronted them with the threatening muzzles of their own atom-guns.

"Devils of space!" raged Otho. "Lu Suur's men!"

A voice called down from the ridge. "Bring them up here, if they're still living."

Curt Newton, appalled by the suddenness of the disaster, perceived that none of his comrades had been more than dazed. But resistance to the menacing weapons leveled at them was hopeless.

The vicious-eyed, squat green Jovian who covered Newton with his weapon pointed up the slope with it. "March, Cain! All of you!"

Grag was swearing blisteringly in his rumbling voice. Two atom-guns covered the giant robot and the Brain. A movement at resistance by any of them meant death.

Newton felt a bitter despair raging in his soul. But not yet had he given up hope of preventing ultimate disaster. No matter what happened to them, the ancient horror that slept on this moon must not be awakened.

They reached the ridge. It was higher than the plateau, and they could look out across that cracked, glaring white expanse. Four other men were running from the plateau toward the ridge.

But the eyes of Captain Future and his comrades were riveted for the moment on the man who faced them. A gray-haired, elderly-looking Earthman, whose thick spectacles glinted at them mockingly in the pink glow—

"Walker King!" hissed Otho. "You were right, chief. He is Lu Suur!"

Lu Suur in turn seemed amazed as he looked at Newton and Otho. "So you and Cain turned traitor and helped these Futuremen, Li Sharn?" he snapped. "You'll wish you hadn't done that."

The Venusian plotter's eyes flicked toward Grag and the Brain. "Yes, I recognized you two as two of the Futuremen as soon as I saw you coming. And the girl and old Gurney." He laughed. "You've proved pitifully stupid without Future himself to lead you. You should have known that we'd see your ship landing and would expect you to come after us."

Lu Suur nodded toward a half-dozen small black cases which lay on the ground near a piece of electrical apparatus with a protruding antenna.

"Lucky we had a few trinitite charges we hadn't planted yet, wasn't it? That one we tossed should have blown you to tatters. But you are quick with a gun, Cain."

Before Curt Newton could speak, the four men who had come running up from the white plateau reached the ridge.

Ka Thaar was the leader of the four. The Mercurian youngster's thin face wore a look of alarm as he exclaimed to Lu Suur.

"What was that blast? We heard it just as we were planting the last charges, and were afraid you'd used the detonator prematurely."

KA THAAR'S voice trailed off into silence. The young Mercurian had now noticed the captives. His tawny eyes seemed to distend in amazement as he looked at the giant metal figure of Grag and the hovering Brain.

"Two of the Futuremen!" he exclaimed in a low voice.

"Yes, two of the famous Futuremen," said Lu Suur satirically. "Those living wonders you have always talked about. They look pretty harmless now, don't they?"

Ka Thaar made no answer. He was staring at the robot and Simon Wright, as though still unable to believe his eyesight.

CHAPTER XVIII
The Kangas

Curt Newton spoke desperately. "Lu Suur, what happens to us is important only to us. But whatever you do, you must not detonate the charges you've planted down in that plateau."

"And why not?" demanded Lu Suur ironically. "We've gone to considerable pains to prepare them. The radio-detonator here will set them off and blow this whole plateau open. The sight of that will madden the Roons to a panic that will send them against the colony in a big attack and that means the secession I've had in mind for nine years."

"I know all that," Captain Future said. "And I'm not trying to appeal to your conscience. I'm appealing entirely to your self-interest when I tell you that you must not blow the plateau!"

Lu Suur looked at him narrowly. "Cain, what are you trying to say?"

"That the legends of the Roons are true, that the Old Ones, the Kangas, actually sleep in a crypt beneath that plateau and will awake if their crypt is uncovered by your blast," cried Newton.

Lu Suur burst into laughter. "Cain, you're an ingenious sort of traitor. Too bad you turned out to be a Patrol spy. I could really have used a man of your cleverness."

"It's true!" Curt Newton affirmed desperately. "You saw the inscribed monolith back there in the valley where you left your ship?"

"There are old carved monoliths like that all around the plateau, remnants of some crazy forgotten race," said Lu Suur contemptuously.

"They're warnings," Newton insisted. "Warning written by the ancient Denebians of the Kangas who lie beneath the plateau."

"And I suppose you can read ancient Denebian?" mocked the other. "The lie isn't even clever."

Newton, desperately trying to convince the Venusian, put his hands up to his face, removed waxite plugs, pulled away false scar-tissue. His hands came down to reveal his own normal clear, tanned face instead of the evil, scarred countenance of Rab Cain.

"What does that prove?" snapped Lu Suur. "As a Patrol spy, you'd naturally be disguised—"

He was interrupted. Ka Thaar was staring at Newton, and there was a wild expression on the young Mercurian's face. He uttered a cry. "Captain Future!"

GRIMLY, Curt Newton had taken this final desperate gamble to convince the arch-conspirator of the reality of dreadful peril. The disclosure of his identity seemed almost stunning.

In their eyes, the Earthman whom they had known as Rab Cain seemed suddenly mantled with the fame that for years had blazed one name across the universe like a meteor.

"Future!" hissed Lu Suur. All his irony, his satiric amusement was gone now. Naked hatred glared in his eyes. "So you've been on Roo all this time?"

"Yes," said Newton. "And you know now that I can read Denebian, that my warning about the plateau is no trick!"

Lu Suur, glaring at him, seemed not to have heard. "I might have known," he whispered. "The stories that you had been shot down and lay wounded back in the System, the whole set-up—it was clear enough, if only I'd seen it."

He shook his head. "Future, I underestimated you. But now you are underestimating me when you try to stop me with this last crazy strategem. Do you think I've spent all these years at Roo, playing a part I hated and working toward secession and a vitron monopoly, to give it up now because you threaten me with childish superstitions?" His voice took on a deadly meaning. "I'm not making the mistake a lot of men have made, of letting you live a minute too long."

Ka Thaar had been staring at Curt Newton during these moments. But now the young Mercurian turned to Lu Suur. "But the danger must be real," cried Ka Thaar. "If Captain Future says the Kangas will awake if we blow the plateau, it must be so!"

"You ought to know that it's only another trick," snapped Lu Suur. "But then, you always were hypnotized by this fellow's fame."

"But if you blow open the crypt, the Kangas will awake!" persisted Ka Thaar.

"They won't—all that is merely Roon legend," declared the Venusian. "Watch these prisoners. I'll deal with them in a moment but it's time we set off the blast now."

With hopeless eyes, Captain Future saw Lu Suur starting toward the radio-detonator which would fire the charges buried in the plateau.

A half-dozen atom-guns covered Newton and his comrades. Their own captured weapons lay

on the ground out of reach. But Curt Newton gathered himself for a final suicidal attempt to stop the Venusian.

But Ka Thaar had suddenly swung around toward Lu Suur. The Mercurian's cry was sharp, imperative.

The Mercurian youngster had both his atom-pistols in his hands and his tawny eyes were flaming as he faced the others.

Lu Suur stopped and turned. "Don't be a fool, Ka! You can't turn against me at this stage of the game."

Ka Thaar's thin, dark face was set like metal. "I've been loyal to you when it was a mere matter of inciting the Roons and bringing on a rebellion. But this is different. This means planetary disaster."

Lu Suur's eyes became like ice behind his spectacles.

"Drop those weapons, Ka. You haven't a chance. We got eight atom-guns."

Ka Thaar's tawny eyes flared brighter as he stood, slightly crouched, facing the men whose atom-guns were trained on Captain Future and his comrades.

"Eight guns?" mocked the Mercurian youngster. "Then which of you eight wants to be the first to shoot it out with me?"

The brutal faces of the motley criminals grew livid with fear and rage. Yet none of them dared turn his weapon away from Newton and others toward the Mercurian's thin, crouched figure.

Ka Thaar's dark face was terrible as he taunted them. "Eight of you, all afraid of my reputation as a gunman? Eight, afraid to shoot it out with one? By space, I'm glad that I'm through with you all!"

He took a quick step sidewise, his tigerish eyes never leaving the frozen line of men. His foot moved out then to kick the atom-pistols on the ground toward Curt Newton.

"Pick them up, Future," he said.

Then the spell broke. The burly, vicious-eyed Jovian in the row of criminals uttered an oath and swung his gun toward Ka Thaar.

ATOM-GUNS crashed like lightning and living bolts of fire seemed to dance between the men. Ka Thaar was standing, his atom-pistols jetting blinding death at the criminals who were firing at him as they turned. The Jovian was down, two others were falling—

Captain Future had dived to snatch up one of the weapons on the ground. He came up with it, working the trigger as he rose, his and the

Mercurian's deadly, unerring blasts scything the men before them.

Grag was rushing forward, booming his battle-cry. Otho and Ezra and Carlin were beside him. A gun-blast seared Newton's cheek as his own blast cut down the Uranian who had fired it.

He dimly heard Joan's cry. "Curt—Lu Suur!"

The Venusian arch-plotter, near the radio-detonator, had whipped out his weapon and fired. Ka Thaar, rushing forward to intercept Lu Suur, took that blast in his side and staggered to his knees.

The raging Venusian was bending, fumbling with the switches of the detonators. Captain Future aimed and fired in one movement.

But at the very moment the crashing blast left his pistol and lanced toward Lu Suur, the sound of it was swallowed by the reverberation of a titanic explosion.

"The blast!" yelled Curt Newton. "Get behind the ridge!"

The whole surface of the white plateau seemed to be heaving skyward under the explosion of scores of powerful trinite charges.

The moon was rocked by the reverberation, the rocky ridge swaying sickeningly under them as Curt Newton dragged the others down with him behind the crest.

Chunks of rock were hurled high into the air and crashed down around them. Debris and splinters of stone rained upon their prone bodies. Clouds of dust choked them. Then the shock died away.

Captain Future stumbled up, back to the top of the ridge. He looked downward, appalled.

A giant crater had been blown in the surface of the plateau. It was still veiled by shifting clouds of dust, but its depth was great.

"Lu Suur touched off the blast just before I killed him! Newton choked. "And now—look!"

Down in the dark, dust-shrouded depths of the giant new crater, a strange blue light had suddenly come into being.

"The Kangas have awakened and are coming out," Captain Future exclaimed hoarsely.

He whipped around to them. "Joan—all of you—hurry to the Comet and get away if I fail!"

He stooped and snatched up the unused trinite charges that still lay on the ground beside Lu Suur's dead form.

Then, cradling the little black cases in his left arm, Newton ran down the side of the low ridge and across the plateau toward the edge of

the great crater which had been torn by the blast.

As he ran, Captain Future's free hand was pulling out of his jacket the instrument he had shoved there when they left the Comet. It was the psycho-amplifier, the ancient weapon of the Denebians against the Kangas.

The instrument he had ordered Simon to build merely to impress the Roons, was now their last hope!

Newton jammed the headset on as he ran, its flat induction coils fitting closely over his skull, its tungsten rod dangling from the cable. He was within twenty feet of the crater when he stopped short, frozen.

"Awful!" he whispered. He was shaken by a horror and a fear that no man in the universe had felt for a million years.

Up over the edge of the crater, from the newly gouged depths, was coming a fat, black, obscene thing. It was a big, semi-liquid, plastic mass, that heaved itself painfully over the rim and was followed by another of its kind.

The Kangas! He was looking at creatures no human eye had fallen upon for ages. They were looking back at him.

For they had eyes. It was the only recognizable feature of those insanely plastic black bodies—the two enormous, pupilless eyes that fixed solemnly upon Captain Future.

Newton had been desperately raising the rod of his psycho-amplifier, his thumb fumbling for the switch-button in its grip. But he did not complete his gesture of aiming the rod at the two horrors.

He couldn't complete that gesture! He was frozen by the super-hypnotic command projected at him by the two creatures before him.

He felt as though his brain was congealed to ice. The impact of infinitely powerful and infinitely alien minds was holding him like a child in their power.

HE WAS in the power of the mighty beings whose race had died out ten thousand centuries before, the ancient kings of the universe who had reigned before ever man was, the Old Ones!

Curt Newton made frantic mental effort to raise the rod of the psycho-amplifier in his hand, to thumb its button. He couldn't do it. Sweat trickled down his brow. He felt his mind cracking—

"Curt!" came a scream behind him. Joan had followed him!

That scream distracted the attention of the two Kangas, briefly. For just a moment, the hypnotic grip of the two creatures upon his mind relaxed as they glanced at the girl.

In that fleeting moment, Newton was able to bring up the rod in his hand to point at them and to press the button in its grip.

He felt the subtle current of electro-encephalic vibrations streaming from the rod toward the two Kangas. The powerful force of his own mental command, amplified manifold in intensity by the apparatus he wore, was being projected at his two nightmare antagonists.

Terrible contest between two giant, ancient minds and one man's mechanically amplified will raged for a few moments in awful silence.

Then the two Kangas began to retreat slowly back down into the crater, at his unspoken command. He followed, step by step.

Not his mere weak human will was driving them, beating down their hypnotic attack. Only the instrument of ancient Denebian science which the Denebians of long ago had devised to conquer these dark horrors, enabled him to overcome them in this ghastly duel.

The Kangas had retreated down over the edge of the crater. Curt Newton was at the brink, above them. His senses reeled as he looked down into the depths.

For down there in the dusty darkness he glimpsed the curved upper surface of a giant dome of metal. It was the crypt in which Kangas had slept for a million years, and in which they had now awakened.

There was a round opening in the top of that metal dome. Dim blue light streamed upward out of it. It revealed vaguely the interior of the great crypt—a horror of scores of obscene, fat, black shapes writhing amid unearthly machines and objects. Others were already toilsomely climbing the sides of the crater after the first two.

Captain Future felt the sudden combined mental attack of the creatures below beat down even his artificially amplified resistance. But as he staggered wildly, he was blindly tossing into the crater the little sealed charges of trinitite he had held in his left arm.

He glimpsed the little cases falling toward the open crypt. He reeled backward. Then came a titan shock and blast as the explosion turned the interior of the crater into an inferno. Newton was hurled backward as by a giant hand.

He regained complete awareness to find Joan Randall bending over him. Wildly, he staggered up.

"The Kangas?" he cried hoarsely.

"I think they are dead," she choked. "I think everything in that crater must be destroyed."

Captain Future stumbled over shattered stone to the brink of the crater. The whole crater had been half collapsed by the explosion. It held a mass of broken rock, twisted metal and crushed black bodies.

The Kangas were dead, indeed. The last representatives of the once-mightiest race in the universe had awakened only to perish.

Newton and Joan, after minutes, stumbled back across the plateau to the ridge. The others were there. They had refused to flee. They were, like Captain Future, too dazed as yet to rejoice at the miracle that had saved an unsuspecting universe from the return of the most dreaded creatures ever to inhabit it.

Philip Carlin plucked Newton's sleeve urgently. "Ka Thaar is nearly gone. And he wants to see you."

The Mercurian's youngster's thin face was drained of color and his eyes were glazing as he looked up at Captain Future.

"I tried to stop Lu Suur from setting off the blast," he whispered. "But I couldn't. The Kangas—?"

"Are dead," Newton told him. "There's no more danger now. You saved us all, Ka— saved us from a disaster that would have brought our whole race into the shadows."

There was a queer gleam in Ka Thaar's fading glance. "And I fought beside you, didn't I? I fought shoulder to shoulder with the Futuremen! Years ago, I used to dream of that!"

The words dribbled into nothing as his head rocked back and the emptiness of death came quietly into his eyes.

JOAN sobbed against Curt Newton's shoulder. He looked down at the dead youngster, moved as he had not been for years.

At last, Simon Wright broke the silence. "Curtis, what about the Roons? They will have seen the blasting of the plateau as a final omen, and they'll be boiling with superstitious excitement now."

Newton nodded wearily. "But we can soon quiet them. All we need to do is to dig out the crushed body of one of the Kangas and take it back with us to show the tribes that the Old Ones are really dead."

He looked up at the great pink disk of Roo. "And the danger of rebellion will collapse, with Lu Suur dead. Harmer can be sent back to the System under arrest, and a new governor appointed." He smiled. "And the people in the System will get their vitron as freely as before, without ever knowing the price that was paid to keep it that way."

Joan looked down at Ka Thaar. "Curt, shall we bury him here? I think he'd like that."

Captain Future, gazing at the dead, strangely happy young face, nodded slowly. "Yes, I think he'd like it. There's another thing I want to do that, I think, would please him." . . .

Two hours later, the Comet rose from the desolate satellite and sped back up into the sky toward the great pink planet. Its trail of rocket-fire faded swiftly, against the darkness, and the last echo of its rockets died away.

There was silence on the deserted moon, except for the whisper of the thin wind. The shattered plateau lay quiet beneath the stars. But now, near it, there rose in the planet-glow a high and massive cairn of rocks. Upon the face of that lonely tomb, the scorching blast of an atom-gun had deeply engraved a brief legend.

KA THAAR OF MERCURY A FUTUREMAN