

WEEK
END

CAPTAIN FUTURE

MAN OF TOMORROW



13'

FUTURE

CAPTAIN FUTURE AND THE SEVEN SPACE-STONES

A Complete Book-Length
Scientifically Based

By EDMOND HAMILTON

"Think I'm good" to sit in a shiny office on Earth and watch other men go out and have fun?" he demanded. "Give somebody else the commandship—I don't want it."

Kara Gurney was already a gray, grim veteran of the service, when he first met Curt Newton and the Futuremen.

That was when Captain Future and his three warship comrades were first bursting dramatically upon the System, blowing a crusade against the most dangerous interplanetary criminals.

Curt Newton and Kara Gurney were drawn to each other at first meeting. The brilliant red-haired youth and the grim, aging veteran had two things in common—unflinching courage and unrelenting hate of evil. They came to know each other well.

Gurney Joins the Futuremen

It was the famous "Space Emperor" case on Jupiter, that amazing plot which almost smashed the System law on its greatest world, which brought Curt and Kara into work together. Since then, Kara has participated in most of Curt's exploits.

Beside his deep affection for Curt, Kara admires the Wizard of Science tremendously as a fighting-man. He swears by Curt's ability as a space-fighter. But he sometimes gets impatient with Curt's deep scientific researches. Kara is a fighting-man, not a scientist, and inclined to think science can be a nuisance.

"Didn't go in for all these researches and laboratories in my day," he will grumble. "We just unatched our atom-guns and hunted 'em out and blasted away."

He knows, quite well, that only the unparalleled scientific ability of Curt and the

Futuremen has brought civilization to the super-scientific criminals Captain Future quelled. But he likes to pretend he thinks it all a waste of time.

The Coup That Gurney Won—and Lost

Kara can tell great yarns of his untried experiences in the old wild days, though the crusty veteran seldom shows enough to tell them to strangers. But there is one story of his past that Kara never told to anyone but Curt Newton.

That is the story of how he destroyed the third of those great space-planes of past years. That plane leader, known as The Falcon, was considered the deadliest corsair in space. He was known to be an Earth-man, but that was all. After one squadron-leader after another of the Patrol had met defeat trying to destroy him, Kara Gurney was sent out against him.

The saga of Kara Gurney's fight against the Falcon is still told in the System wherever space-men meet. Kara brought the Falcon to bay off Saturn, and destroyed him in one of the most terrific cruise-action battles ever seen. Immediately after, Kara requested to be transferred from space-duty. Everyone wondered why, but he never told the reason to anyone but Curt.

No one in the System but Curt knows that the Falcon was Kara's own younger brother, gone wild in their early space-days and drifting into piracy as his brother entered the Patrol. And no one but Curt can quite appreciate the grim, bleak strain in the crusty old veteran's make-up, and the reason for it.

THE WORLDS OF TOMORROW

(Continued from page 45)

reamed the basis of the great canal.

By 10000 B.C. Mars was a desert world of fighting tribes who dwelled among the ragged ruins and near the arid oases along the canals. A number of cities, notably Syntha, did survive and keep some of the old Martian traditions and knowledge alive. But such places were few.

It is believed that the Jovian civilization which flourished about 88000 B.C., Earth chronology, sent explorers in crude rocketships to Mars and that the Jovians gained much of their own ephemeral glory of science from study of Martian relics. But the Jovian magnificence was even shorter-lived than the Martian.

Landing of the Earthmen

It was not for nearly a hundred thousand years later that organized space-traffic began again. Then the vigorous new civilization of Earth, rising with unprecedented rapidity, sent forth its first explorer, the immortal Gorbam Johnson. When he landed on Mars, an epoch was ended and another epoch began. Since then planetary archaeologists from Earth and other planets have unraveled

many of the mysteries of the ancient, mighty Martian civilization, though there are even more enigmas at which we cannot even gaze.

The Martians see, even now, perhaps, the most strange people psychically in the whole System. Consciousness of a mighty past, a lost greatness, makes them tend to look down on other races with a scorn perhaps not unshared with awe. The great ruins of the past that dot Mars invite them to brood too much upon the dead glory of their race.

Inherited ability, perhaps, explains their remarkable aptitude for scientific research. Their art is severely geometrical and functional, lacking the aesthetic sense of the Venusians. Similarly, their music is a complicated hegemony that other planetary peoples are inclined to consider soulless.

They live on their world untrapped in the past. And whoever has traveled to Mars and stood at night, in the desert, and seen the two moons of Phobos and Deimos hovering low over the mighty ruins of the Martian cities of hundreds of thousands of years ago, must feel with them the grandeur and sadness of their planet's history.

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UNDER OBSERVATION

(Continued from page 4)

the official theme-song of the Futuremen. Anybody want to try his head at some lyrics?

NO BODY FOR THE BRAIN

Everybody loves the Brain—but the Brain doesn't want a body! Here on a sidewalk strike to keep himself intact, without cumbersome appendages added to his rectangular abode. He doesn't want to be able to move, to fight. You much added responsibility—and then he'd be stanking Greg's (buddy).

Samson Wright won't feel right with mobile accessories. But he thanks you all for your swell suggestions.

But don't give up hope. One of these days an emergency may arise, and the Brain then will have to adopt some means of locomotion. Maybe he'll like it so much then that he'll refuse to stay out!

NEW FANTASY NOVEL

Family News! Dr. David H. Keller, whose master serial, **THE HUMAN TERMITES**, we concluded in the last issue of **CAPTAIN FUTURE**, has just had an unusual fantasy novel published by Simon & Schuster, publishers of many famous books of the day.

The name of Dr. Keller's new novel is "The Devil and The Doctor," and leading literary critics have declared it a distinctive piece of work. If you're a Keller fan—and who isn't?—then you'll do something about further investigating this absorbing literary work by one of science-fiction's greatest writers.

FUTUREMEN CLUB

The first thing to do is to clear up the navigation channel. How about this new organization—The Futuremen? Do you want to join it, or don't you? I'm not going to have staff like this hanging over every issue to clutter up my quarters. It reminds me of the natives of the Salt Marsh sections of Saturn who had costumes of every conceivable nerve and substance hanging from the walls and ceilings of their huts. But I'll tell you about that, and how I earned the name of Saturn, some other time.

This club, now—just tear off the name-strip and date line at the contents page of this issue, fill out the application blank on page 128, and shoot these items on in with a stamped and self-addressed envelope—and our Futuremen secretary will do the rest for you. And that's that. I'm not going to keep dangling that bait in front of your eyes in this department every issue. If you space out get left, you're going to have to look for coupons and remittances elsewhere. The address is: **THE FUTUREMEN, CAPTAIN FUTURE MAGAZINE, 30 W. 46th St., New York City.**

FLORA AND FAUNA

If only half of the many suggestions pouring in to this department were adopted, (Continued on page 22)

(Continued from page 10)

we'd have to cut down on the story section or increase the size of this magazine in order to cram everything in. Of course, we're not going to do *nothing* for the present, anyway. That doesn't mean that a vast number of suggestions aren't good, either. Here's an example:

Dear Editor: Captain Future Magazine is great. Please make it a bi-monthly. I'd like to see them visiting three months for their orbital station. How about a new department of that depicts and thoroughly describes the means of such planets? Hamilton's descriptions of those things are too vague. Please print the names and addresses of all club members in the next issue and add the new members to study other clubs. I would like to contact fellow subscribers—Miss Gorman, 428 N. 11th St., N. T. C.

Your chief pilot thinks that is a neat suggestion, but it isn't quite practical. You see, so far there have been no coldly exact scientific expeditions following up Captain Future with their equipment and cameras to study the life of other planets. Oh for a Martin Johnson of the Future to trail Curt Newton! Oh for a Dr. Livingstone to pioneer and do the missionary work in the heart of darkest planet!

But to get on—Edmond Hamilton's description of games of chance of the future . . . a redrum roulette wheel, etc., as presented in this issue's feature novel, CAPTAIN FUTURE AND THE SEVEN SPACE STONES, certainly sounds glamorous and exciting. Chalk up this game of tomorrow along with the other amusements previously introduced—"Compound Chess" and "Dimension Billiards."

Speaking of games of the future has us speculating about the sports of tomorrow. With the purification of gravity possible, the sky will be the limit for all athletes. Fala-vaunting . . . high-jumping . . . these sports and others will vanish into the limbo of antiquity. And how would they hold an Interplanetary Olympics necessary hence? The inhabitants of the various planets, each accustomed to different gravities, will not be able to compete fairly with each other. Perhaps the Judge Lordlikes of tomorrow will work out some handicap system. We don't know . . . but we'd like to be around!

In the meantime, why don't some of you ingenious birds think up a word game, work out the paraphernalia and rules, and send the dope in? We'll print the good ones and send the others on to Hamilton as story plots. Which would tend to make this particular game department somewhat self-sustaining.

Speaking of plots brings us to a valid complaint by a guy who just spent a quarter for these eight swell science-fiction booklets. Say, by the way, what about the best of you gents? Better hurry—they are getting low.

INJECT SOME NEW PLOT

By James Miller

Edmond had made the first in science for eight weeks! The booklets of the future were being printed by the Editor in Chief, FREDERICK MARK, C. D. What a time he had! I would like to back a few suggestions to improve the magazine. Although the characters are very good in the stories, the idea of the story is the same thing every time. How things that

would be treated with greater enthusiasm would be a time-wasting story of an expedition of some other world. This would be a welcome change from the old idea of some one man exploring the system, followed up by CAPTAIN FUTURE going out and riding the waves of the ocean. Be just for a change have Hamilton think up a new idea for his stories—221 Wally St., Greenburg, Pa.

And since we have Ed Hamilton on the gridline, let's give him a good broiling. Here we have a rocket blast from the secretary of the Science Fiction Association of Connecticut. Take it away, Pilot Kovan!

NOT SCIENCE FICTION

By Stanley Kovan

It is highly evident that your magazine is long to wrap.

The original content of this letter will deal with anything your magazine. One suggestion is that your publications is not too science-fiction and it can't be called that.

Your stories deal with cold words and a mass of unbelievable accomplishments that drag out the minutiae of the reading.

The science-fiction has readers—yes, reading and writing.

Your science-fiction story, into detail—but your publications does not belong in it!

Literally speaking you are numbered in just writing "the not out."

What amount to give just a little account of everything, which gives a little color to the reader's mind.

Also your stories are too scattered. Our side today that of Captain Future's line all the other lines, while the other side has almost nothing.

Making the reader's interest is another accomplishment which hampered Hamilton is to complete of detail. The story drags out before it ends.

Let's throw in some suggestions to improve your magazine and the others, see if you can do any better in things which are possible.

The language Hamilton uses is too little—that of a literary artist. The words are over long words, including.

In your stories, could you arrange print the best letters. My best you should take letters including the publications. People who prefer short magazine readers, by read in the publication type. If they think CAPTAIN FUTURE is good.

Your magazine rates very low with our readers' approval. In the science-fiction it doesn't stand up much—42%. Why don't your publications get on level of Wally Street, Hartford, Connecticut.

Take it away, we invited you, didn't we? Yeah, take it far away—and bury it. You didn't leave anything but a few bleached bones to peck, brother. And I don't remember a previous letter from you that we never had space to print in which you took Hamilton apart and dumped him into the sea-pan. Maybe you have a wee something in your complaint. We don't know. We had ourselves praised and belittled from every side until it feels as though the ship is caught in an etheric stress. And why jump on the covers? Just to ride our old ship from stem to stern, eh? You don't want to miss anything. Okay, lad, here come reinforcements for you in the form of a pilot on the arty side. He objects to the same formula plot, too.

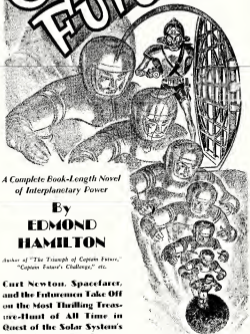
UNPLEASANTRIES

By Charles Hilday

Let's get the unpleasantness over with first, shall we? First, I don't think I was right that

(Continued on page 222)

CAPTAIN and FEUTURE the



*A Complete Book-Length Novel
of Interplanetary Power*

By
**EDMOND
HAMILTON**

*Author of "The Triumph of Captain Future,"
"Captain Future's Challenge," etc.*

**Curt Newton, Spacelancer,
and the Futuremen Take Off
on the Most Thrilling Treas-
ure-Hunt of All Time in
Quest of the Solar System's
Greatest Prize!**

Golden radiance enveloped St. George's

SEVEN SPACE STONES



CHAPTER I

Martian Secret

PETRIFIED with astonishment, Kenneth Lester stared at the blue, faceted jewel.

"The lost secret of Thuro Thuan—the mystery of ages—and part of the key is right here in my hand!" gasped the young archeologist.

The jewel seemed like an icy, menacing eye peering up at him. Its facets, unworn even by incalculable ages, reflected the white glow of the arcanic bulbs in the ceiling of the study.

This room, on an upper level of the great Institute of Interplanetary Science in New York, held the relics that the young Earth scientist had brought home from faraway worlds. Ancient Jovian heads of black stone stared down at him. Unburnian metal busts from beneath Neptune's sea leered from shadowy corners. A grotesque Uranian idol of dark cave-wood

Captain Future Meets the Strangest

towered with webbed hands raised in a threatening gesture.

But Lester was blind to everything except the strange, cold blue gem in his hand. He did not hear the humming of the X-ray projector on his desk, the only sound that broke the midnight silence. Nor did he hear the door of his study softly being opened.

"Part of the secret of Thuro Thuan, locked in this space stone!" he whispered breathlessly. "The secret that would give its finder unlimited power—" A look of fear distorted his studious face. His whisper was thick with apprehension. "If somebody evil got the whole secret, it would be a nightmare!"

He stood irresolute, fearful, in the glow of the uranite bulbs. With abrupt determination, he strode to the desk television.

"There's only one man in the Solar System who can be trusted with this discovery," he muttered.

The square screen of the television broke into glowing light that quickly formed a picture of a young man in an elaborate office.

"Hello, Professor Lester!" the image cried. "I heard you got back from Jupiter weeks ago. Why haven't you been around?"

"I've been studying a lot of relics I brought back from the Cave of Ancients on Jupiter," Kenneth Lester explained hastily. "Bonnell, I want you to help me contact somebody."

North Bonnell, secretary to the President of the System Government, smiled cheerfully.

"Sure. Who is it?"

"Captain Future!"

"Captain Future?" Bonnell blurted. "Why, even the President himself can't do that except in direct emergency! Besides, nobody knows where Future is right now. He's on a vacation."

"Who ever heard of the Futuremen taking a vacation?" Lester asked unbelievably.

BONNELL shrugged. "That's what the President told me. Even he doesn't know where Captain Future is right now. I think the President has

some way to contact Future in extreme urgency. But I'm afraid your case can hardly be that, can it?"

"Perhaps not," Lester said thoughtfully, "though I've uncovered something that's tremendous. Be sure you let me know the first chance you get of contacting Captain Future."

Lester switched off the television. As he did so, a soft voice spoke from behind him,

"So you wish to talk to Captain Future?"

The archeologist spun around. A man had stealthily entered his study.

"Doctor Ul Quorn?" Lester gasped.

Ul Quorn was a slender man, with the fine wrists and ankles and ageless good looks of a Venusian. But he also had the pallid red skin and high forehead of a Martian, and the intelligent black eyes and sleek black hair of an Earthman. Such interplanetary hybrids were not rare in those days of widespread colonization. But segregation had given them unpleasant characters. "What are you doing here?" demanded Kenneth Lester, his face hardening. "How can you come around the Institute after what happened to you here two years ago?"

"You refer to my dismissal and imprisonment for illegal research?" asked the mixed-breed coolly. "You still hold that unfortunate incident against me?"

"Every decent scientist has despised you for the hideous experiments you were making."

Quorn shrugged. "You Earthmen are so quaintly sentimental. My remote Martian ancestors, who delved far deeper into science than any of you, had no such qualms."

"That's what I'd expect from a mixed-breed," Kenneth Lester said contemptuously.

A terrible gleam lit the black depths of Quorn's eyes. His voice suddenly became almost harsh.

"You smug Earthmen here always looked down on me because of my mixed blood! It mattered nothing to you that I was the superior of all of you in scientific craft and skill." Then Ul Quorn shrugged again. The blazing passion that had burned out was

Creatures of All the Nine Planets!

hidden again by the cool, ironical mask. "But I didn't come here to talk about that."

"What did you come for?" Lester snapped.

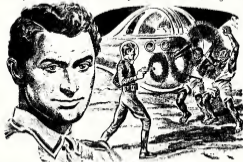
"For that space stone in your hand!"

KENNETH LESTER looked incredulously from the mixed breed's smooth red face to the blue-faceted jewel in his hand.

"This space stone?" he repeated. "Then you know?"

"Yes, my friend, I know," Quorn said softly. "I know it is one of the seven space stones that contain the

of a tiny instrument in his hand. A pulsing cone of radiance sprang from it and enveloped Lester. The young Earthman stood frozen, a horrible change coming over his face. Abruptly he fell to the floor. His body twitched. It was still living, but not with Kenneth Lester's life. A hideous new life now seethed in its tissues. He had dropped the space stone as he fell. Quorn quickly snatched it up. Calmly disregarding the horribly crawling body, he placed the space stone in the glow of the X-ray projector on the desk. Holding the jewel in that force, Quorn seemed to be listening. Tri-



Quorn Future

secret of Thuro Thurn, mightiest scientist of ancient Mars. I have one of those seven jewels already, and this one of yours will make two. When I get the other five, I'll be master of Thuro Thurn's secret. I, the despised mixed-breed, will control the most tremendous scientific power in the System!"

Lester stared at the cool, deadly face of the renegade scientist. Then the young Earthman made a sudden plunge at the television on the desk.

"I was afraid you would," sighed Ul Quorn.

The mixed-breed pressed the switch

umph came into his black eyes.

"Two!" he whispered. "Two parts of the secret are mine! And when I have the other parts, the remaining jewels—"

A distant sound from far across the light-splashed towers of New York brought him out of his gloating. He slipped the space stone into his pocket and went softly to the door. Quorn paused, his eyes caught by a slim Venusian statuette of a beautiful kneeling girl.

"Exquisite," murmured the mixed-breed. Then he stole noiselessly out of the room of hideous death.

HIGH in the night sky north of New York flamed huge letters of living gold.

AMUSEMENT CITY
ENTERTAINMENT CENTER
OF THE NINE PLANETS

A great spread of brilliant, varicolored lights was Amusement City. Supermechanical rides whirled gasping people in dizzying, breath-taking swoops. Games of chance or skill drew crowds. Barkers, shouted in stentorian voices of their unparalleled entertainers from far worlds.

Martians and Uranians, Mercurians and Jovians—people from all the worlds—were in the gay throngs along the midway.

Three Earthlings sauntering through the crowds appeared to be enjoying themselves. One of the two men was six feet four in height, his rangy body clad in a drab zipper suit that could not conceal his broad shoulders and long, lithe muscles. A space cap was pulled down over his shock of curly red hair.

Beneath it, his tanned, handsome face and keen gray eyes were glowing with boyish eagerness.

"Haven't had so much fun for ages," he chuckled. "Wasn't that last 'Rocket Ride' fun?"

The other man and the girl stared at him.

"You got a thrill out of that silly mechanical ride?" asked the girl incredulously. "You—Captain Future!"

Curtis Newton, the stalwart red-headed young man whom the whole Solar System knew as Captain Future, grinned at her.

"Sure I got a kick out of it, Joan. Why not?"

Joan Randall shook her dark head.

"I can't understand it. You've been in every queer corner of the System. You've seen things none of these people here dream of. You've traveled thousands of times faster than anything here can move, yet you really enjoy all this!"

"Well, this is different from what I'm used to. That's why I enjoy it. It's a swell vacation for Otho and me, to be just ordinary folks for a change. Eh, Otho?"

"You said it, Chief," replied the other man. "I'm certainly having myself a time. It was a great idea, coming to Earth incognito."

The man called Otho looked like a slender young Earthman of medium stature, but there was a certain suggestion of rubberiness about him. His pallid face and slightly slanted green eyes had a devil-may-care recklessness. He was, in fact, Otho the android, one of Curt Newton's famous band of Futuremen. He had been created in a laboratory, out of synthetic flesh. Yet he had intelligence, daring, humor, physical speed and skill in disguise far beyond those of any human being.

"Old Greg would have liked to come along too," Otho chuckled, glancing up at the full Moon in the starry sky. "Was he burned up because we left him on the Moon with Simon?"

"You ought to be ashamed," Joan reproached him. "Leaving your pal and laughing about it."

"That clumsy robot my pal?" cried Otho. "If I'd had my way, he'd have been scrap-iron long ago."

"Listen to that spiel," Curt Newton interrupted. "Sounds interesting, doesn't it?"

"This way to the dancing girls from the Hot Side of Mercury!"

"Come in and take a ride on an eight-legged Saturnian horse. Perfectly safe, folks, perfectly safe!"

Through this uproar came the shouting Curt Newton had referred to.

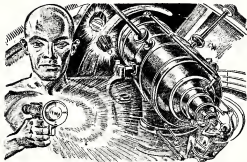
"Visit the Captain Future Museum! See all the exploits of the Wizard of Science and the Futuremen!"

"Why, it's an outrageous fake!" Joan declared indignantly.

"Sure it is," grinned Captain Future. "But let's go in and find out just what we've done. You're sure everything in this show is authentic?" he asked the ticket-seller solemnly.

"Brother, we got all this stuff straight from Captain Future himself," the liar replied.

SMILING, they streamed in with the crowd. It was an enormous pavilion, around which were ranged cases of exhibits and models. A fat, red-faced man was loudly lecturing to the earnest crowd.



O'Neil

"Folks, you've all heard about Captain Future, the scientific wizard who lives up there on the Moon with his three queer Futuremen. You know he's crushed dozens of super-criminals and scientific dangers that threatened us people of the nine worlds. You've never seen Future or his pals. Few people ever have. But you know that when danger threatens, they're on the job. Well, you're now going to learn all about Captain Future and the Futuremen.

"In the first place, folks, Future's home is somewhere under Tycho crater on the Moon. He's got a big laboratory and home there, and that's where he keeps that super space ship you've all heard about, the *Comet*. He and his pals are the only people living on the Moon, and you can bet that nobody bothers them."

"We know all that already," complained a man beside Curt. "Tell us what Captain Future's real name is. Where did he come from?"

"I'm just coming to that, brother," said the barber majestically. He lowered his voice. "Folks, you think Captain Future is an Earthman. Well, he isn't. Future is actually a man from Sirius!"

A murmur of surprise went up.

"Why, this is sheer nonsense!" Joan whispered indignantly.

"Sure, but the fellow has a real imagination," Curt replied.

"This man from Sirius came to our System and made his home on the Moon, years ago. And that was the start of Captain Future, folks."

Curt Newton's grin faded, and he ceased to hear the barber's absurdities. Curt's mind was carried back to the real beginning of his career as Captain Future.

CHAPTER II

Newton's Vacation Ends



YEARS ago, Curt's father, Roger Newton, a brilliant young Earth scientist, had fled to the Moon with his young wife. With them had gone Simon Wright, the Living Brain, who was now one of the Futuremen. They

had fled from the plots of Victor Cor-

vo, an unscrupulous schemer who coveted Roger Newton's scientific secrets.

In the underground laboratory-home they built beneath Tycho crater on the Moon, the refugee scientist and the Brain had labored to create intelligent synthetic life. Two intelligent artificial beings resulted—Grag the metal robot, and Otho the synthetic man. In the same year, Curt was born.

But Victor Corvo had followed them to the Moon. He killed Curt's parents before he was himself killed by Otho and Grag.

Curt Newton had been reared in the strange home by the Brain, the robot and the synthetic android. The Brain, mightiest scientist of the System then, had developed Curt into a scientific genius who eventually surpassed his teacher. Grag the robot, strongest of all beings, fostered Curt's physical strength. And Otho the android, swiftest and most cunning of all in the System, had taught Curt skill and quickness.

When Curt reached manhood, the career of Captain Future really began. A man who sought to use science for criminal purposes had slain Curt's parents. Curt decided to use his own unparalleled education and abilities in a relentless crusade against all such men. He devoted himself to fighting for the System peoples against those who would thwart their future. That was why he had taken the name of Captain Future.

With the Brain, robot and android who had been his tutors and guardians, Curt Newton had taken to the spaceways in bitter conflict against the forces of evil. Whenever danger to the System arose, the President of the System Government would call Captain Future by a beacon of blazing light on Earth's north pole.

Curt Newton thought of the struggle and danger that had taken him and the Futuremen to every world of the System. He listened as the rancorous barker finished his imaginative spiel.

"As for the Futuremen you've heard about, the Living Brain was the first of them. He was once Simon Wright, a great Earth scientist. He was near death when he had his brain taken from his dying body and placed in a

special serum-case. There it still lives and thinks and experiments, even though he has no body."

"Well, he got that right, anyway," Curt said to Joan.

"The second Futureman was the big metal robot. Grag is stronger than anyone ever heard of and intelligent, too. He could tear anyone of you to pieces."

"Good thing Grag isn't here to hear it or there'd be no living with him," muttered Otho. He brightened up eagerly as the barker went on.

"As for the third Futureman, the one they call an android—"

"He'll probably spin a lot of crazy stuff about my wonderful feats," Otho whispered with assumed nonchalance.

"He's the poorest of the lot. He's a sort of synthetic dummy that the others take along."

CURT burst into a roar of laughter. Otho, green eyes blazing with fury, uttered a hissing exclamation of rage.

"A dummy? I'll break his neck!"

"Cut your rockets, Otho," Curt ordered, still laughing as he held the angry android. "Be glad Grag didn't hear that."

"Now I'll show you mementoes of Captain Future's great cases, folks, in these exhibits," the barker was saying. "There are souvenirs of his fight against the Space Emperor on Jupiter, of his struggle against Doctor Zarro out there on Pluto, and—"

"Come on, we don't want to see a lot of take souvenirs," Curt said, taking Joan's arm. "We'd better leave while we can still restrain Otho from murder."

The android had not lost his fury when they reached the bright, crowded midway. To placate him, Curt pointed to a big group of metal pavilions over which flared a bright distraction sign.

INTERPLANETARY CIRCUS— LAST WEEK ON EARTH

"Come on, Otho—maybe the circus will console you," Curt suggested.

But Otho was still fuming as they approached the pavilions. "Let's go in and see the freaks," Curt invited.

The side-show was an ingeniously

compact auditorium, containing metal benches and a stage. Under soft krypton lights, one of the "Nine World Wonders" was performing.

"The Chameleon Man," an Earthling master of ceremonies was chanting: "Watch him change, folks. Watch him!"

The Chameleon Man was an ordinary-looking, blue-skinned, lanky Saturnian. But when he moved in front of a green square of the varicolored curtain, his skin abruptly changed to an exactly matching shade of green. He moved before a red part of the curtain, and at once his skin turned red.

"How in the world does he do that?" Joan wondered.

Curt had quickly fathomed the secret.

"He's being subjected to a ray that can alter skin pigmentation swiftly, just as actinic rays burn a white skin brown. His skin has been chemically prepared."

The Chameleon Man was replaced by a peaked-headed, cadaverous gray Neptunian, who possessed enormous, round, cuplike ears.

"The Hearer can hear a leaf fall from a tree ten miles away," boasted the showman. "Whisper to your neighbor, as low as you can, and he'll tell you just what you said."

Various members of the audience tried it and were amazed to find that the Hearer could detect each almost inaudible sound.

"His ears have been enlarged and made supersensitive by some surgical process, Chief," Otho declared.

Curt nodded. "Must be, though it would take a master physiologist to do it."

"And now, before the main show begins the circus, we present our greatest act," the stagemaster was announcing. "You have all heard of the scientific powers of the ancient Martians, the mighty dynasties that perished long before any Earthman ever traveled space. You're going to see a man who has discovered the great secrets of these ancient wonder-workers. The Magician of Mars!"

"The great faber of all," jeered Otho.

Future stiffened as a man came out on the stage, holding two can-



Alvira

bersome, puzzling instruments in his hands. He had the red skin of a Martian but Earthly black hair, black, intelligent eyes that surveyed his audience with veiled scorn, and smooth, handsome features.

"Why, that's Doctor Ul Quorn!" Curt exclaimed.

"Ul Quorn?" Joan repeated. "Who is he?"

"He was as brilliant a scientist as the nine worlds possessed," Curt said thoughtfully. "He's half Earthman, a quarter Martian, a quarter Venusian. He had a high post at the Institute of Interplanetary Science before certain rather ghastly experiments of his were discovered, which got him a year in Cerberus prison and made him an outcast among all decent scientists. I'm sorry to see as brilliant a man as Quorn doing cheap scientific fakery in an outfit like this. I suppose it's the only way he can live, though."

"Look at what he's doing!" Otho blurted.

An attendant had brought out a small Earth rodent, a furry, frightened little animal. Ul Quorn placed it on a suspended metal plate and aimed one of his instruments at it. The animal suddenly fell through the

solid metal! Quorn passed the plate around to show it was perfectly solid.

"Traps of space, this Quorn has something!" Otho swore. "That's the same dematerialization effect the old Jovians had mastered, that gave us so much trouble in the Jupiter case."

"Yes," Curt frowned. "Archaeologists believe the Jovians picked it up, like a lot of their old science, from the ancient Martians."

"Is it possible that this man has really uncovered the long-lost science of the Martians?" Joan asked.

"I wish I knew," Captain Future muttered. "Look at that."

UI Quorn, his handsome face expressionless as ever, had taken a seedling and was subjecting it to pulsating flashes of green light. Instantly the seedling swelled to a sapling, then to a large, rootless tree. A cry of wonder came from the audience.

"That's no illusion," Curt stated. "It's the old Martian accelerated growth technique. Quorn really has found something!"

Otho had been staring hard at the face of the magician.

"There's something uncannily familiar about this Quorn's face," he said. "Somehow, even though I never saw him before, I feel that I've met him—and that we weren't friends."

Joan suddenly straightened. Curt's quick ears caught the buzz from the tiny instrument in her pocket, a pocket television such as every agent of the Planet Police carried. She bent her head. Curt heard the metallic voice from the little television.

"Agent Randall? Police Headquarters speaking. You knew Professor Kenneth Lester, the archaeologist?"

"Yes. I met him on Jupiter," Joan whispered into the minute transmitter. "He was involved in the Space Emperor case."

"Lester has just been murdered in his study at the Institute. Since you knew him personally, you may be able to help in the investigation. I know you're on detached service, but will you help anyway?"

"Of course," Joan agreed swiftly. "I'll be at the Institute in twenty minutes."

She raised her eyes to Curt and Otho. Curt looked grim.

"I'll go with you," he said tersely.

"But this is your vacation—" she protested.

"Lester and I became friends in that Jupiter case," Captain Future reminded her. "If I can, I'd like to see his murderer brought to justice."

TWENTY minutes later, Curt and Otho followed Joan into the softly lit, crowded study of the murdered archaeologist. A dark-uniformed officer of the Planet Police barred the way to the two men.

"You may be with Miss Randall, but you can't enter," he said stiffly. "Only members of the police are allowed."

Curt wordlessly took a large, curious ring from inside his belt. Around its glowing sun-jewel, nine planet-jewels revolved slowly.

"Captain Future?" gasped the officer. "I'm sorry. I didn't know. Go right in—"

Inside, Curt saw Hank Anders, the bulldog-faced commander of the police, and Marshal Ezra Gurney, whose scarred old face lighted up at sight of him.

"Future!" the veteran cried. "Danged glad you're here! But I thought you was on vacation way outside the System."

"No, Ezra. I've been right here on Earth. I heard about Lester just now and came with Joan."

"Captain Future, working on a mere murder?" asked the commander.

"Lester was my friend," Curt repeated grimly. "You remember him, don't you, Ezra?"

Ezra nodded. "Fine young fellow, and now look at him."

Curt Newton turned. On the floor lay the horror that had been Kenneth Lester. It was a boiling mass of corruption—a body whose tissues sought to devour each other.

"Most hideous thing I ever saw," came the commander's thick voice. "What could do a thing like this?"

"I don't know just what was used to do it, but I know what it is," Curt Newton replied somberly. "The ancient Martian 'life disintegrator' destroys the cooperation of the body's cells. They no longer work together, but seek to devour each other. How it was done isn't known. It was a se-

cret of ancient Martian science."

He was looking at Ocho as he spoke. He saw in the android's narrowed green eyes the same speculation he had in mind.

"Ancient Martian science?" Ocho hissed. "There's something damned queer about this coincidence—if it is one."

CHAPTER III

The Third Space Stone



BACK at the Interplanetary Circus, the big show was about to begin, and Ul Quorn, the 'Magician of Mars,' performed his last feat of scientific legerdemain. A roar of applause burst from the audience. Then they

began drifting toward the main pavilion, from which music blared.

Ul Quorn watched them from the wings. There was contempt in his keen black eyes as he turned to the girl who had come quietly to his side.

"Performing tricks for gaping fools!" he gritted. "Degrading my knowledge to provide entertainment for stupid crowds!"

"It will not be for much longer, Master," said the girl in her soft, slurring Martian speech.

She was pure Martian—and pure danger. There was an indolent, mocking beauty in her perfect features, yet worry was apparent in her gaze as she anxiously watched Ul Quorn's handsome, brooding face.

"Yes, N'rala, it won't go on much longer," he replied thoughtfully. "And this freak-show of mine was the best stratagem to raise funds and provide a cover for our activities. But when I have all the space stones—"

He was interrupted by the blue-skinned Saturnian who was called the Chameleon Man. "They are waiting in your pavilion, Master," the freak whispered.



Ul Quorn, the Magician of Mars

The cadaverous Neptunian called the Hearer also approached.

"Master, there is something you should know."

"Later," Quorn said impatiently. "Come, N'rala."

The Martian girl glided after Quorn to his private dressing room. Three Martians were waiting in it. They were queer-looking men, hollow-eyed, tense. They sprang up as Quorn and N'rala entered.

"Greetings, Sons of the Two Moons, said Quorn formally.

"To you, too, Son of the Two Moons, greetings," answered the oldest of the three. Ul Quorn sat down, but his black eyes were angry as he spoke to the oldest Martian.

"Why do you come here, Si Twih? Do you want everyone to know I belong to your organization?"

"Doctor Quorn, the High Council of the Sons of the Two Moons sent us to you. The Council demands to know why you have not made more progress."

"I told you it would take time."

"You have had time," retorted Si Twih. "A year ago, you promised to bring complete success to the great purpose of our cult—the restoration of the glory that was ancient Mars. What

purpose should command more loyalty than that? What Martian would not give all to see our world regain its rightful position?"

"Have I not devoted myself heart and soul to that great purpose since I joined the Sons of the Two Moons?" Quorn demanded.

"Aye. You promised that you could restore the glory of Mars soon. You have done nothing but wander from world to world with this circus. Our members grow impatient."

QUORN'S smooth face was cold as he answered.

"The only thing that can restore the glory of Mars is the tremendous secret power discovered ages ago by Thuro Thunn, greatest scientist of ancient Mars. I told you that until I have that secret, we cannot do anything openly. The seven space stones on which Thuro Thunn wrote his secret were scattered in later ages among the worlds of the System.

"One of those space stones was on Mercury. I got that stone last month. Another was brought recently from Jupiter to Earth. That stone I secured today. There is a third one here on Earth, which I intend to secure tonight. There is another stone on Venus, which I'll get when the Circus goes there. That will make four of the space stones. But where are the other three? Haven't our members located them yet?"

"We are trying hard to locate those three," old Si Twih answered apologetically. "We believe one is on Mars."

"Then my freaks and I will stay with the Interplanetary Circus until it reaches Mars," Quorn stated. "It affords an excellent blind for my activities."

Si Twih stared at him gloomily.

"I suppose we can trust you, Doctor Quorn. Yet there are many who say we should not. After all, you are only partly Martian."

"My blood may be only part Martian, but that part is from the veins of the mightiest kings of old Mars," Quorn answered haughtily.

"But you expose the secrets of ancient Martian science to make a show for the vulgar crowd!" protested another fanatic.

Quorn shrugged. "What would you have me do? I must have funds to search for the space stones. Anyway, those who see my feats think them merely cheap magical illusions."

Si Twih rose to depart. But he turned at the door of the pavilion.

"We hope to have definite information on the location of the other three stones by the time you reach Mars, Doctor Quorn. Farewell still then, Son of the Two Moons."

Quorn bowed. "Farewell, Sons of the Two Moons."

When the Martians had gone, the handsome face of the mixed-breed scientist twisted in scorn.

"The poor fools, to believe that I really have faith in their crazy plan to restore the glory of old Mars!" he said contemptuously to N'rala. Then he laughed. "But they and their cult are damned useful in helping me to find the seven space stones."

"When we have all the stones, and the secret of Thuro Thunn is in our grasp, it will be ours alone!" N'rala cried eagerly.

Quorn, still laughing, patted her shoulder.

"It will be mine, N'rala, not ours. I trust no one completely. But you shall share my power when the secret of Thuro Thunn is mine."

UL QUORN went to the door of the pavilion. The cadaverous Saturnian called the Hearer was waiting outside.

"What had you to tell me?" the mixed-breed demanded.

"Master, you ordered me to listen to our audiences, when I was not performing, that I might detect any spies among them."

"Yes, yes," Quorn said impatiently. "What have you heard?"

"There were two men and a girl in the audience tonight," the Hearer continued hastily. "I discovered from their talk that one of them was—Captain Future!"

"Captain Future?" Ul Quorn gasped, his small fists clenching.

"Yes, Master," said the freak. "The other man was the Futureman they call Ocho, and the girl was a secret agent of the Planet Police."

Quorn's handsome face was dark

with passion as he stared past N'rala and the freak.

"Captain Future," he muttered. "So he was here, and I didn't know. The one man in the System I hate most bitterly!"

"Why?" N'rala asked wonderingly. "I never knew that you'd met Future."

"I never did meet him, yet he and his Futuramen have a debt to me that they're going to pay some day," Quorn said between his teeth. "That debt goes back many years."

He was silent, brooding. Neither the Martian girl nor the fearful, cadaverous Saturnian freak dared his anger until he spoke.

"What were they talking about? Why were they at our show?"

"I gathered that they only came in from curiosity," the Hearer said quickly. "But the girl received a pocket-televisor call from Planet Police Headquarters, asking her to help investigate the murder of Professor Lester. She left, and Future went with her. He said he would help investigate to bring the murderer to justice."

"If that devil Future is mixing into Lester's death," said Quorn harshly, "he might learn about the space stones and the secret—" Quorn made a quick decision. "We've got to get the other space stone that's here on Earth, before Future can block us!"

"Surely you are not afraid of anything this Captain Future could do?" N'rala asked in amazement. "You, with your mastery of ancient and modern science?"

"I never underestimate an opponent," Quorn said. "Too many smart men have been taken by that red-headed devil because they made that mistake." The mixed-breed paced rapidly to and fro.

"The other space stone on Earth is in the private collection of Harrison Yale, whose estate is a hundred miles north of New York. I sent Juko to examine the place. It'll need only the Hearer and the Chameleon Man for this job. Get a rocket-flier ready."

TEN minutes later, U1 Quorn's swift little Tark flier rose with a growl of rockets from the field near Amusement City, and headed northward.

The main show at the Interplanetary Circus had just ended, and the concessions were closing. A few miles southward, the shining pianos of New York challenged the moonlit sky.

Behind Quorn in the little cabin crouched the Hearer and the lanky Saturnian called the Chameleon Man. Both freaks were silent, peering anxiously ahead. Quorn's face was dark and inscrutable as he steered. His thoughts were less on the task ahead than on the man against whom he cherished a blood-feud.

He cut the rockets and opened the flier's metalloy wings, on which they swooped, down through the moonlight, silently as a bat. Below was a big chromalloy mansion, set amid gardens along the river.

"Harrison Yale's estate," muttered the mixed-breed. "We'll land in that grove at the far edge."

Softly as an alighting bird of prey, the flier landed amid the trees. Quorn and the two freaks emerged.

"The collection is housed in a special vault near Yale's mansion," Quorn whispered. "Follow me."

He led the way through the shadowy grove, holding in his hand a watch-like instrument he had taken from his pocket. They advanced five minutes, and then the thing in his hand buzzed weakly. Its sensitive detectors were warning of atom-traps ahead that would loose a terrific blast upon an unwary prowler.

Quorn spent ten patient minutes using his detector to find the hidden trap. He disconnected the concealed guns before they risked continuing. Finally a massive structure only thirty feet in diameter stood before them.

"Is anyone awake at the house?" Quorn asked the Hearer.

They waited as the freak listened intently.

"Not a sound, Master. But I can hear the breathing of two guards at the vault."

"I expected that," Quorn said. He turned to the Chameleon Man. "Get those guards out into the open."

The Saturnian silently glided forward, keeping his hand on the mechanism at his belt. He softly approached the door of the massive vault and

knocked. At once the Chronolon Man faded from view as his skin took on the exact hue of the moonlit concrete wall. Two guards, armed with heavy atom-guns, came to the door. They looked around puzzledly.

Quorn had put away his watchlike detector and held a small cube in his hand. He pressed its switch. A pulsing conical radiance sprang out and enveloped the two guards. They choked, fell, and lay in writhing heaps of dead-alive flesh.

"Haul those bodies out of sight," Quorn ordered.

As the two freaks obeyed, the mixed-blood entered the vault. Inside was one brightly lit room at whose center was an enormous cylindrical safe. Quorn bent and feverishly examined the complicated controls.

"Permutation lock," he muttered. "I expected that."

He applied a tubular eye-piece to the edge of the lock, and prepared to use the penetrating vibrations of a little projector. It would enable him to see into the lock's interior and decipher the permutation that would unlock it.

"Master!" came a frantic whisper from the Hesper outside. "A rocket is flying straight toward this place!"

Quorn stiffened. "Can it be Future? If it is, I'll have a chance to settle our old accounts!"

CHAPTER IV

Mental Message



CAPTAIN FUTURE looked away from the hideous thing that had been Kenneth Lester, and stared around the softly lit study of the murdered archaeologist Joan Ears Gurney and the Planet Police commander were silent, waiting for the wizard of science to speak. But Otho spoke first.

"I say it's damned queer that we should have just been talking about ancient Martian science and then find that Lester was murdered by an ancient Martian weapon!"

Old Ears Gurney stirred uneasily. "I've seen men die in a lot of mighty bad ways, but I never saw anyone die like that!"

"Nobody else has, for ages," Curt Newton replied somberly. "Sermon and I have read of a weapon, used by the old Martians during the wars of the Ninth Dynasty, which caused this horrible disintegration. The nature of the weapon is still a mystery."

Hain Anders, the bulldog-faced commander of the Planet Police, turned to Future.

"I had a call just before, from North Boreel, the President's secretary. He says that Professor Lester had called him tonight, asking to contact you."

Curt Newton's brows drew together. "Contact me? Why?"

"Lester said he'd discovered something tremendous. He was excited!"

Curt felt that he was somehow touching the fringe of the mystery around this ghastly murder. His gray eyes swept the room, crowded with relics and unexpected cases.

"Lester had been studying the fragments of Jovian civilization he brought back from the Cave of Ancients of Jupiter," he said thoughtfully. "He told me he was eager to begin examining them."

Captain Future's memory swept back to that strange cavern on the shore of the great Fire Sea of Jupiter, where he, Greg and Lester had been trapped by the Space Emperor. The relics of Jovian science there had been given into Lester's charge by the System Government.

"Maybe we could find out from his notes just what he was up to, Chief," suggested Otho.

Curt nodded. "That file looks as though it contained his observations."

For half an hour, while the others watched, the scientific wizard and the android leafed swiftly through the dead archaeologist's notes. But when he had finished, Curt felt baffled.

"Nothing there," he muttered. "Apparently he was just making a routine examination of the relics. But wait

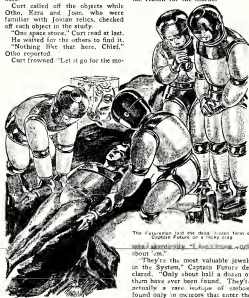
a minute! Here's a list of all the things Lester brought from Jupiter. Let's just check it to make sure they're all here."

Curt called off the objects while Otha, Kara and Joan, who were familiar with Jovian relics, checked off each object in the study.

"One space stone," Curt read at last. He waited for the others to find it. "Nothing like that here, Chief," Otha reported.

Curt frowned. "Let it go for the mo-

when Jovians had contact with other worlds.' The space stone is the only thing that's missing. Could that be the reason for the murder?"



The Futuremen laid the dead, frozen form of Captain Future on a rocky crag.

ment, apparently. "I don't know, with about 'em."

"They're the most valuable jewels in the System," Captain Future declared. "Only about half a dozen of them have ever been found. They're actually a rare isotope of carbon, found only in comets that enter the System from outside."

Halk Anders, the Police Commander, looked interested.

"There was a space stone involved in a murder case on Mercury a few weeks ago, Captain Future. A gem merchant was murdered and a space stone stolen."

Curt stiffened. "Was the murder committed in the same ghastly fashion as this one?"

"I don't know, but I can soon find

ment. We'll see if everything else is here."

All the other listed objects proved to be present in the study. Captain Future went back to the matter of the missing space stone. He read the description on the list:

"A space stone cut and faceted in the ancient Martian fashion, apparently brought to Jupiter from Mars.

"Would it be that valuable?" Kara

out from Headquarters."

The commander went to the desk television, while Otho spoke to Curt. "That description says the space stone was cut and faceted in the ancient Martian manner. Ancient Mars again! What the devil does it mean, Chief?"

"It may be just coincidence," Curt said slowly.

"I know you don't think so!" Otho exploded. "You're thinking just what I'm thinking."

The commander came back, his face excited.

"The murder of the gem merchant was committed just like this! And the space stone stolen was also cut in the old Martian style."

"You see?" Otho exclaimed, his green eyes sparkling.

Curt was beginning to feel that the murder of Kenneth Lester was no mere isolated crime as he had at first thought. It seemed to be one ramification of some vast interplanetary plot that was tied up somehow with the rare space stones. Lester had told Bonnel that he had discovered something tremendous. Had Lester been killed because he had found out something, or had it been merely a murder for theft?

"Everything seems to revolve around the space stones!" Curt said ruefully. "We must find out more about them."

"Best fellow for that would be Lockley, the specialist on interplanetary jewels," Ezra Gurney answered. "We need to call him in whenever there was a gem question to be decided, eh, Halk?"

The commander nodded his massive head. "Call Lockley now," Curt ordered. "Get him here fast."

Lockley proved to be a thin, bespectacled, jassy little Earthman of advanced age, irked at being routed out so late at night.

"Couldn't it wait till morning?" he demanded resentfully.

"I'm afraid it couldn't," Curt said. "We need information and we need it quickly."

Lockley's alert eye noticed the ring on Curt's finger. The little jewel specialist looked up in awe at the big, pleasant red-haired young man.

"Captain Future?" he cried.

Curt quickly explained the problem.

"Two space stones have been stolen and their owners murdered. One was a jewel merchant on Mercury, and the other an interplanetary archaeologist right here. I want to know how many other space stones there are and who are their owners. This whole murder mystery seems to revolve about those stones."

The expert seemed eager to exhibit his knowledge.

"As far as is known, only seven space stones have been found in the whole System's history. All seven are of different colors. They were apparently collected from meteors by the ancient Martians, for it is known that they once belonged to the so-called Doomed Kings, more than two hundred thousand years ago. But with the degeneration of Martian civilization, the seven space stones were scattered. Some of them seem to have vanished altogether."

"How many are in known collections now?" Captain Future asked.

Lockley shrugged. "The blue stone you say this archaeologist had wasn't known. Only three space stones are definitely listed. One was in the possession of the Mercurian jewel merchant you mentioned. A second is in the collection of Harrison Yale, a rich Earthman who lives near New York. The third is in the State Museum of Venus."

"That makes four space stones," Otho pointed out. "What became of the other three?"

"There's been no trace of them for centuries. They merely dropped out of sight."

Curt Newton pondered. Confident that the space stones were somehow the clue to the mystery, he came to a rapid decision. "Otho and I are going to this Yale's home. I want to study his space stone."

A FEW minutes later, Captain Future and the android were ripping north through the moonlight in a fast Rissman rocket flier he had borrowed from the Planet Police.

"Why do we have to creep along at a thousand miles an hour?" Otho grumbled. "We could have got the Comet."

"And advertised to the whole planet that the Futuremen were out," Curt said wistfully. Otho looked up at the full Moon smiling royally in the starry heavens.

"Old Grag would be wild if he thought we were out on a trail without him," he chuckled.

"I wish Simon were here," muttered Curt. "The Brain could shed light on this space stone mystery, if anyone could."

He brought the streamlined Resman down in a silent swoop in front of the gleaming chromalloy mansion of Harrison Yale.

Yale proved to be a distinguished-looking man of sixty, a retired interplanetary shipping magnate whose gem collection was apparently his chief interest now. The magnate was astounded when he learned the identity and purpose of his caller.

"Why, I'd be only too glad to show you the space stone, Captain Future," he blurted. "I'm proud of it. Paid a fortune for it."

He led the way to the massive vault that gleamed silver in the Moon. The magnate exclaimed in horror:

"The door's unlocked! The guards are gone!"

"Maybe the man we're after has already been here," Curt cried. "See if the space stone is gone."

They burst inside the tower. Yale sprang to the massive metal vault and hastily touched the buttons of the permutation block. The door flew open. He hauled out neatly arranged drawers. Scintillating rays stung their eyes as jewels gave back the light. Milky Uranian opals glowed like misty little suns. Ice diamonds from far Pluto flashed and dazzled. Mercurian sapphires, blacker than outer space, glittered in somber splendor. Moonstones from the satellites of distant Saturn shone placidly white.

"Nothing seems to be missing," Yale was muttering as he frantically examined the trays. "The great fire ruby of Jupiter. The three green pearls of Neptune—"

"But the space stone," Curt snapped.

Yale drew out a small drawer and opened it, then uttered an exclamation of relief. "It's still here!"

A faceted green globe, it looked up at them like an alien eye. Its facets appeared sharp and clean, as though carved yesterday. But Curt, taking from his flat gray tungstate belt a small tubular instrument, applied his eye to it. The electronic microscope showed him minute, netlike scars on the facets.

"As though the thing had been bombarded with hard radiation for some reason," Curt mused. He brought out a small projector used for X-ray vision. "Let's see if the hard rays show any difference in it."

Turning on the projector, he bent over the jewel. Curt received an electric shock of surprise. He heard a faraway, thin voice that was not speaking aloud. He heard it in his mind!

"Thus had I put my own people in danger," that remote mental voice said, "for they wished me to lead them back whence I came. I pretended to agree, and said I would return with many such mechanisms as I wore myself. By this beguiling them, I prevailed on them to let me go. I returned, resolved never again to unlock that danger. It would be better for my people to struggle against hardships than take such risk again. But not wishing altogether to destroy my great discovery, I put it into these gems."

"Good Lord!" gasped Captain Future. "The secret of the space stones!"

"Look out, Chief!" yelled Otho in alarm.

There had been a clacking sound from the darkness outside the open door of the treasure vault. A pulsing cone of radiance shot into the room, aimed at Future's tall figure.

BUT with the binding speed that only the android possessed, Otho dived at Curt and knocked him clear of the path of the deadly cone. They snatched out their proton pistols almost as they hit the floor. But Curt felt a hand grab the space stone from his grip.

A semi-invisible, flying shadow was darting out the door. Curt and Otho fired together. But the needle rays of their proton pistols were an instant too late.

"After them!" Captain Future shouted.

He and the android jumped for the door. Harrison Yale could only stand stupefied. Clouds flying across the moon obscured the trees and gardens around them. Fiercely Curt's eyes swept the darkness in search of their mysterious attackers.

"This way, Chief!" Ocho hissed. "I hear men running."

Captain Future and the android plunged together through the shrubbery. A roar of rockets blasted from close ahead as a little Tark flier flashed up out of the trees into the moonlight, its rocket tubes spuming back a curving trail of fire. Rapidly it disappeared westward in the night.

"We'll chase 'em down!" Ocho cried. "Nobody's going to take pot shots at us and then rocket clear!"

"Save it," Curt retorted. "We might catch them with the Comet's speed and instruments. But this little Rissman flier will never run them down when they have that much of a start."

Curt was not as calm as his tanned, set face indicated. No more than any other man did Captain Future enjoy having his life threatened from ambush. But he was not one to let anger cloud his judgment. He led the way back to the jewel vault. Ocho was still cursing audibly. Harrison Yale sprang to their side as they entered.

"The space stone?" cried the millionaire collector anxiously.

"They got it," Curt grunted. "There was someone in this room when we entered. He grabbed the jewel from my hand."

Yale stared. "Why, nobody could have been in this room when we entered. We'd have seen him."

"Then it was somebody we couldn't see," Curt said.

"You mean somebody has an invisibility secret like yours, Chief?" Ocho blurted.

"No. It wasn't quite invisibility. I could glimpse him as a sort of vague, flying shadow. It was someone who couldn't be seen as long as he crouched motionless against the wall—someone like that Chameleon Man in the freak-show tonight."

Before the android could speak, Curt went on rapidly.

"This mystery is far bigger than I dreamed. It's no mere theft of space stones for their commercial value. I learned that while I was examining that incredible gem." He turned to Yale. "I'm afraid I can't promise the return of your space stone, but I'm going to do my best to run down the robbers. Come on, Ocho. We've got to hurry."

CHAPTER V

Home to the Moon



WHEN they were in the little Rissman flier, rocketing back to New York through the moonlit night, Ocho asked eagerly:

"What's up, Chief? Are we really going to hit the space trail again?" A gleam lit Ocho's eyes.

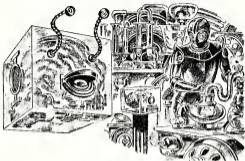
"We are," Curt said grimly. "And I have an idea that for once you may get your fill of danger."

He made no further explanation until they were back in Lester's study in the Institute of Interplanetary Science. Then, to Ezra Gurney and Joan and the Police commander, Curt spoke rapidly.

"There's hell behind these space stone robberies. Those seven jewels contain a tremendous secret. If my guess is right, each stone contains a part of the secret."

"How in time could seven jewels hold a secret?" Ezra asked.

"It's recorded in the space stones by mental transcription," Curt declared. He smiled at their puzzled faces. "Psychologists discovered, a long time ago, that thought is really an electrical vibration of the brain's electro-chemical neurone patterns. It can be transcribed in a permanent record like sound or light. Various substances will take a thought transcription, and play it back when hard radiation stimulates the record."



Simon Wright, the Living Brain

"It appears that the complex carbon isotope which forms a space stone will take a thought transcription. Examining Yale's gem with X-rays before it was snatched from me, I received the thought record in it. I am sure now that the other six space stones have similar thought records in them, together forming one vast secret."

Otho uttered an excited yelp and pointed to the small X-ray projector that stood on Kenneth Lester's desk.

"Look, Chief! Lester was using that projector! I'll bet he was using it to examine the space stone he had and accidentally got the thought record in it."

"Just what did you hear in the thought message of the stone you examined?" Joan Randall asked.

"Thus had I put my own people in danger, for they wished me to lead them back whence I came. I pretended to agree, and—" Curt went on to the end of the message, word for word.

"What does it mean?" old Erza queried puzzledly.

"It doesn't mean much without the parts of the secret that go before it and after it," Curt Newton admitted.

"Then how the devil do you know that this secret is such a tremendously

important one?" Otho demanded skeptically.

"Any of you ever hear of Thuro Thuun?" Curt asked, his gray eyes searching theirs. When they shook their heads, he said meditatively:

"It's not likely you would have heard of him. Lester had, of course, because he was an archaeologist."

"I don't get your wave at all, Chief," complained Otho. "Who was this Thuro Thuun?"

"He's supposed to have been the greatest scientist of the ancient Martian civilization—perhaps the greatest scientist of the past. Thuro Thuun flourished during the Tenth Dynasty of Mars, about the time of the mysterious invasion by the unhuman Wallus, more than two hundred thousand years ago. According to legend, Thuro Thuun made a scientific discovery that could give him power over whole worlds if he desired it.

"But he disappeared during the Wallu conquest, supposedly leaving his secret written down in some secret way. I believe that legend. I think he transcribed seven sections of his secret on the seven space stones, and that someone is trying to collect the parts of that secret."

"But what exactly is this tremendous secret of the old Martian scien-

tist?" Joan wanted to know.

Curt shook his red head. "I don't know, and I can't know unless I can get all the space stones. But the murderer must have a good idea of the nature of the secret, to want it so badly."

"Which brings us right back around the orbit to where we started from," growled Ezra Gurney. "Who's the murderer's devil that's after the secret of the stones?"

"Chief, it's clear as space!" Otho yelled. "Our killer must know a lot about ancient Martian science. And the theory is clinched by the half-invisible fellow in Yale's jewel vault!"

Curt Newton nodded. "We haven't a shred of real proof—but I'd bet a meteor against a sun that our man is Doctor Ul Quorn."

"Ul Quorn?" cried Ezra Gurney. "That smooth-faced mixed-breed scientist we sent out to Cerberus prison for illegal research? What makes you think he's the man?"

"Several things," Curt retorted. "In the first place, Quorn is right here on Earth, running a freak-show down at Amusement City. That circus—and Quorn—were on Mercury when the space stone there was stolen. He's doing stunts that are real feats of ancient Martian science. He undoubtedly would need funds for this plot of his. That's why he's running his show, I believe. The point is that Quorn is familiar with ancient Martian science. Therefore it's a ten-to-one shot that he would have an idea of the nature of Thuro Thurn's secret."

"That still don't say he's the killer," Ezra drawled.

"In Yale's jewel vault," Curt replied, "a semi-invisible man snatched the space stone from me. He must have been the Chamelcon Man, one of Quorn's freaks."

"Here's another possible tie-up," Halk Anders said. "We've been watching a fanatic Martian organization, a queer secret cult of some kind. Its officers have contacted the Interplanetary Circus a couple of times."

"Ah!" breathed Captain Future. "The mystery begins to clear a little. A fanatic Martian cult, backing Quorn in his quest for the stones' secret."

"And look, Chief, here's something else," Otho said. "There's a space stone in the Venus Museum, Locsley told us. The Interplanetary Circus—and Quorn—leave tonight for Venus."

"Clear as space is right!" Ezra Gurney declared. "What'll we do—grab Quorn right away?"

"How long could we hold him?" Captain Future asked. "We haven't any real evidence that would hold up in Interplanetary Court."

"But surely you'll do something!" Joan Randall protested anxiously. "A tremendous power in the hands of a man like Doctor Quorn—"

"I'm thinking of that," Curt admitted bleakly. "Quorn mustn't get the seven space stones. We've got to get the three he has, but first we must beat him to the other four. I'm pretty sure that without all the stones, he won't have the complete secret. It's going to be risky. Quorn is a brilliant scientist, perhaps the greatest in the System."

"As if anybody in the System could surpass you!" Joan cried loyally.

Curt grinned. "Thanks, lady. All the same, I'm not going to take any chances. We'll need all the cunning and knowledge we have to checkmate him. I want Simon Wright in this, and we're going home to the Moon for him."

"Devils of space, Quorn will be on Venus, snatching the space stone there before we can catch up to him!" Otho protested.

"I've thought of that," Curt stated. "Ezra, you and Joan must rocket for Venus right now. Camp down in the museum at Venusopolis, and guard that space stone till we get there."

Ezra's faded blue eyes glittered. "We're blazin' off in ten minutes, Cap'n Future! We'll be there long before Quorn arrives."

"And I'll be there with the Future-men as soon as possible, to set a little trap that will smash his plot," Curt Newton promised. "See you on Venus. Come along to the Cowar, Otho."

A HALF-HOUR later, from a private official landing terrace atop the great Government Tower, arose a small space ship. It was not a Cruh-Cholo, Rissman, Tark, or any other

standard make. The queer little craft, shaped like an elongated tear-drop, rocketed skyward with enormous speed. It was the Comet, flying laboratory of the Futuremen, the swiftest ship in the System.

Comparatively soon, so tremendous was its speed, the Comet was swooping down toward the barren, glaring, airless surface of the Moon. As it sank into Tycho Crater, doors in the floor of the crater unfolded automatically to disclose an air-lock hangar. The ship settled, the doors closed, and air hissed in.

Captain Future and Otho emerged and strode through tunnels in the solid rock. They felt no lighter in weight here than on Earth, because of the flat gravitation equalizers at their belts.

They entered a big room excavated from the rock, illuminated by a flood of softened sunlight from a huge glassed window in the crater floor, which formed the ceiling. Telescopes of large size and odd design, chemical and electric apparatus, paraphernalia of a dozen sciences, crowded this room. It was the home and laboratory of Curt Newton and the Futuremen. Here, Curt had been born.

A strange creature turned its eyes toward them as they entered. It looked totally unhuman—a square, transparent metal case on which were mounted glass lens-eyes on flexible stalks. The queer case rested on a tall pedestal, from which it had been scanning a micro-film book.

"Back so soon, lad?" came a rasping voice from the square metal case.

"The vacation's over, Simon," Captain Future said quietly.

The glass lens-eyes of Simon Wright, the Living Brain, fixed intently on him.

"What's wrong?" asked the Brain sharply.

Curt Newton explained rapidly. As he listened, the Brain's strange eyes never wavered from Curt's somber face.

Simon Wright, one of the three famous Futuremen, was a wholly unhuman-looking being. Yet Simon had been a great Earth scientist whose living brain had been taken surgically from his dying body and encased in

this transparent cube. It now lived in circulating serums constantly repurified by apparatus inside the case. He saw by means of lens-eyes, hearing by microphone ears and speaking by a voice resonator.

THE Brain spoke slowly in his metallic voice when Curt had finished.

"And you think Doctor UJ Quorn is behind it? I remember reading his monosonic theory and 'double-gene' experiments. He's brilliant, I must admit."

"Simon, it's the weirdest thing," Otho broke in. "When I saw Quorn I thought I knew him. I can't understand it."

The Brain paid little attention, for he was brooding.

"So Quorn is after the ancient secret of Thuro Thunn," he said finally.

"Simon, what can that secret be?" Curt asked. "Have you any idea at all?"

"No more than you, lad. The old Martian legends say that Thuro Thunn himself was appalled by what he discovered. If it's that big, Quorn mustn't get hold of it."

Curt nodded vigorously. "That's why we've got to get to Venus and have a trap set when he tries to get the space stone in the museum. Then we'd have proof against him. We ought to start at once. Where's Grag?"

"Down in the foundry room, repairing a fracture of one of his fingers. He'll be here in a moment. Lad, do you remember what anniversary this is?"

"Sure," Curt grinned. "The day that Grag was made by you and my father. Grag's birthday."

"Of all the space-struck nonsense, this business of Grag's birthday is the limit!" Otho exploded. "A robot with a birthday!"

Curt chuckled. "That's what you always say, Otho. But—"

A clanking sound interrupted him. Grag the robot was hurrying into the laboratory, booming a joyful grating.

"I heard the Comet landing, Master. I'm glad you're back again."

Grag stood seven feet high, on jointed metal legs. He was a huge

metal man, with a massive torso and a bulbous metal head in which gleamed two bright photo-electric eyes. There was affection in Curt's gaze.

"This is your birthday, Grag," Captain Future said. "And here's a little present for you." He handed the robot a thick, short metal tube. "It's a projector I devised. Besides being a light tube, it can emit vibrations all along the electro-magnetic scale by a sliding control. I think you'll find it useful."

"You need not have gone to so much trouble for Grag, Mamer," Grag's booming voice stammered in gratitude.

"Listen to that mock-modesty," sneered Otho. "He was wondering for weeks what he was going to get."

Grag turned indignantly.

"You say that because you hate to admit I'm more human than you are, and having a birthday proves it."

SIMON'S rasping voice stopped the argument.

"Grag, for my present I've devised a new type of rubberoid padding for your feet. Your present foot-pads are always wearing away, you know."

Grag took the new pads eagerly.

"Thank you, Simon," he boomed.

Otho came forward, elaborately bored as he handed a small package to the robot.

"I suppose I will have to give you something to keep you from feeling hurt. Here, take it." The package contained a new set of detachable metal fingers for Grag's mighty hands. "See if you can break these fingers. I made them up of a special formula with super-tensile strength."

Grag looked astounded. "Why, Otho! Thanks a lot—"

"Don't thank me. I did it only to while away the time."

Curt Newton smiled, thinking how characteristic it was of Otho to disguise his deep affection for his fellow Futureman.

"I'll try out all these things right now!" Grag exclaimed.

"No time now, Grag," Captain Future said. "We're rocketing along the space trail to Venus, and there may be hell at the end of it. Otho, bring Simon along to the Comet. There's no time to lose."

"I'll have to get Eck," Grag said. He dashed away, returning soon with a small, gray, sharp-nouted animal, like a tiny bear.

"I was hoping he'd forget that damned moon-pup," growled Otho.

"Why?" asked Grag injuredly as he followed the other Futuremen to the Comet. "I owe him the trip. He hasn't been to Venus in a long time."

"Yeah, but Dr. Quorn will scare the little coward," sneered Otho. "He'll only get in the way."

"No more than you!" roared Grag.

"Cut your rockets," Curt ordered. "Save the fight for Quorn."

CHAPTER VI

Venusian March Danger

*The moons of Mars circle the stars,
And Earth's Moon's javier pat,
And Saturn's night is powered with light,
Yet still I can't forget*

*Old Venus' moonless, cloudy sky,
Seen by the Western Sea,
Where the night wind's stamp from the island
swamp,
And the one girl waits for me.*



FUTURE sat in the control room of the Bying Comet, his fingers touching the twenty strings of his favorite Venusian guitar. His lean, tanned face was lazily relaxed as he softly hummed the popular melody of the

cloudy planet. The automatic controls were set and the little tear-drop space ship was flying through the star-stocked vault of space. Ahead, the white half-disk of Venus was growing larger.

"Lad, you've hummed that song four times," rasped Simon, his lens-eyes speculatively watching Curt. "It isn't possible that you're thinking of Joan, is it?"

Curt flushed. "Can't a fellow sing a tune? You're getting too analytical. I'm going aft and rouse out Grag and Otho. We'll soon reach Venus."

Putting away the instrument, the tall, red-haired scientific wizard strode into the astoundingly complete laboratory of the Comet. Wherever the Futuramen might be in the System, they brought equipment that was surpassed only by Future's underground home upon the Moon.

If a problem required astronomical investigation, the Futuramen had portable electro-telescopes and spectroscopes of advanced design and unequalled powers. If there was a point of astrography that needed checking, here were the files of star and planet spectra, the maps of the planets, moons and asteroids, the atmosphere-samples from every world.

Similarly the physical apparatus held microscopes capable of seeing far into the infinitesimal. The biological cabinet held complete equipment for research, including botanical and entomological specimens from many worlds. The surgical apparatus was a miracle of completeness and compactness. The philological file contained spoken records of scores of planetary languages. The cabinet of tiny micro-film books was an exhaustive scientific reference library.

In two space chairs with a folding table between them, Grag and Otho sat playing cubical bridge, the most complex of card games. The "cards" were cubes, each face of which bore a different suit, making a total of six suits. The card on the upper side was the one that counted. But it could be "covered" by a matching card of an opponent's cube, so that the suit that was led might suddenly turn into a quite different one.

"Come on and sit in, Chief?" Otho invited eagerly. "Even though we did adapt this for two-handed play, it's better with three."

"Otho just wants to start a new game because he's losing this one," Grag accused. "I've taken nearly all the tricks so far."

"Sure, robots always make good players," Otho sneered. "I'll tell you what I'll do, Grag, if you're so confident. I'll play you for real stakes. I'll put up my best proton pistol."

"And what do you want me to put up?" Grag asked.

Otho pointed to the corner of the



Robert Mann

cabin, where Grag's bearlike pet was gnawing idly at a stanchion. The moon-pup did not breathe air and was capable of eating metal or mineral, but the impervious metal of the stanchion was resisting his teeth.

"You put up Eck," Otho said.

GRAG rose to his feet indignantly. "It's just a plot of yours to get my pet! You'd cheat to get him, and then toss him out into space because you hate the poor little fellow."

"Poor little fellow?" cried Otho. "That little beast is the curse of this outfit! I'm damned if I'll put up any longer—"

"We're nearing Venus," Curt Newton interrupted. "Put away that darned game and quit bickering."

They followed Curt back into the control room, Grag picking up Eck and protectively fondling him. Captain Future unlocked the automatic pilot and took the controls. He tested the braking rockets by depressing the throttles. The Comet shook to the roar and jerk of the blast. Venus was a glowing white half-moon in the heavens ahead. Curt sent the Comet curving around in a spiral toward the dark side of the planet.

"Better if we reach Venusopolis at night," he mused. "We'll be able to visit the Museum secretly."

Soon the Comet was screaming down through the clouds into the clear, moonless Venusian night. Curt's instruments had not misled him. Below stretched Venusopolis, sprawling between the dark inland marshes and the tossing Western Sea.

"The Interplanetary Circus is here already," Otto said, pointing to a spread of colored lights just east of the city.

"I know Quorn would be here," Future said confidently. "But there's nothing to worry about, with Ezra and Joan guarding the space stone in the museum."

But he readily admitted them when Captain Future showed his ring.

"Marshal Gurney and Miss Randall are waiting for you in the Room of Jewels."

Curt nodded and led the way through the silent, dim halls and corridors. They entered a brilliantly lighted room containing glassite cases of rare planetary gems. Old Ezra Gurney and Joan Randall rose eagerly from chairs to greet them. The veteran had his stem pistol in his hand.

"The space stone's safe?" Curt asked quickly.

"Quorn hasn't had a chance to get it," Joan said. "It's in there."

She pointed to a big metal safe against a side of the room. Ezra Gur-



Curt's keen eye saw Quorn's hand slide

He cut the rockets to a purring hum, and the Comet glided lower over the coastline toward the lighted city. Venusopolis was a community of graceful white structures, interlaced with the dark gardens of the esthetic Venusians. He headed for an oblong, many-pillared structure that he knew was the State Museum of Venus. Quietly he brought the ship down into the groves around it.

"Come on," he whispered. "Bring along Simon, Greg."

They emerged into the balmy Venusian darkness, heavy with the smell of rank vegetation drifting from the marshes. At the entrance to the great museum, a guard challenged them.

ney lumped to it and unlocked the door.

"Nobody's been near this safe since we got here," he stated flatly. "And we were here a couple of hours before Quorn reached Venus with that circus."

"Good," Curt replied. "First thing I want to do is activate the jewel into transmitting its part of Thuro Thuron's formula and make sure the stone's safe with me. Then we're going to set a neat little trap for Doctor Quorn when he comes for it."

Ezra stopped pawing in the safe. He whipped around, his face stupefied.

"Why, the stone is gone!" he cried. "It can't be!" Joan protested. "One

of us was watching that safe every minute. Its door was never opened!"

BUT search soon disclosed that the space stone had somehow been taken. Otho gave a hissing oath.

"Fire-rings of Jupiter, Quorn beat us to it! But how?"

"I tell you, the safe wasn't opened," Joan insisted.

"Of course it wasn't opened," Future said angrily. "Quorn got the stone without having to open the safe. Why couldn't I have suspected it? It's obvious enough."

"How could he get the stone without opening the safe?" Joan asked bewilderedly.

"Don't you remember how he made

plained.

"Outwitted!" Otho yelled furiously. "This Quorn's a devil!"

"I warned you he was a cunning, highly intelligent scientist," Curt reminded. "But I forgot my own warning."

"It's not your fault," Joan argued. "You couldn't know the jewel would be in a safe like this. It's all my fault."

"Self-accusation won't help now," cut in the Brain's rasping voice. "We must plot our course of action."

"Why not let me go out to the Circus, find Quorn, break him in half, and take the space-stones?" Orag boomed.

"Attractive, but impractical, Orag," Curt said. "Quorn will have his four



under his jacket (Chapter XVII)

a small animal pass through solid metal? He speeded up its body's atoms so it would interpenetrate ordinary matter. That's how Quorn got this space stone. He simply dematerialized one of his freskos, sent him into the safe to rematerialize in there, grab the jewel, dematerialize again, and walk out through the metal."

"But you can see a dematerialized man," protested Ezra. "I remember that from our case on Jupiter. We didn't see anyone entering the safe at all."

"Quorn would send him through the wall of the room and the back of the safe so you couldn't see," Curt ex-

plained cunningly hidden, and he'll be on guard against any sudden attack we might make on him. Since we still have no real proof against him, we'd be breaking Interplanetary Law ourselves by attacking him."

"We're surely not going to give up and let him get away with Thuro Thum's secret!" exploded Otho.

Curt's tanned face hardened, and his gray eyes grew bleak. For one of the few times in his career, he felt almost inferior to a brilliant mixed-breed scientist against whom he had matched himself. And Captain Future didn't like that feeling.

"No, we're not going to give up," he gritted. "It's going to take time

and effort, but I have a plan. We're sure Queen has the four space stones and that he's after the other three. But we haven't proved yet. He's traveling with his freaks so he can use the circus as a blind for his activities. We must watch him if we're to checkmate his scheme and prove his guilt.

"So the Futuramen are going to join that circus. We'll be able to stick to Quorn till we find out where he has the stolen space stones, and can prevent him from getting the others. It's the only way we can watch him all the time, without arousing his suspicion."

JOIN the circus as performers?" Otho blurted. "How can we get away with it. I don't get your wave at all, Chack."

"Everyone would recognize us as the Futuramen," Greg boomed.

"We'll be in disguise, you block-heads," Curt retorted. "Otho can easily disguise himself as the 'Ultra-acrobat' from Ganyemeda, or something. We'll dummy up Greg with some artificial rubberoid flesh to make him look wholly human, and he can be the 'Strong Man of Space.' We'll hide the Brain inside a glory-looking machine and call it the Thinking Machine. As for me, I'll join as a wild animal tamer—Kovo, the Venusian Swamp-man, and his performing marsh tigers."

"Marsh tigers?" repeated Ezra Gurney, his faded eyes widening. "Hell, nobody in the System can tame marsh tigers. They're the most ferocious, vicious, dangerous critters in the nine worlds."

"I can tame them," Curt grinned. "After Otho's helped me bring them back alive."

"It's more than likely you'll bring Otho back dead," bleated the android. Curt ignored him.

"First thing is to fix up the disguises for Greg and Simon. We others will join the circus, separately, to avoid arousing any suspicion."

Curt and the Futuramen, with Ezra and Joan Randall, went back to the Comet. There Otho the master of disguise, rapidly concocted a mass of rubberoid flesh. While it was still warm he roughly applied it to Greg's giant metal body except the eyes and

mouth. When the rubberoid cooled, it became firm, pink and elastic as real flesh. Otho put dark spectacles over Greg's shining photo-electric eyes, and then regarded him with satisfaction.

"You look almost human now, Greg," he said.

"When do you mean—almost?" roared Greg. "I am human a lot more than you, you miserable son of a laboratory robot!"

"I'm through with Simon," Captain Future interrupted quietly.

Curt had quickly constructed a small mechanism that looked like a rather phony machine, with arms, dials and blinking lights on the front of its cylindrical case. Small wheels stood beneath it. Captain Future put the Brain's square case inside the cylindrical one, made necessary connections, and then closed the cover.

"Hides you completely, Simon," he said. "You can still see through those concealed openings, and listen and speak. Also, I've made it possible for you to roll from place to place or use those flexible arms on the side of the case, instead of web feet."

"That's something new—Simon with a body," said Otho.

"I don't want a body," rasped the Brain. "It disturbs the thought processes. But I'll try it this time."

Curt gave Greg full instructions.

"I understand, Master," bleated the disguised robot, who now looked like a giant man. "I'm to call myself the Strong Man of Space and say this Thinking Machine is a fake device I picked up and got into the circus. But I'm not to know you or Otho when you appear."

"That's it," Curt replied. "You'd better get started now."

Obediently Greg picked up the apparently dormant Thinking Machine that hid the Brain, and disappeared into the darkness.

"Now for the marsh tigers," Curt turned to Otho. "We'll get offed in the Comet to the Great South Marsh. We'll find plenty of 'em 'ere."

"The circus plenty to get 'em," growled Otho as he took the controls. "But I suppose a fellow can do only one."

"What are you and I gotta help

"Captain Future?" Joan Randall asked.

"I want the two of you to stay with the Comet, and trail the circus from a safe distance. You'll be in close touch then if I need the ship. You know how to operate it, Ezra."

"Sure, but it's a very tricky craft to handle," drawled the veteran of space. "Touch a throttle, and you're out of the System."

An hour later, Otho brought the Comet down on a muddy hummock in the dark, vast Great South Marsh. Curt had been tinkering with a tiny instrument. He held the dumb-bell-shaped mechanism in his hand as he and the android opened the door.

"Where's your proton gun, Chief?" Otho asked.

"I'm not going to use any, Otho." Curt replied calmly.

Otho recoiled. "Hunting marsh tigers without a gun? Oh, well, why not? We're tired of living, anyway."

They stepped out into darkness and oozy muck. Instantly, from the black swamp an enormous, green-eyed bulk charged, screaming. It was a marsh tiger, a scaled, black creature with four thick legs that were armed with razor talons. Its hideous snouted head was distorted by a gaping mouth bristling with great fangs.

A glimpse of that hideous maw as it bore down on them sent Curt and Otho leaping into the muck to avoid its rush. It thundered past, then turned with appalling speed to rush them again.

"I know it!" Otho yelled, drawing his proton pistol. "We're sunk!"

"Don't fire, Otho!" Curt ordered.

He was aiming his small, dumb-bell-shaped instrument at the marsh tiger. The instrument buzzed thinly as he pressed its button. The marsh tiger stopped. It made no threatening move when Curt boldly advanced and patted its scaly head.

"Devils of space!" gasped Otho. "How in the Sun's name—?"

"Simple," Curt grinned. "This instrument is a 'will-dampener,' which Simon and I worked out a good while ago. It radiates a force that neutralizes almost completely the neuronics currents in this beast's brain-cells, makes him stupid and docile as a lamb. We'll collect a half-dozen of them in

the same way."

"All right," said Otho uncertainly. "But all hell's going to break loose if your 'lambs' suddenly recover."

CHAPTER VII

Interplanetary Circus



GRAG the robot, disguised as an Earthman of colossal stature, strode heavily through the dark streets of Venusopolis. In his enormous hand he carried the cylindrical Thinking Machine that hid the Brain.

"The Interplanetary Circus is out by the spaceport, so I think this street will take us there," boomed the robot.

"Not so loud, Grag," cautioned the metallic voice of the Brain. "Are you sure you know your part?"

"Sure, I'll be the Strong Man just like Master taught me," Grag answered. "Only I hate to leave Eck in the Comet."

"Ezra and Joan will take care of him," Simon assured him.

Grag looked exactly like a hulking, giant Earthman as he tramped along. He had donned a loose zipper suit over his great frame. But the pink rubberoid artificial flesh that covered his metal head now made him look like a blank-faced, dark-spectacled giant.

He avoided the bright central region of the Venusian city and kept to the quieter, darker streets of beautiful white cement homes and dark, fragrant gardens. The scent of exquisite flowers mingled with the faint tang of the sea and the strong, rank breath from the great inland marshes. The marsh smell made Grag think of Captain Future, somewhere in the swamps on his dangerous mission.

Grag worried constantly about Curt Newton. To the robot, Curt was still the impish, red-headed little boy he had helped to educate on the Moon.

They passed the edge of the spaceport, a vast lighted tarmac rimmed by

busy docks in which soared the high hulls of ships from all the nine worlds. Grag approached the adjoining field, where the Interplanetary Circus had pitched its pavilions. The circus traveled from world to world in its own space ships, which were docked at the edge of the field. Grag saw that most of the ships were ponderous Crab-Cholo freighters, though there was one twenty-man Riseman cruiser that looked fast.

Flaring krypton lights illuminated the pavilions of the circus. These pavilions were conical, made of thin sections of light, strong metal that could readily be unbolted and stacked away inside the big Crab-Cholo freighters for the trip to the next world. Grag trodged toward the little pavilion marked "Office of the Proprietor." A thin, blue Saturnian looked up as Grag entered.

"What do you want?" the Saturnian demanded suspiciously, eyeing Grag's seven-foot figure and stupid face.

"You the boss of this circus?" Grag demanded loudly.

"Yes, I'm Jur Nugat, proprietor and manager," snapped the Saturnian. "And I'm a busy man, too."

Grag struck his breast with his free hand.

"Me, I'm the Strong Man of Space! I'm the strongest man in the whole System, bar none. You think anybody's stronger, you bring 'em on. I'll break 'em in half!"

JUR NUGAT looked annoyed at Grag's boasting.

"You may be strong as a Jovian stamper, but why bother me about it?"

"You want a good strong man for your circus, huh?" Grag demanded, his blank, pink face never changing expression. "You hire me, and you got the best strong man in the business. Steelite bars or logs of swampwood—I can break 'em all in half!"

Jur Nugat shook his head. "Sorry, Can't use you."

"You mean you think I'm no good? Why, I'll break you in half!" He started forward menacingly. Jur Nugat hastily skipped back.

"Wait a minute!" bleated the Saturnian. "I can't use you, but maybe the side-show that travels with us can.

Go over and see Ul Quorn."

Grag appeared to hesitate.

"All right, I go. This fellow Quorn better hire me, or I'll break him in half."

As Grag stalked away, carrying the Brain's machine, he heard Jur Nugat muttering behind him:

"Damned if he hasn't got breaking things in half on his brain!"

Grag chuckled. "Didn't I put it over, Simon? It would be swell if we could get right into Quorn's show."

"Quorn will be a harder customer to fool," the Brain rasped in a low tone. "Don't overdo it."

Grag threaded his way between the smaller pavilions. Teasing roustabouts, a motley crew from all nine planets, were sweating to bolt on the last metal sections. A Jovian stamper, huge, round-headed, elephantine brown beast, had been brought to push a cage into place. Calls and cries in a half-dozen interplanetary languages spilt the night. The roars of caged beasts being unloaded from the big Crab-Cholo-managerie-ship were deafening. Grag strode in stupid placidity through the uproar, toward the pavilion of the "Congress of Nine World Wanderers."

The freak-show of Ul Quorn was already prepared for the next night's performance. Grag strode past it to the small private office of Ul Quorn, outside which a cadaverous gray Neptunian was lounging.

"That must be the freak Master said was called the Hearer," Grag mused. "I must be careful what I say when he is around."

"Where is the boss?" he asked the Hearer loudly.

"Inside," answered the Neptunian. "But you can't see him."

"He'll see me!" roared Grag. "I'm the Strong Man of Space, and I'm going to see him right now."

The Hearer started to bar his way. Grag thrust him aside with a mere flick of his giant arm. The uproar brought a man and a girl from inside the tent. The girl was Martian, a dark-eyed, supple red girl of wildest beauty. But Grag's eyes swung at once to the man. Ul Quorn's smooth, handsome, red features and intelligent black eyes produced a tangible shock

inside Grag.

"Why, I know this man," Grag thought bewilderedly. "Yet I'm sure I never saw him before."

"What is all this commotion?" Ul Quorn was asking in a quiet yet somehow menacing voice.

GRAG put down the machine that hid the Brain, and snatched up a girder lying nearby. By a tremendous exertion of his mighty arms, he bent the girder double.

"See, I break 'em all in half!" he pretended to pant. "You'll hire me!"

"Why don't you get rid of this stupid lot?" the Martian girl said impatiently.

"Not so fast, N'rala," Quorn replied coolly. "A fellow with strength like

plained. "It belongs to me. You ask it a question, Boss."

Ul Quorn, staring curiously at the cylindrical machine, addressed it mockingly.

"Will we have good luck when we go to Mars?"

Inside the cylinder, the Brain spoke in a slow, hesitating, mechanical voice that sounded quite artificial.

"You will—go to Mars soon—and meet new—sweetheart."

"Not exactly an appropriate reply, but pretty good for a fake," Ul Quorn said. He looked sharply at Grag. "Did you make it?"

"No, Boss, I couldn't make a thing like that," Grag answered hastily.

"The last show I was with busted up on Pluto and the manager couldn't pay

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that could be useful." He studied Grag's stupid pink face, and spoke to him carefully, to reach his ignorant mind.

"If I hire you, you'll not only do a turn in the side-show but obey my orders in everything else. Do you understand?"

"Sure, I do what you say, Boss," Grag boomed cheerfully. "You don't like anybody, you tell me. I'll break 'em in half."

Quorn laughed quietly, apparently able to see the humor in Grag's loud, stupid boasting.

"All right, you're hired. But what's this machine you've got?"

"It's a Thinking Machine that can answer your questions," Grag ex-

plained. "You pay me or I'll break you in half." He said he'd give me this Thinking Machine for my back wages. He told me how it works, but I forgot. I think he said there are thousands of phrases on tiny voice records inside the machine. He said the words of a question automatically trip fairly appropriate phrases to answer. Yeah, that sounds like what he said."

"All right, you can use the thing as part of our show," the mixed-breed scientist said disinterestedly. "The Hearer will show you a cubicle that you can use for a dressing room."

In the tiny room, Grag waited till he saw the Hearer stroll off across the grounds before he dared speak.

"I think we've fooled Quorn. Si-

men," he whispered to the disguised Brain. "But the man puzzles me. He looks familiar."

"I also felt as though I'd seen him before, though I know I never did," the Brain answered perplexedly. "And Ocho felt the same thing. Well, watch him as closely as you can without raising suspicion."

Next morning, Grag devoted himself to learning as much as possible about Ul Quorn's freak-show and its various performers. Besides the Healer and the Chameleon Man, whom Captain Future had described, there were many other interplanetary oddities in the show. There was the "Intelligent Moon Wolf," a six-legged beast from Io, who could read, write and calculate with amazing skill. Actually, as Grag soon learned, Ul Quorn had transferred part of a man's brain into the Moon Wolf's skull, giving it true human intelligence.

Quorn had been responsible also for the "Eel Man," a Venusian whose skeleton structure had been cunningly dissolved, then replaced by a reticulation of elastic rods. As a result the Eel Man could compress his body to unbelievable slinness, and literally tie himself into knots. Grag liked the patient, quiet Moon Wolf, and he saw that the Eel Man was timid. But he disliked the so-called "Meteor Dwarfs," Juho and Lobo, two hideous Plutonian freaks who stared at him with red-rimmed, hostile eyes.

ALL the freaks seemed to fear Ul Quorn. The softest word of the mixed-breed was obeyed with frantic haste. It made Grag realize the perfidiousness of his own position, but he was careful to keep up a loud boastful front.

"When other performers treat me right, I treat them right," he roared. "When they treat me wrong, I break 'em in half."

"You better not try threatening me," muttered the Healer.

"Let the Strong Man alone," the Moon Wolf, said hoarsely. "His loud talk means nothing. I think he is a good fellow."

Lounging and watching everything, Grag later that morning saw a lean, cocky figure in a foppish zipper

soft swagger through the grounds. It was a vain-looking, lithe, white Ganymedean.

"That's the new acrobat Jur Nugat hired for the circus," said the Moon Wolf in his husky, slurred voice. "He calls himself the 'Ultra-acrobat'. They say he did some marvelous feats."

"I don't like acrobats," Grag declared. "They skip around like insects. If they get in my way, I—"

"You break 'em in half?" asked the Moon Wolf, looking up at him with a flicker of strange humor in his green animal eyes.

In the early afternoon, a tremendous sensation rocked the circus. A rusty old Kalber rocket flier landed nearby. From it emerged a big Venusian swamp man, driving before him six shambling, black-scaled monstrosities.

"Marsh tigers—and they're loose!" went up the terrified yell.

Performers and roustabouts fled in all directions, yet the horrific beasts lumbered docilely along toward the main pavilion. Grag knew the swamp man driving them was Captain Future. But Curt had disguised himself so well, he was totally unrecognizable. His curly red hair was now straight and black, his tanned skin the unhealthy white of a swamp-dweller. He wore a soiled old zipper suit, and had one hand thrust idly into its pocket.

Grag guessed that Curt had his will-dampener in that pocket to keep the beasts in a submissive stupor by means of its radiations. He saw Captain Future approach the office of Jur Nugat, the circus proprietor, who had locked himself inside.

"Take these beasts away!" shrieked the Saturnian.

"I can control 'em," Curt answered confidently in a soft Venusian dialect. "I'm Kovo, and I thought maybe you'd buy these marsh tigers."

Fearfully Jur Nugat emerged, trembling, but apparently reassured by the obvious docility of the ferocious beasts. Grag heard him ask:

"You really have tamed these monsters? But nobody has ever tamed marsh tigers!"

"I have," the pseudo-Venusian replied casually. "Watch me."

Grag saw Curt playfully cuff the



Carl Peterson rode the plank first, using the brass barrel as the wedge. Backus tried the same pistol (Chapter VIII)

monstrous beasts, wrestle with them, do everything possible to rouse them. They remained docile.

"Say, if you did that in an act, it would be the sensation of the circus!" Jur Nugat yapped excitedly. "Will you?"

"Well, I'd only figured to sell you the beasts," Curt answered with assumed reluctance.

"I'll pay any salary you ask—within reason," Jur Nugat offered. "But I won't buy the brutes unless you come with them."

FOR the rest of that day, Grag heard of nothing but the Venusian who had actually tamed marsh tigers, and was going to work in an act with them in that evening's show. When evening came, lights and music flared and blared all through the circus and the side-shows. Crowds of curious, chattering Venusians began streaming into the grounds.

"You'll go on fourth, after the Moon Wolf," Ul Quorn told Grag. "Your Thinking Machine will follow you."

When the Moon Wolf had finished its turn speaking pettently in its husky voice to exhibit its human intelligence, it was Grag's cue to go on. He had already prepared an act with bars and weights.

"I'm the Strong Man of Space," he roared at the audience. "See that bar? Watch me break it in half."

A ripple of amazement came from the spectators as Grag seized a steelite bar and actually snapped it into two pieces. The applause mounted as Grag lifted colossal weights, bent girders, and concluded by lifting a light platform on which twenty men were standing.

"Now the Thinking Machine!" shouted the barker. "The automaton that actually answers your questions."

The cylinder that contained the hidden Brain was brought out and the audience began firing questions at it. It replied hesitantly in a deliberately artificial voice.

"Why doesn't my husband get back from Earth?" asked a woman.

"Husband—Earth—pretty girl," answered Simon.

A roar of laughter went up. In replying to questions, the Brain was

careful not to make the answers too appropriate. He didn't want anybody there to think he was anything but a cleverly faked machine. Then he felt himself lifted off the stage to make way for the Chameleon Man's turn. Resting unnoticed in the wings, Simon heard the Hearer and Ul Quorn speaking close beside him.

"I tell you, it's Captain Future in disguise, right here in the circus!" Ul Quorn was saying in a low tense voice. "That devil is on our trail. I'm going to put him out of the way right now."

CHAPTER VIII

Death Cage



NOISILY blaring a raucous Martian march, the brilliantly uniformed band of the Interplanetary Circus marched around the big main pavilion. Krypton lights glowed on the metal walls for the thousands of

people who jammed the innumerable rows of seats.

"Big show about to begin!" barkers outside could be heard shouting. "Hurry, hurry! Don't miss it, folks!"

Jur Nugat, the thin, blue Saturnian proprietor of the Interplanetary Circus, stepped into a spotlight as the band's music ceased.

"Introducing the greatest galaxy of interplanetary acrobats ever gathered together!" he bellowed at the mob.

The crash of brass from the band and eager applause from the packed audience greeted the half-hundred men and girls who ran out and nimbly climbed to the high, swinging trapezes and wires.

"Each and every performer wears a standard gravitation equalizer!" Jur Nugat was announcing loudly. "A committee of reputable witnesses inspects them before each show. No gravitation fakery in this circus, folks!"

The band swung into a soft Earth waltz. The acrobats, Martians, Earthmen, a few Venusians, and a great number of swarthy Mercurians, began the giddy leaps and swings above the copper-gauze safety nets spread far below. They somersaulted, hung by one finger, danced on wires.

"Look at that bunch of amateurs," growled Otho, eyeing with disdain the fees that held the spectators breathless. "They ought to be ashamed of taking money for such childish stunts. Wait till I show that audience something."

Otho, disguised as a white-skinned Ganymedean, was wearing tight-fitting trunks. He stood casually beside Captain Future, who lounged negligently as a Venusian swamp man.

"Quiet, Otho, don't seem to be talking to me," whispered Curt without moving his lips. "I think Ul Quorn is watching us."

Future's keen eyes had noticed Ul Quorn standing with the Hearer in the shadow of the pavilion entrance. The mixed-breed's handsome red face was imperturbable, but Curt saw him say something, and noticed the Hearer slip hastily away.

"Quorn's up to something," Captain Future mused. "If he has suspected us—"

A thunderous crash of applause interrupted him. The acrobats had finished their performance. Jur Negat was introducing the next act.

"And now the greatest acrobat in all circus history, making his first appearance. The Ultra-acrobat from Ganymede!"

Otho stepped into the spotlight and bowed elaborately. Then he turned and spoke loudly to the circus laborers nearby.

"Take those nets away!" he ordered. "I don't need 'em."

"But we always use nets—" Jur Negat began to protest.

"Not for me!" Otho declared, making sure he was near the microphones. "Nets are for amateurs. Now watch a professional."

As the laborers hastily rolled up the copper gauze nets, Curt swore beneath his breath.

"That reckless android would have to show off to a crowd, just when

Quorn may be getting suspicious."

Otho started climbing a rope toward the highest trapeze platform. He went up hand-over-hand so fast that the eye could hardly follow him. A cry of astonishment came from the crowd. The band played a pulsing Martian rhythm, and Otho went into his act. He dived straight toward the ground, a hundred feet below.

A YELL of horror broke from thousands of throats. But ten feet from death, the android caught a hanging rope. He swung in a dizzy arc up toward another trapeze platform, where he landed gracefully. Then he turned and bowed to the audience.

The crowd went wild. It was a feat such as no one had ever seen before. No human being could have performed it, of course. It required the utmost dexterity of even Otho, the fastest and most agile of all beings in the System.

Gratified by the applause, the android went on with his spectacular act. He swung free on a rope, leaped toward another rope twenty feet away, did eight somersaults in mid-air, and landed safely. He hopped loosely swinging wires on one hand, flashed between the ropes and wires so swiftly that sometimes he was hardly visible. When he finally slid down and stepped into the spotlight, the applause was terrific.

"You big ham!" Curt Newton whispered furiously as Otho paused beside him. "Showing off may make Quorn suspect you, too! He's been watching every move you made."

Otho glanced quickly across the pavilion. Quorn was still standing there. At that moment, he was rejoined by the Hearer. The freak had brought a small conical metal case.

"I just wanted to show 'em what a real acrobat could do," defended Otho. "Didn't you hear that applause? Boy, did I go over big!"

"Listen to me, you idiotic hunk of rubberoid," Curt hissed. "While Quorn and the Hearer are here, now is your chance to search Quorn's pavilion. He may have the space stones stowed away in some hiding place there. Try to find them."

"Okay, Chief. But you be careful with those damned marsh tigers."

"Get out of here—Jur Nugat's going to announce me," Curt warned. "If you and I seem too friendly, it'll ruin everything."

As they conversed unnoticably, the equestrian acts had been on. Star interplanetary riders had shown their skill in managing Earth horses, Jovian lopers, and bucking, fierce Saturnian stada. "And now our new attraction, ladies and gentlemen" the Saturnian proprietor announced. "The greatest wild-animal act in interplanetary history. The ravenous beasts never before tamed by man! The man who tamed them—Kovo the swamp man—and his marsh tigers!"

Curt shambled out like a typical swamp man and bowed clumsily to the crowd.

"Let them into the cage," he ordered the waiting laborers.

From the round main pen, constructed of stout steelite bars, a passage led outside to the menagerie. Through this passage, prodded on by light touches with an atomic prod, the six marsh tigers charged. Roaring deafeningly, clawing viciously at the bars of the big cage, the huge, black-sealed beasts reared up on their thick hind legs, raising their hideous snouted heads. Their small reptilian eyes were blazing, their great fangs and razor-like talons glinting.

Excited, fearful cries came from the audience. These Venusians knew that marsh tigers, the most terrible beasts of their world, had seldom been captured and never tamed. "Are you sure you want to go in there?" Jur Nugat asked Curt, and this time he spoke sincerely. His face was pale as he stared at the roaring monsters.

"They won't hurt me," Curt said casually. "Take this atom pistol, anyway," the Saturnian begged.

HE insisted on thrusting the weapon into Curt's belt as Captain Future stepped toward the door of the cage. The entire audience was hushed, tense. The marsh tigers were snarling and quarreling at the side of the cage farthest from the gate. Curt Newton quietly slipped inside and quickly relocked the door.

The sealed beasts turned at the click. Twelve reptilian eyes glared as the ferocious monsters crouched for the savage leap that no man could stop.

"They're going to kill him!" screamed a hysterical Venusian woman in the audience.

"Look!" yelled another voice. "Gods of Venus, look!"

Curt's hand had pressed the switch of the will-dampener instrument in his pocket. The instant the radiated neuronic electric force struck the vicious beasts, the crouching marsh tigers relaxed. The will-dampener completely blanked out their natural ferocity, making them as docile as kittens.

The audience gasped incredulously as two of the marsh tigers shuffled up to Curt. But when he patted the hideous monsters, the Venusians cried out. They burst into thunderous, frantic applause as Curt mounted the largest and most terrible marsh tiger and negligently pulled its ears.

"Kovo! Kovo!" the audience yelled in frenzied applause. Curt Newton turned to bow to the audience. A terrific roar of fury behind him made him spin around. The marsh tigers were no longer docile and submissive. They were crouching again to spring at him. Ophidian eyes glared bestial hate at him, and deadly fangs glittered murderously.

"Devils of space!" Curt muttered. "The will-dampener's out of order—"

Then he realized that the instrument was still buzzing away in his pocket, radiating its neuronic vibrations. But suddenly the marsh tigers seemed to have become immune to it.

Captain Future's eyes flashed around the cage. He knew he was in the greatest peril. The marsh tigers were between him and the door of the cage. They would spring in another instant.

His keen eyes, photographing every detail even in that ghastly moment, glimpsed Ul Quorn and the Hearer. Back in the shadows of the pavilion entrance, the Hearer was holding a control machine. He was aiming its apex directly at the cage, and Ul Quorn was smiling faintly at Curt.

"Neutralizing my will-dampener in

some way?" Future muttered. "I knew he suspected."

Abruptly he shouted to the horror-stricken circus laborers outside the cage.

"Put the copper gauze nets around the cage. Quick!"

The sound of Curt's voice acted as a trigger to the mindless ferocity of the six beasts. They charged. Then the audience saw something that none of them would ever forget. Curt Newton did not wait to be reined by lung and talon. There was one slim chance to escape death. As the marsh tigers sprang, he leaped to meet them!

OVER the head of the foremost monster he sprang and landed on its back. Grabbing its neck with one hand, Curt Newton rode the marsh tiger, using his free hand to fire swift flashes from his atom pistol at the other beasts.

rified thousands.

Suddenly the mad bucking and roaring of the marsh tiger stopped. The beast quieted down, stood plaintively purring. The other reptilian monsters had also grown docile again. The laborers outside the cage had succeeded in wrapping the copper gauze nets completely around the cage.

"Just in time," Curt gasped. "Lucky those workers weren't Quorn's men, or he'd have countermanded my order."

He still felt the reaction of the narrow escape, yet he let none of it show. He turned, dismounting from the quiet monster, and bowed again to the audience. They applauded until the thin metal walls of the pavilion shook wildly.

"Kova! Kova!" the roar went up.

Curt slipped out the door. Only when he was outside did he turn off the will-dampener in his pocket.

"I thought they had you, Kova," Jur

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To the audience, the big cage was a whirl of black, veiled bodies in which the man could hardly be seen. To Curt, it was a mad riot. The marsh tiger he clung to was bucking and rearing in roaring fury to dislodge him. But his hideous mount kept the other marsh tigers from reaching him for the moment, and his atom gun tended further to bewilder them. Though he clung to the beast with all his great strength, Curt knew that even he couldn't last long.

A cold sensation gripped the heart of Captain Future. To die beneath rending fangs in a steelite cage—It couldn't be! He had always known that someday one of his adventures must end in disaster. But he had always thought it would be out in the spaceways, with the white eyes of the familiar stars for witnesses, not in a trap like this beneath the eyes of hor-

Nugat stammered. "Gods of Saturn, you had me scared."

Curt shrugged. "They were a little unruly tonight."

The Saturnian's blue jaw sagged.

"A little unruly?" he bleated.

Curt ran hastily to the dressing pavilion entrance. Half along the covered way stood a curious-looking machine, as though left there by a careless worker. It was the cylinder that contained Simon Wright.

"Lad!" rasped the metallic whisper of the Brain. "I came here to warn you. I rolled here in this fake body. I heard Ul Quorn speaking tonight to the Hearer. He suspects you're Captain Future!"

"Your warning's a little late, Simon," Curt said with a grim chuckle. "Ul Quorn nearly got me a few moments ago. I'm the only man who ever invented and used a will-dampener. Re-

member my demonstrating it last year to the Uranian zoologists? Quorn must have heard of my invention. When he saw me controlling marsh tigers, he figured only a will-dampener could do it. Hence, I must be Captain Future.

"Quorn figured to kill me without seeming to be implicated, as he would be if he used an atom gun. He intended to neutralize my will-dampener by using a conical generator of powerful electro-magnetic vibrations that blanked out my instrument's force. I guessed what he was doing at once. I had the Circus laborers put up the copper gauze nets around the cage to screen it from Quorn's blanketing force. Then my will-dampener was able to function again."

"That mixed-breed devil," rasped the Brain. "If we don't—"

"Hush, Simon," Curt interrupted. "Ul Quorn is coming toward us now!"

CHAPTER IX

Challenge to the Futuremen



UL QUORN was sauntering toward them, as though casually returning to his own pavilion. The Hearer and the conical mechanism that had almost trapped Curt had disappeared. There was a cool smile on Ul Quorn's smooth,

handsome red face and cold humor in his black eyes as he confronted Curt.

"Let me congratulate you on your lucky escape, Kovo," the mixed-breed said softly. "I was watching. You were indeed fortunate to escape death."

Despite his anger, Curt Newton couldn't help grinning. Ul Quorn's audacity somehow appealed to him. He knew perfectly well that Quorn suspected him of being Captain Future, and he knew that Quorn knew he knew that. Yet the mixed-breed faced him fearlessly. "The marsh tigers were a

little out of hand tonight," Curt admitted negligently. "But I always manage to bring 'em around."

He spoke in the Venusian swamp dialect, though he was sure that Quorn was not deceived by his disguise.

Quorn laughed softly.

"Yours is a dangerous career, Kovo. Haven't you ever thought you may some day tempt danger once too often?"

Curt understood the subtle threat, but he smiled.

"Taming wild beasts is my business. I've subdued a lot of them in my time."

"No doubt," Quorn murmured. "Yet isn't there always a danger that you may meet one you can't tame?"

Future recognized the veiled threat behind the innocent words, and his own reply was two-edged.

"Why, yes Doctor Quorn," he admitted cheerfully. "I may run up against a wild beast too tough for me to handle. But—I've tamed them all over the System and I'm looking for the kind you're talking about." A tiny shadow darkened Quorn's mocking black eyes and was gone.

"Perhaps you have not pitted yourself against an antagonist of your own caliber," he said quietly. "Perhaps it would be wise, when you meet such an antagonist, to withdraw from a useless struggle and save yourself from—"

He was interrupted by a babel of yells and angry shouts from the direction of the Congress of Freaks. The Moon Wolf came loping up to Quorn. The human-minded animal's eyes were bright with frightened excitement.

"A prowler has been caught in your private pavilion, Doctor Quorn! The Hearer detected him!"

Quorn stared suspiciously at Captain Future. Then the mixed-breed scientist hastened after the weird animal.

"What shall we do, Simon?" muttered Curt anxiously. "Otho must have been caught."

Simon Wright had remained motionless and silent in his cylinder while Quorn and Curt had sparred. Now he spoke quickly in his muffled, metallic voice.

"That fool android is a master at getting into trouble?"

"I've got to see he doesn't," Captain

Future declared anxiously. "Otherwise, Quorn may put him out of the way with that cursed life disintegrator he used on Lester."

"He didn't try that ancient weapon on you in the cage tonight," reminded the Brain.

"That was because he dared not use it in the open, before so many witnesses. He wanted to make it seem that the marsh tigers had turned on me. But Otho's in real danger! You wait here, Simon. You mustn't be seen moving or talking."

Captain Future hastened toward the motion of voices from Quorn's private pavilion.

THE hideous freaks were gathered around Quorn and the Martian girl N'rala. His face dark and menacing, Quorn was confronting a cocky white Ganymedean, at whom the Hearer and the Chameleon Man trained atom pistols.

"You're the new acrobat that joined the circus," Quorn was saying dangerously to Otho. "Why are you prowling in my private pavilion?"

"It's nothing to blow your rockets about," Otho answered with assumed annoyance. "I'm new to the show and I blundered in here by mistake."

"He's lying, Doctor," the Hearer gazed. "When I came back with the—the instrument you told me to return here, I heard this fellow searching through your belongings."

"A spy, then?" Quorn asked with murderous calm. "Of course, I should have known. The Ultra-acrobat, the only being in the System who could do those impossible tricks."

"Good, weren't they?" Otho said blandly. "I sure gave the people in there a good show tonight."

"Too good," replied Quorn. "You gave your identity away, too."

N'rala's eyes flashed with feline fury.

"You mean he's one of them?" she cried to Quorn. "Then why white time?"

From among the tense ring of freaks strode the huge figure of the Strong Man of Space.

"You want me to take this snooper out and break him in half, Boss?" Grag bellowed.

"No," Quorn said softly. "There are other ways."

Curt thought it time to intervene, before Otho and Grag made a break and precipitated a crisis. He pushed past the freaks. Ut Quorn turned sharply.

"You?" he exclaimed. Then he smiled thinly. "I might have known—"

"I heard the Ultra-Acrobat was in trouble," Curt broke in coolly. "He's a friend of mine, you know. I'm sure he just blundered into your pavilion by mistake. I'd let him go, if I were you."

"You would, would you?" Quorn murmured softly. "And if I don't?"

Curt's tanned hand was near the belt of his swamp-jacket, where the proton pistol butt protruded. His level eyes clashed with Quorn's, meeting with a tangible shock.

"If you don't," Curt said quietly, "your conscience may keep you awake."

The freaks edged back. An electric tension had suddenly reared like a charged wall between the two men. N'rala's eyes glared pure hatred at Curt.

"Are you going to let him take his spy out of your hands?" she accused the mixed-blood.

"Of course," Curt said with a taunting little laugh. "If you wish to try stopping me—"

It was an open challenge to Quorn. Curt hoped fervently that the mixed-blood would accept that challenge and draw his concealed weapon. It would give Curt a chance to have it out with him in a fair fight, once and for all, though Curt knew well that the deft magician might be even faster on the draw than he was. But Ut Quorn smiled inscrutably.

"You'd take the risk of fighting it out, wouldn't you?" he said to Captain Future. "It won't work. I shall take no chances of losing such a fight with you. I won't draw my atom gun, and I know quite well that you, the champion of law, won't force me."

Curt pretended puzzlement, though he understood perfectly.

"Come on," he ordered Otho. "These fellows are space-struck, I guess."

As he left the pavilion, Curt heard

Grag speak up loudly.

"Say, Boss, somebody mislaid my Thinking Machine. If I find out who did it, I'll break 'em in half!"

"Find your machine yourself and don't bother me," Quorn retorted. "I have other things to think of."

CURT and Otho walked swiftly till they were well away from the pavilion of freaks, for they had learned the capabilities of the Hearer for eavesdropping. Not until they were approaching the dark main circus, where the Brain was, did Captain Future speak.

"You certainly scrambled the orbits for us in there, Otho. How the devil did you let yourself be caught?"

"That cursed Hearer!" swore the android. "I swear the fellow's un-human. I wasn't making sound enough to be heard a foot away, yet somehow he heard and gave the alarm."

"You didn't find Quorn's four space stones?"

"No. They're not in his pavilion. I made sure of that. The damned breed must carry them on him. I'll catch him alone some dark night and snatch them from him. It'll be easy."

"No use," Curt stated. "He doesn't carry the space stones on him. First thing I did when I got here was to use an X-ray scanner on him secretly, to see if he had them on his person. He doesn't."

They had reached the dark entrance where the cylinder that contained the Brain still rested. Grag came hurrying up as Curt and Otho reached the Brain. In the darkness, Curt spoke in a quick whisper to the three Future-men.

"Mustn't be seen together, or you and Grag will be suspected, Simon. Quorn knows I'm Captain Future and that the Ultra-acrobat is Otho, but he doesn't suspect you two. Here's how it stands: The four space stones Quorn has already secured are not in his pavilion nor on his person. Therefore they must be in his ship, the Rissman cruiser that transports his freak-show from world to world with the circus."

"Then, lad," said the Brain immediately, "our best chance to find the stones will be when Grag and I are in

that ship with the freaks, on the way to Mars for the next stop."

"The circus leaves for Korak, on Mars, a week from now," Curt said. "Yes, I think you'd better not try anything until you're actually on the way, Simon. Grag, you obey his orders utterly."

"Yes, Master," boomed the robot obediently. "But I am afraid for you. Quorn will use the life disintegrator or some other means to put you out of the way."

"Otho and I will have to look out for ourselves," Curt answered. "Quorn may not try anything till we get to Korak. He must figure on getting the other three space stones somewhere on Mars."

HE OVERHEARD a few words between him and N'rala," the Brain said. "I gathered that that fanatic Martian cult, the Sons of the Two Moons, are to tell him where the other stones are when he reaches Mars."

"So that's it?" Curt muttered. "The cunning devil's using those Martian fanatics as his tools, eh? He mustn't get those other three stones. We can't allow the secret power of Thuro Thoun, whatever it is, to fall into the hands of that brilliant, unscrupulous fiend!"

"Why in hell's name don't we just grab the whole crew of cursed conspirators and throw them into Interplanetary Prison?" Otho demanded furiously.

"Can we prove one single charge against them?" Curt demanded with equal fury. "Not unless we actually find the four stolen space stones in his possession. As Simon says, our best chance to find them will be for him and Grag to search the ship en route to Mars. I'll televise Ezra Gurney and Joan to trail the circus in the Comet. We'd better not try to meet again till we reach Mars. Do your absolute best to find those space stones, Simon."

"Aye, lad," rasped the disguised Brain. "And you take care, for Quorn will surely strike at you sooner or later."

Yet in the week that passed, Quorn made no attempt on Curt Newton's life, nor had Otho been menaced. As



Grab the Metal Robot

the night approached for the circus to leave Venus, Future felt uneasy.

"Queen has something up his sleeve, to use against us," he muttered as he watched the mixed-breed's freaks and properties being loaded aboard the big, fast Rissman cruiser. "I wish I knew what."

"We'll finish his tricks for him on Mars," Otho vowed.

The circus ships began lifting with roaring rocket tubes. The ponderous Cruh-Cholo freighters clambered up first, followed by Quorn's Rissman. Curt looked after it with deep foreboding as it blasted off to Mars.

CHAPTER X

Sons of the Two Moons



DOWN over night-cold Mars, like the brooding, murmuring voice of long-dead glories, murmured the cold wind from the polar snows. It wailed in a low, keening dirge across the desert drylands that

stretched in every direction beneath

the two brilliant, hurtling moons. Into the ancient Martian city of Korak blew that icy breath, searching the crumbling stone streets and time-eaten walls, domes and bulbous, unearthly towers.

To the few Martian men and women abroad in the older part of the city, the wind was an unwelcome, frigid breath against which they wrapped their synthewool mantles more tightly. Most of the red-skinned, still-legged Martian men in the streets were heading southwest toward the spaceport, where the brilliant diffraction sign of the newly arrived Interplanetary Circus already glowed in the moonlit sky.

But a few citizens of the red planet were quietly moving toward a certain squat, ancient cement tower in the west part of Korak, near the great Main West Canal. In a small room high in that tower, illuminated by a feeble granite bulb, Ul Quorn sat, wrapped in a heavy cloak, waiting. His handsome face was brooding. His eyes gleamed with disgust as he looked around the crumbling walls and the lifelike murals of ancient Martian combats.

"Dead, like everything else on Mars," he mused ironically. "These people live in the past, in the forgotten era when Mars was great and glorious. N'rala! Where in space are you?"

The Martian girl sneered, brilliantly beautiful in her tight saffron bodice and gilt skirt. But there was a hint of danger in the slumbrous depths of her dark eyes as she looked at the mixed-breed.

"I am here," she said. "And I am no child to be called to heel like that! I've killed men for less."

Ul Quorn smiled. "I've no doubt you have. That's why I'm so fond of you, N'rala. You're so damnably and single-mindedly wicked. At least there's no hypocrisy about you."

The girl's passion faded. Her slender red hand touched his shoulder with possessive tenderness.

"Where is that old fool Si Twih?" he asked.

She shrugged her faultless shoulders. "Down below, greeting the Sons of the Two Moons as they arrive for the meeting. He said he would give you the signal to come down and speak to them."

"I was hoping I wouldn't have to deal off more nonsense to those fanatics," Quorn said wearily. "Why doesn't Si Twih tell me where the other three space stones are? He said he knew."

"He'll tell you later," N'rala reassured him. "He just wants to be dramatic about it."

"Children, all of them, with their outward pretense of restoring the glories of Mars," complained the mixed-breed. "And I have to act with them, to get possession of the space stones."

"But is it not worth it?" exclaimed N'rala, her dark eyes aglow. "With the power of Thuro Thum in your hands you'll have power, riches, pleasures—everything you want!"

UL QUORN looked at her, his handsome face oddly disdainful.

"You think that's why I seek power—for pleasure and fame? You don't know me yet. Power to me means power to break all laws, crush all objectors, sweep aside all obstacles, in the search for ultimate scientific truths. I tried it on Earth a few years ago, and the sentimental fools called my ideas 'hudecus' and sent me to Cerberus Prison. But wait till I have Thuro Thum's power. Then I'll carry out

my ideas on a planetary scale!"

N'rala shrank from him.

"I do not understand," she breathed.

"Of course you don't. What would a super-beautiful wildcat, with a heart black as outer space, know of scientific ambition? But any great scientist would understand, even though my plans would horrify him. Even Captain Future, though he plans to destroy me, would understand."

"Captain Future—that's a h r e w d devil!" Hate and fear glittered in the Martian girl's eyes. "Why haven't you killed him before now? You know he's Kove, the tiger tamer."

"You don't kill a man like Future right after learning his identity," Quorn said regretfully. "Plenty of men have tried it in the past, and they no longer exist. He's too competent a scientist to be caught in simple traps, or to be surprised twice by even a weapon like the life disintegrator. He and I are probably the greatest scientists in the System's history. It's a pity that one of us must destroy the other."

"You are contradicting yourself," N'rala said perplexedly. "You have told me that you carry an old grudge against him and the Futuremen, that an old feud demands their deaths. Yet you speak of them almost with approval."

Quorn laughed. "That's the Earth attitude I inherited, N'rala. And that's something no other race has ever been able to understand—why Earthmen are able to meet even their deadliest enemies with a smile and a pleasant word. But the Venusian in me tells me not to worry about enemies at all, to forget such unpleasant things and enjoy beauty. Yet the part of me that is Martian orders me never to forget the wrong done me long ago by the Futuremen. And I will not forget!"

A thin, scrawny Martian stuck his head timidly into the room.

"Si Twih had me report that the Sons are all gathered and waiting for you," he blurted, and hastily departed.

"Now for the play-acting," Quorn said ironically as he rose and removed his cloak. "I must toss these fools hope, as one tosses a obalar a bone."

With N'rala following, the mixed-breed strode down the dusky, chill stairways of crumbled cement, into a

big room in the base of the ancient tower. It was circular, its windows masked by curtains. A cluster of uranite bulbs in the ceiling shed a glow on more than a hundred Martians.

Si Twih, the old, hollow-eyed Martian leader of the fanatic cult, stood on a low dais at one side of the room. Quorn stepped up beside him. Every eye turned hopefully on the handsome, straight figure of the mixed-blood scientist as he faced them.

"Brothers of the Two Moons," U! Quorn said in a low, clear voice, "the secret of Thuro Thuum shall soon be in our hands at last, if you continue your praiseworthy obedience. Then our common dream will be realized. The glory of Mars will blossom again!"

QUORN saw the eager, almost pathetic emotion that shone on every face. He glimpsed N'raia, standing at the far side of the room, smiling veiledly as she listened to him.

Before Quorn could continue, a big, stalwart Martian with a grizzled, hard face stepped forward.

"Is it permitted me to ask a question?" he asked.

"It is Mus Siga, one of our brothers from Syrtis," Si Twih said. "What would you ask, brother?"

Mus Siga spoke challengingly to Quorn.

"We Sons of the Two Moons in the equatorial cities grow impatient with your promises, Doctor Quorn. We expected you to have this mysterious secret of Thuro Thuum before now. Maybe you have the formula and are trying to keep it for yourself!"

Quorn felt cold fury at this shot that came so close to the truth, yet he knew better than to let his temper master him.

"Your leader, Si Twih, knows that we do not have the secret yet. I have secured only four of the seven space stones, and must acquire the other three before the world-shaking power of Thuro Thuum will be ours."

"It is so, brothers," Si Twih assured the crowd. "But there is good news. We have located the other three space stones. After this meeting, we will impart their location to Doctor Quorn, so that he may secure them as he has the others."

"Unless Captain Future interferes," warned the girl, N'raia.

An exclamation of fright went up from the fanatic throng.

"Is Captain Future working against us?" cried one. "Then there's danger. The whole System knows that the planeteer and his Futuromen are death to love against you."

"Don't worry," Quorn reassured them. "Future has met his match in me. He's been hanging on my trail for days without being able to accomplish anything. He'll soon be out of our way. I have an old score to settle with Future and the Futuromen."

The grizzled Martian, Mus Siga, spoke loudly.

"Tell me where Future is and I'll kill him. I am not afraid of him!"

"Don't worry," Quorn repeated coldly. "I've already made plans to take care of our enemy."

"You have heard the vow that soon the power of Thuro Thuum will be ours, brothers," Si Twih addressed the crowd. "We must not continue this meeting longer, for the Planet Police are suspicious of us. Go now, and soon you shall be called together again to hear of our final success."

The Martian cultists began to leave unobtrusively, one by one. Quorn felt a sense of relief. It was a strain to play his part with these fanatics. Being the shrewdest, most ruthless of realists himself, he could not understand their intense devotion.

"I'll be glad when all this is over," he mused. "It's bad enough keeping Future off my back without having to juggle with these monomaniacs, too."

SI TWIH and two other leaders of the Sons of the Two Moons pressured to U! Quorn. He followed them into a small chamber behind the dais. N'raia had returned to the tower room. In the small chamber, Quorn faced Si Twih and the others.

"Well, you said you had located the other three space stones," he urged tauntly.

Si Twih nodded. "It took all the resources of our organization to track them down. But it is going to take all your resources, Doctor Quorn, to get them."

"Where are they?"

"One of the space stones," Si Twih replied, "is on Deimos. The jewel is in the possession of a Martian who has an estate on that moon. He poses as a retired shipping magnate, but he's really the retired space pirate, Rok Olor. Among the hoard of loot he still has is the space stone he took in a foray years ago."

"Good," Quorn said. "It shouldn't take long to get Rok Olor's space stone, once I've put Future out of our way. Where are the other two space stones?"

"They're on the Pleasure Planet—that asteroid gambling paradise outside the limitations of System law. Bubus Uum, the fat spider who fleeces all who come there, has the two space stones. They were lost to him by their former owners, who came there and gambled their fortunes away."

"It'll be harder getting those two stones," Quorn said reflectively. "Bubus Uum is no fool. But I'll do it, never fear. As soon as I get rid of Future and his cursed partners, I'll get the space stone at Deimos. Then I'll leave the circus and visit the Pleasure Planet to get the last two jewels."

"Doctor Quorn, can't you tell us what this secret power of Thuro Thuum is?" Si Twih asked hesitantly. "You're the only man in the System who even suspects what it is. I know you said you weren't quite sure of it yet, but I believe that the leaders of the organization should be told what you have surmised."

Quorn shook his head. "No, Si Twih. I dare not give you misleading ideas. I will not be certain until I get all the stones and have Thuro Thuum's complete formula. Thus much I will tell you. If my deductions are correct, the possessor of that secret will have absolute power over *man/dad!*"

The three Martian fanatics looked at him in speechless awe.

MEANWHILE, N'rala had become restive as she waited in the chill, dimly lit tower room above. The lithe Martian girl shrugged impatiently and started down to the chamber. She stopped on the topmost step, stifling like a Venusian swamp cat that scent of peril. She drew a tiny, atom pistol from her bodice.

"Mus Sigu!" she breathed. "But why is he here?"

The big circular room into which she was looking down was almost deserted, for the Sons of the Two Moons had dispersed—all but one. The exception was Mus Sigu, the grizzled Martian from Syrtis, who had dared to challenge Ul Quorn. He crouched against the door of the chamber in which was Quorn, Si Twih and the other leaders of the cult.

"A spy!" whispered N'rala fiercely. No hunting panther of any of the nine worlds could have moved more silently than the Martian girl. Soundless as a shadow, she approached Mus Sigu as he listened intently at the door. N'rala suddenly thrust the tiny pistol against the Martian's back.

"Turn around, and draw no weapon!" she ordered venomously.

Mus Sigu turned, startled. In that moment of amazement, the grizzled Martian's hard face looked different. But at once he regained control of his features. That instant, though, had been enough to reveal an incredible fact to N'rala.

"You!" she whispered. "You're not Mus Sigu. You're made up like him. You're Captain Future!"

CHAPTER XI

On the Martian Moon



INSTANTLY Captain Future—for it was he in the disguise of Mus Sigu—felt the peril of his position as he faced the Martian girl. Before she could scream an alarm, he acted with all the swiftness and unexpectedness that made the resourceful wizard of science most dangerous when cornered. In the art of echo ventriloquism, there was no greater master in the System.

Future's eyes photographed in an instant the angle of the walls behind

N'rala. He turned slightly. Without moving his lips or throat, he spoke in the deep, booming voice of Grag the robot. That cunningly disguised voice seemed to issue directly behind the Martian girl.

"Shall I kill her, Master?"

N'rala's eyes flashed with startled fear. She turned with eagle-like swiftness. Then, remembering the famous tricks of Captain Future, she spun quickly back to Curt. But she was too late! Curt Newton grabbed her mouth and gripped the wrist of her gun hand.

"Thought you'd fall for that one," he smiled. "Stop fighting, you darned wildcat!"

N'rala was indeed struggling in his grasp with the fury of a trapped feline. Curt hastily pressed a finger against a spot at the side of her forehead, numbing a vital nerve. The girl went limp all at once. Holding her sagging form, Curt listened intently. There was no sound of alarm from beyond the door. He had kept the pseudo-voice of Grag pitched low.

"Better blast out of this cursed place at full rocket," Curt muttered. His gray eyes gleamed. "We're doing better, thanks!"

He lifted the unconscious Martian girl in his stalwart arms, and strode hastily out of the old tower. The streets of old Korak were dark and silent, swept by the freezing polar wind. Few people were to be seen. Most of the Martians had been drawn to the Interplanetary Circus, which was setting up its pavilions near the spaceport.

Captain Future knew Korak as he knew every important city in the nine worlds. He strode noiselessly but swiftly through dark alleys and crumbling arcades, keeping out of the light of brilliant Phobos and Deimos. He emerged into the open plain on the side of the city opposite the spaceport. Curt's keen eyes searched the moonlit plain as he moved on more slowly. Nothing was to be seen but whirling desert devils of wind-blown sand. Far to the north glittered the edge of the polar snows.

"Ezra and Joan should be right here with the Comet," Curt said under his breath. "If Quorn somehow stopped

them—"

"Gettin' kind of careless, ain't yuh, Future?"

The drawing voice behind made Curt spin sharply around, his proton gun leaping into his fist. Ezra Gurney had risen from behind a concealing dune. The old man's withered face wore a grin of enjoyment.

"Surprised you, eh? First time I ever managed to slip up on you."

"I must be getting stupid," Captain Future said ruefully. "You're the second one who has pulled that trick on me tonight."

"What's up?" Ezra asked eagerly. "That's Quorn's girl you're carryin', ain't she? Where'd you pick her up?"

"She picked me up," Curt admitted. "Darned near got me. I was so busy saveldropping, I let her surprise me. Where's the Comet?"

"Right over here, between two dunes," Ezra said, leading the way. "Joan and I have been waitin' here since we trailed you and the circus in."

CURT felt a vivid satisfaction at sight of the small, tear-drop craft concealed in the shadow between two tall sand dunes. As he entered the compact cabin-laboratory of the ship, Joan Randall eagerly ran forward to meet him. She stopped suddenly.

"Who is that?" she asked, frowning at the Martian girl Curt was setting down in a chair.

"Ain't jealous, are yuh?" Ezra asked significantly.

"Of course not!" Joan denied, flushing. She looked up at Curt. "What about Doctor Quorn?"

Curt told them rapidly what he had done after joining the circus.

"When I reached here with the circus, I found out from Police records that a certain Mas Sigu was known to be a member of the Sons of the Two Moons. I wanted to penetrate the organization, to be there when Quorn expounded his plans to it. So I had Mas Sigu arrested, made myself up as his double, and took his place. I did learn something, too, before N'rala surprised me.

"Two of the three space stones Quorn hasn't acquired are in the possession of Bubas Uum, proprietor of the Pleasure Planet. The other space

stone is on Deimos, owned by a certain retired space pirate named Rok Olor."

"Rok Olor!" The name burst explosively from Ezra Gurney's lips. "Why, Rok Olor disappeared thirty years ago. He's supposed to've died right after."

"It seems he didn't die, Ezra. He went into retirement as a supposedly honest ex-planter on Deimos."

"That blasted old space fox!" Ezra Gurney swore. "He always was the most tricky devil in the System. Many's the time he gave me the alibi in the old Patrol days, after I'd trailed him for weeks."

"I'm going to Deimos at once, to get the space stone he has before Quora can get it," Curt said.

"And I'm goin' with you!" Ezra snapped. "Wait till that old buzzard sees me step in and arrest him, after all these years!"

"It'll take us only a few hours to get to Deimos and back," Captain Future added. "We'll take this girl N'vala with us for there's something I want to find out from her. In the meantime, I want you to carry a message to Otho, Joan. Tell him to stage a big rumpus of some kind when he puts on his Ultra-acrobat act in the circus tonight."

Joan nodded. "I'll tell him. Then I'll come back here and wait for you."

She slipped out of the Comet and hastened across the moonlit dryland toward the lights of Korak.

With Captain Future's hand on the throttle, the tear-drop ship zoomed up into the sky—rushing out through the thin Martian atmosphere, it headed at terrific pace toward the hurtling, bright little sphere of Deimos.

AS the little moon broadened out in the fore-port of the control room, old Ezra Gurney sat staring at it with fierce eagerness in his faded eyes.

"Just wait till I get my hands on that old devil Rok Olor!" he kept repeating. "To run him down, after all these years—"

"We've got to find him first," Curt reminded. "He'll be living under some false name. Call the Syrtis office of the Planet Police on Mars. Describe

Rok Olor as you remember him, and ask them what planter of that description lives on Deimos."

As Ezra obeyed, Curt rapidly removed the disguise which had enabled him to assume the identity of Mus Siga. Removing waste pads from his cheeks, he washed off the red skin-stain and discarded the cunningly devised aids which had given him a stilt-like Martian figure. Ezra Gurney reported as Curt finished the task.

"Retired planter livin' near the south pole of Deimos. He calls himself Kex Isa, but he answers Rok Olor's description. He's our man!"

Soon the Comet was dropping toward the surface of Deimos. The night side showed as a tiny green world of parklike estates. Having been given atmosphere and hydrosphere by synthetic air and water creators, the little satellite was a favorite residence of wealthy Martians, whose gravitation equalizers enabled them to live comfortably there. Curt Newton landed not far from a gleaming chromalloy mansion. Small, but exquisitely beautiful, it was set amid formal Martian gardens.

"That's the house," Captain Future declared. "Come on, Ezra."

"What about the girl?" Ezra asked. N'vala still lay unconscious in the space chair.

"She won't come to till I bring her out of it," Curt replied.

He and the veteran emerged into the soft night of Deimos. Mars hung in the sky like an immense, dull-red moon. Flower scents made the warm breeze fragrant. It was easy to see why rich Martians preferred this blossoming little world to Mars. Captain Future and Ezra strode rapidly toward the chromalloy house. Their gravitation equalizers had automatically adjusted to the lighter gravitation.

"Just watch Rok Olor's face when he sees me, and he realizes he's goin' to Cerberus Prison!" crowed Ezra.

As they entered the vestibule, a Martian servant came into the dimly lighted marble hall to greet them.

"Just two friends to see Kex Isa," Curt said easily. "We'd rather not give names. We want to surprise him."

They heard a limping step. A small, shriveled-looking Martian of advanced age, with a scarred, seamed face and proud, brilliant eyes, entered the vestibule. When he saw Ezra Gurney, he went rigid.

"Devils of Mars, Captain Gurney of the Patrol!"

Cap'n Future here. He spotted you."

ROK OLOR looked long and speculatively at Curt Newton.

"So you're this Captain Future we all hear about," he said at last. "You must be all they say you are, to have tracked me here. Guess maybe you'd have outmatched any of us pirates in the wild days."

"Sorry to have to expose you after all this time, Rok Olor," Curt said, uncomfortably. "But you realize the old charges against you still hold, and that Ezra must arrest you."

"I know that. I ask no mercy."

"You can help me out in a big case."

Curt went on earnestly. "If you do, I'll see that you get the shortest pos-



A warning cone of reference spring from the jaws and developed Lester (Chapter 1)

"Marshal Gurney now, Rok," drawled Ezra. "Surprised to see me, eh? Thought the Police never was goin' to find you."

Rok Olor's shriveled figure seemed to sag for a moment. Then he raised his bald head defiantly.

"No, Gurney. I always felt that some day you would find me. I kept trying to tell myself it was nonsense, that I was safe here till I died. But underneath, I wasn't sure. You always track a man till you get him."

"Well, Rok," said Ezra in a somewhat softer tone, "the fact is that I stumbled on you by accident. This is

sible sentence."

Rok Olor shrugged. "I haven't so long to live. Even the shortest sentence on Cerberus will finish me. But I'll help you, if I can."

"You've got a space stone, haven't you?" Curt pursued.

Rok Olor drew back, surprised.

"Yes, I have a space stone. Took it in a raid on the Venus shipping lanes years ago, before I retired. It belonged to some Venusian collector who was on board."

"That was the raid you carried out off Earth's orbit, wasn't it?" Ezra yelled. "I remember it. How the hell did you escape that time? You just seemed to melt into thin space."

"That was an easy one," Rok Olor retorted, a faint grin on his shriveled face. "We put out our 'halos' for protection and ran beyond Mercury, right close to the Sun. Then we circled half around, and lined out for Mars and the asteroid zone."

"I'll be damned!" swore Ezra. "We never figured you had halo equipment, and that's where we slipped. Say, you remember the time I was chasing you out past Saturn, and you—"

"First, what about the space stone?"

Curt interrupted. "I'll get it," Rok Olor said. "It's in my safe."

He came back in a few moments, holding out the jewel. Eagerly Future took it. Yellow in color, faceted as sharply as if it were new, it blinked and burned in the palm of his hand. Curt hastily took his little X-ray scanner from his belt. He applied its radiation to the space stone, holding the gem close to his face. Into his mind, as the hard radiation freed the mental record in the gem, came that thin, remote voice of the past.

"A small generator must be constructed which shall be capable of emitting vibrations within the thirteenth division of the eighth octave of the electro-magnetic spectrum. These are the carrier waves, which must be so projected by the generator as to enclose the subject and affect every atom of his body and clothing."

Captain Future turned off his scanner and stared at the space stone with deeply thoughtful eyes. Remembering the other one-seventh of the secret he had learned from Yale's space stone, his super-keen scientific mind was trying to find a connection. Faint, dawning intimations of what Thuro Thunn's secret might be crept into Curt's mind. It seemed fantastic, yet it might be. And if Thuro Thunn's

secret was that—

"No wonder Quorn's so eager to get it," Curt muttered. "Good Lord, imagine power like that in any one man's hands!"

He stopped pondering. Rok Olor's thin voice and the drawl of Ezra Gurney recalled him to his surroundings.

"Sure, you were far and away the best space fighter the Patrol ever had," the old pirate was telling Ezra. "You whipped that Uranian bandit, Ju Jimco, in fair space fight, and the 'Falcon,' the greatest pirate of all. Nobody but you two saw that fight, but I sure wish I had."

Ezra's faded eyes went bleak and strange for a moment, as the veteran looked far back into the memory of crowded years.

"Yes, the Falcon was the greatest space fighter of all," he whispered. "God rest his soul."

Rok Olor looked puzzled. But Captain Future understood the sudden tenderness in the old crime hunter's voice. Only to Curt did Ezra ever reveal the fact that the Falcon had been his young brother.

"We've got to be going, Rok Olor," Curt said quietly.

The old pirate nodded calmly.

"Want to search me for atom guns before you take me in, Ezra?"

Ezra looked dismayed. All the eagerness with which he had looked forward to arresting Rok Olor seemed to have evaporated.

"Listen, Future," Ezra said. "After all, Rok is a pretty old man now. He hasn't been a pirate for years."

Curt saw what was coming, but refrained from smiling. "I know," he said solemnly. "What about it?"

Ezra squirmed. "Well, yuh said yuh was goin' to see he got mercy from the court for giving you the space stone, didn't you? They'll just let him off anyway, so why bother takin' him in?"

"What, leave him here?" Curt asked in mock horror. "But I thought you were keen on arresting your old enemy!"

"Cap'n Future, when yuh get old as me, and meet a feller yuh fought against in the old days when yuh was young, and talk it over with him, yuh

— See department *The Futuremen*.

don't want to arrest him. You—you're sort of glad to see him, in fact. Let's leave Rok alone, huh?"

Curt grinned. "You sentimental old fraud! All right. That goes, Rok Olor. You've helped me considerably with this space stone. As far as we're concerned, you're still just Xex Isa, an ex-planter."

Tears glistened in Rok Olor's eyes, but his voice was steady.

"Thanks, both of you. Good-by, Erra."

"Good-by, Rok, you old devil," grinned the Police veteran.

They gripped hands.

CHAPTER XII

Grog Gate Orders



AGAIN in the Comet, clear of Deimos and rushing back toward the big red parent planet in the sky, Curt tugged the controls over to Erra Gurney.

"I have a few things to ask this girl of Quorn's,"

he explained.

Curt pressed and massaged the temples of the unconscious Martian girl, using his skillful Venusian therapy, till she awoke.

"N'rala, I won't waste time," he said crisply. "Quorn has four space stones. He has them hidden somewhere in that Riseman space cruiser of his. Where are they?"

"Do you really expect me to tell?" she retorted mockingly.

"You might as well," Curt stated.

"You'll tell eventually, anyhow."

N'rala's mood seemed to change. She looked up at him with curious, speculative admiration in her dark eyes.

"You are not the kind of man to threaten a girl, Captain Future," she murmured. "Especially a girl like me." She moved closer to him. The subtle, alien perfume of his midnight

hair reached him. Her eyes had a soft, almost eager glow. "You are a strong man, Future—perhaps even stronger than Ul Quorn. I like men who blaze a great trail across the worlds. I could like you."

"And your friend Quorn?" Curt Newton reminded her.

She shrugged indolently, smiling up at him.

"Ul Quorn wearies me. But no woman would ever grow weary of you."

Curt laughed. "It's a swell act you're putting on, N'rala, but you might as well save it. I'm not falling for it." She recoiled furiously from him.

"You're not human! You're cold as the robots who reared you! Or else it's that Earth girl agent—"

"Never mind her," Curt snapped. "Where are Quorn's space stones hidden in his cruiser?"

"You'll never learn from me."

"No?" he asked softly. "I think I will. Look at that!"

Suddenly he grasped her head, and held up the ring he wore—Captain Future's famous emblem-ring, the nine planet-jewels revolving around the glowing sun-jewel. The planet-jewels began spinning and reversing in a bewildering way as Curt held it in front of N'rala's eyes. He was using the ring as a hypnosis-inducer, as he had used it many times before.

N'rala tried to turn her head aside, but Curt held her so firmly that she had to look at the flashing jewels. Presently her struggle ceased and a dull, hypnotized glaze came over her eyes.

"You will answer any question I ask," Curt stated.

"I will answer," she said in a mechanical voice.

"Where does Quorn keep the four space stones hidden in his ship?"

"They are in the Riseman's Number One cyclotron."

"They'd be annihilated in the cyclotron!" Curt exclaimed.

"The space stones are in a small tube that is proof against the raging atomic force inside the cyclotron."

"Darned clever," Captain Future admitted with grudging admiration. "All right, you will awake now."

N'rala came back to control of her own mind and instantly realized what had happened.

"You hypnotized me, you red-headed devil!"

SHE began to beat at Curt's face with her small fists in raging, untamed fury. Hastily Curt tied her into a space chair.

"Whew, I don't envy Quorn his life with you!" he gasped.

"He'll see that you don't live long, Future!" she cried murderously. "You'll find you've met your match this time!"

Ignoring her, Curt went back to the control room. Ezra was bringing the Comet down into the moonlit desert outside Korak.

"Here's the place—and there's Joan waitin'," Ezra called out.

Joan Randall came running toward Curt as he emerged from the little ship.

"I saw Otho, and he said he'd put on an uproar they'd never forget when it was time for his act tonight," she reported.

"Good, but it's almost time now for the circus to start," Curt said. "I'm going to be there and get into Quorn's ship when Otho stages his riot. I know where the four space stones are now. You and Ezra wait here, and keep N'rala quiet."

Running across the moonlit plain, Captain Future made his way around the outskirts of Korak. He reached the spot near the spaceport where the lights of the Interplanetary Circus glowed. Brassy music told him the big show had started. He slipped shadowlike between parked ships toward Quorn's streamlined Riseman cruiser. Its door was open. But as he had expected, two of Quorn's freaks—the Plutonian dwarfs—stood on guard. There was no sign of Quorn. Curt guessed he was at his pavilion.

"Can't use my invisibility process to get in, with those two freaks right on the door," he muttered. "Hope Otho makes enough uproar to draw them away."

Captain Future waited in the shadow of a Crub-Cholo freighter. An hour passed. Then from the main circus pavilion came a terrific clamor.

The two freaks guarding the Riseman were startled. They edged toward the circus to listen. Curt slipped at once inside the Riseman.

"Keep it up, Otho," he whispered prayerfully. "You're doing fine."

He went to the cyclotron room of the cruiser, and soon was disassembling the big, squat Number One cyclotron. A curious sighing sound drifted almost unnoticed to his keen ears. Abruptly something struck the back of Captain Future's head, and he felt blackness swallow him.

* * * * *

GRAG had felt worried and baffled ever since the circus had reached Mars. During the voyage from Venus, the disguised robot and the Brain had surreptitiously searched Quorn's cruiser for the four space stones, but had not found them. They had not dared press the search too far, lest the mixed-breed discover that two of his freaks were actually Curt Newton's Futuramen.

With the circus set up in Korak and due to begin its first performance soon, Grag was with Quorn's other freaks in the show pavilion that was the scene of their performance. To the eyes of the other freaks nearby, it looked merely as though the Strong Man of Space were tinkering with his Thinking Machine. Actually Grag was whispering to the Brain inside the cylinder.

"The space stones can't be in Quorn's ship. Simon. We'd have found them if they were."

"Curtis said they must be there, and I believe him," answered the Brain.

"Careful, here comes that cursed Hearer," Grag warned.

The Hearer, always distinguishable by his enormous cuplike ears, glared suspiciously. But he went on, to speak to the Moon Wolf and the Chameleon Man. Grag dared not do any more talking to Simon with the Hearer in the neighborhood. He lounged until Ul Quorn himself appeared. The mixed-breed's handsome face held an expression of worry as he looked sharply around the pavilion.

"Where's N'rala?" he demanded. "Isn't she here?"

"I haven't seen nor heard her," the Hearer replied.

"Strange," Quorn muttered. "She wouldn't leave without explanation, unless she got on the trail of something."

Quorn beckoned the Hearer and the Chameleon Man. He spoke to them in a whisper, but Grag's microphone ears picked up the words.

"Estate on south Deimos—Name of Xex Iza—Get the space stone from him—Return by show-time—"

Grag saw the Hearer and the Chameleon Man slip away to the parked circus ships. Then he saw a four-man, fast Kaiber flier take off, zooming up with a thunderous burst of rockets toward the swift, small moon.

"What are we to do, Simon?" Grag whispered anxiously. "Quorn's sent them to Deimos for a space stone."

"Look out, here comes Quorn now," cautioned the Brain.

The mixed breed approached. For a moment, he eyed Grag peculiarly. Grag, his mighty metal body perfectly disguised by the pink artificial flesh that covered it, got to his feet.

"Hello, Boss," he rumbled. "How's my act going in the show?"

"Pretty well," Quorn said. "But I have a more important job for you. Do you know the Ultra-acrobat?"

"That crazy Ganymedean who does such daffy stunts in the main circus show?" Grag boomed disdainfully. "Sure, I've seen him around."

"He's no Ganymedean," Quorn said emphatically. "He's an enemy of mine, in disguise. I want to get rid of him tonight, and I want to get rid of Kovo, the swamp man tiger tamer."

"That's easy, Boss. I'll go right

now and find 'em both and break 'em in half."

"No, you blockhead!" Ul Quorn said angrily. "Nothing as crude as that. It would be traced right back to me. It must look like an accident."

Grag pretended perplexity.

"How do you mean, Boss? I'm not good at tricks and stuff like that. I just break 'em in half."

"Listen carefully," Quorn ordered. "Tonight, the Ultra-acrobat repeats that leap from the top of the pavilion to catch a rope ten feet from the ground. You are to stand against the center mast of the pavilion. Just as the Ultra-acrobat leaps, you push the mast a little, without letting it be noticed. It'll bring the rope a little out of line. The Acrobat will miss it and be killed."

"I can do that easy, Boss," Grag boasted. "What about Kovo?"

Kovo carries an instrument in his right pocket that controls those marsh tigers. Just as he is entering their cage, you bump against him. Squeeze that instrument without his noticing it. The marsh tigers will finish him."

"Consider it done, Boss," Grag assured loudly. "Only I'd rather break 'em in half. It's more fun."

WHEN Quorn turned away, Grag muttered anxiously to the Brain.

"Simon, Quorn's planning to blast out Master and Otho tonight. What shall I do?"

"Get to Otho and Curtis and tell them," the Brain directed. "But be careful Quorn doesn't see you. Wait till after our show."

At that moment, the barker outside
[Turn Page]

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Quorn's freak-show was beginning his familiar spiel.

"The Congress of Nine World Wonders, folks! The Magician of Mars and his mysterious feats! The Strong Man of Space!"

Grag broke his steeple bars and lifted his enormous weights without giving heed to the amazement and applause of his Martian audience. The big robot's mind was a fever of anxiety and alarm. As the so-called Thinking Machine started its jerky replies to questions, Grag moved out of the pavilion. He stopped in the shadow outside as he saw the Hearer and the Chameleon Man with Quorn.

"I tell you, Future has been there and got Xex Iza's space stone," the hearer was repeating. "The description fitted Future perfectly. We secretly searched Xex Iza's house without finding the stone."

"That devil!" muttered Quorn. "How in the name of all the planetary hells did he learn about the space stone on Deimos? Anyway, he and that damned android of his are going to be killed tonight by the Strong Man. We'll get the space stone from Future's body."

"That's what you think," Grag whispered.

It was almost show-time for the big performance. The band began playing. The audience of festive Martians was pouring in, and the performers were hastening to their dressing pavilions. Grag found Otho.

"Where's Master?" he demanded.

"The chief's rocketed for Deimos," Otho replied. "Jean told me."

"I know he went there and got a space stone, but he should be back by now," Grag declared.

"He's around somewhere," Otho said confidently. "He sent me a message to create a rumpus when I put on my act. That means he wants to draw attention to the show, for some reason."

"By the way," Grag said casually, "I'm supposed to kill you tonight."

"What the devil do you mean?" howled Otho.

Grag uttered a booming chuckle.

"Don't get worried. Much as I'd like to do it, I won't. Here's the situation."

He went on to tell Otho of Ul Quorn's orders. The android's green eyes flashed.

"That checks swell with what I want to do—create an uproar! Listen, Grag. You pretend to follow Quorn's orders and displace that rope. I'll pretend almost to miss it, and I'll accuse you of doing it deliberately. We'll stage a fake fight that'll create a real uproar."

"All right," Grag agreed. "We'll put on a fuss that'll have the place in a riot."

Band music was already blaring as the "Pageant of the Planets" opened the show in the main pavilion. Otho slipped away, and Grag entered the big pavilion. He leaned negligently against the main steeple mast of the pavilion, apparently watching the show.

"The Ultra-Acrobat from Gany-mede, greatest acrobat in circus history!" announced Jur Nugat. "He works entirely without safety nets!"

CHAPTER XIII

Fatal in Space



OTHO ran into the spotlight, bowed, and then swarmed up to the highest trapeze platform. He poised there for his terrific dive to the swinging rope, which always stunned the audiences. Grag leaned his huge

weight hard against the big mast, just as Otho dived.

A cry of horror went up from the audience as the rope Otho was diving for swung out of line. He made what looked like a superhuman effort. Actually the disguised android had cunningly calculated it in advance. He barely managed to seize the swinging rope. A roar of voices from the audience told of their relief at the Ultra-Acrobat's escape. Jur Nugat ran forward in alarm.

"Gods of Saturn, you nearly missed the rope!" he hissed.

"It was the Strong Man's fault!" Otho accused furiously, pointing at Grag. "He pushed the mast and rope out of line purposely!"

"You're crazy," Grag retorted loudly. "You say that again and I'll boot you clear out of this pavilion."

"You'll what?" Otho shrieked. "Why, you thick-headed, weak-minded excuse for an Earthman, I'll tie you into knots!"

The android leaped in at Grag and struck him a furious blow in the face. He pulled his punch, but Grag pretended to stagger.

"I'll kill him for that!" Grag roared. "Let me at him. I'll break him in half!"

He lunged heavily at Otho, but the android skipped nimbly aside. Snatching up a pavilion stake, he belabored Grag with it. The blows seemed heavy ones, but they were so shrewdly calculated by Otho that Grag scarcely felt them. But to the audience, it seemed that Otho was really trying to kill the Strong Man.

"Stand still and fight like a man!" Grag yelled, his huge hands grabbing vainly for the android. "When I get you, I'll break you in half!"

"Catch me first, you big lummon!" taunted Otho.

He brought the stake down on Grag's head again in what seemed to all onlookers a killing blow.

"Separate them before they kill each other!" Jur Nugot was yelling wildly to his men.

The whole great pavilion was in a wild uproar. Under his breath, as they fought, Grag muttered:

"You're doing swell, Otho. Better let me catch you now."

"All right, you grab me and I'll pretend you're murdering me," Otho whispered.

Grag swiftly noticed that the battle had brought Ul Quorn and the Hearer to the main pavilion. That encouraged him. He and Otho wrestled and scrapped between masts, stages and cages. Jim Nugot's men leaped in to separate them, but Grag's mighty arm knocked them back. Roaring, he continued to pursue Otho.

"The Strong Man's gone crazy!" a man shouted. "Keep out of his way!"

Otho purposely skipped in a little too close, and Grag succeeded in grasping his arm.

"Here's where I break him in half!" bellowed the disguised robot.

"Help, the Strong Man's killing me!" Otho yelled. As he pretended to struggle with Grag, Otho glanced quickly under his opponent's mighty arm. He saw that N'rala, the Martian girl, had suddenly appeared at the edge of the crowd and was speaking excitedly to Ul Quorn. At once Quorn and the Hearer hastily left with the girl.

"Something's wrong, Grag!" Otho hissed. "N'rala just showed up. She was a prisoner in the Comet, Joan said, so she must have escaped. She warned Quorn about something, I think. We'd better stop this and find the chief!"

"All right. You pretend to slip out of my grip and I'll chase you out of the pavilion."

OTHO pretended to break from the Strong Man's grasp and fled through the crowd, out of the pavilion. Grag plunged after him. Planet Police who had been called tried to stop him, but he brushed them aside and tore on after Otho. The whole circus was in uproar. Outside, under the light of hurtling Deimos and Phobos, Grag found Otho looking tensely around.

"No sign of the chief," the android groaned. "We'll find Simon."

They rushed to the freak-show pavilion. All the freaks had disappeared, but the Thinking Machine stood neglected in a corner. From inside the fake machine, the Brain spoke swiftly.

"Grag — Otho — something's happened! Quorn came running in and gave orders to the freaks to board his cruiser at once. They didn't wait to pick me up. Quorn seemed excited."

At that moment came a roar of rockets. Through the door of the pavilion they saw Quorn's big Blis-Man cruiser flash seaward.

"Quorn's blasted off!" Otho cried. "What in hell's name has happened? Where's the chief?"

"Maybe at the Comet with Joan and Erra," Simon Wright suggested. "We'd better head there at once. Take me out of this wily device. I think

Quorn's finished with the circus now, and our disguises aren't going to be any more good to us."

Grag lifted Simon Wright's square, transparent brain-case from the cylinder disguise. The three Futuramen hastily departed from the clamor at the circus, heading out of Korak toward the drylands northward. They found the Comet in the prearranged location, gleaming like a silvery dream ship in the light of the moons. Ezra Gurney and Joan came running to meet them. The girl had a bruise on her temple.

"The Futuramen—thank the space gods!" Ezra panted. "We were just starting for the Circus. N'rala escaped from us. By now, that wildcat musta warned Quorn that Cap'n Future was searchin' his ship for the space stones.

"Smoking comets!" swore Otho. "Was the chief searching Quorn's cruiser? Then the chief's been discovered and captured. The Rissman just took off into space!"

For a heart-beat, there was silence among the five comrades.

"That's bad," Ezra mumbled at last. "Cap'n Future right in Quorn's hands—and Future had the fifth space stone on him."

"Who cares about the space stones?" Otho cried. "It's the chief himself I'm worried about. Quorn will enjoy killing him. He hates all us Futuramen like poison, for some reason."

"I ought to quit the Patrol," Joan said huskily. "N'rala pretended to be in agony from the Venusian nerve-stunning trick Future used to make her unconscious. I loosened her bonds to help her. She struck me down suddenly and escaped from the Comet while Ezra was standing watch outside."

Simon Wright's cold, rasping voice cut in sharply.

"We're wasting time. We must follow Quorn and his outfit to free Curtis. Where would they be going?"

"I know that," Ezra Gurney cried eagerly. "Future said the last two space stones are on the Pleasure Planet, owned by that fat crook, Bubas Uun. That's where Quorn'd head, all right."

"The Pleasure Planet—the gam-

bling asteroid that's outside System Law?" Simon repeated. "It's not far around the asteroid zone from here. If we lay a course straight toward it in the Comet, we should overtake Quorn's cruiser before he reaches there."

"Sure we can!" Grag cried. "Who ever heard of any Rissman cruiser that could travel as fast as the Comet?"

"What're we waiting for, then?" Otho yapped. "Let's get going!"

THE Comet flashed skyward from the moonlit Martian plain. Curving sharply across the brooding section of old Korak, she arced skyward. A trail of rocket-fire streamed behind as the cyclotrons roared to their full capacity.

Grag held the controls. They picked up speed, flying out into the star-blazing black vault toward the great belt of asteroids that circles between the orbits of Mars and Jupiter. Otho had removed his Ultra-acrobat disguise. He relieved Grag at the controls while the robot discarded his own make-up.

"Glad to get that cursed artificial flesh off," granted Grag as he finally stood, massive and metallic as ever. "Give me a good metal skin that doesn't bruise or cut at every little accident."

Eek, Grag's moon-puppet, had been badly baffled by the disguise of his master. Now it clambered joyfully to Grag's shoulder. Hour followed hour as the Comet flew deeper into space.

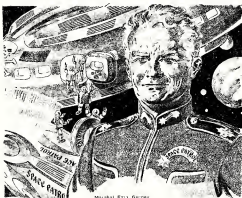
They were threading their way now between the tumbling planetoids and swarming meteors that make the zone the wilderness of space. As they arched toward the Pleasure Planet, Otho swept space with the electroscopes, seeking to locate Quorn's ship ahead. Finally he uttered a cry.

"Something floating ahead, but it's not a ship. It's a body! We'd better stop and check. Maybe the chief managed to get Quorn."

Grag stopped the Comet. With a grappling beam, Otho skillfully fished the frozen, floating body into the airlock.

"Good Lord!" Ezra Gurney shouted in unbelieving, gasping horror. "It's Cap'n Future's body!"

"The chief," Otho whispered, staring. "The chief—dead!" Curt New-



Michael Earl Gurney

ton's empty gray eyes stared up at them. The planeteer still wore his drab synthefix zipper suit. Upon his finger was still his masque emblem-ring. But in his breast was a gaping, charred wound.

"He's dead," the Brain said dully.

"Master can't be dead!" Grag bellowed. "We can bring him back to life some way, Simon!"

"Nothing can bring back a man whose cells have been frozen in space, even if he didn't have that terrible wound. Quorn killed him and tossed his body into space."

Jean Randall's face was agonized. She seemed unable to speak. Old Ezra Gurney's faded eyes were wild.

"I still can't believe it," he choked. "Cap'n Future, the greatest planeteer of them all. He went through more dangers than any other man—"

They were silent, for there was nothing to say. The glamorous career of the most audacious figure in System history was over. Their minds were unable wholly to understand that fact. It was Simon who roused them.

"There is something for us still to

do," he rasped somberly. "Quorn killed Curtis. We shall take vengeance on Quorn such as the System has never seen before."

"I'll tear him atom from atom!" Otho raged.

Grag sat still stunned.

"Master can't be dead," he muttered.

SIMON WRIGHT'S lens-eyes were looking at the inert face of the man in the air-lock. The voice of the Brain grew then and cold.

"Before we start on the vengeance trail, there is something we must do. We cannot let Curtis' body drift endlessly in space."

"Give him space funeral, like the old space pirates did, on one of these asteroids," Otho suggested hoarsely.

"Aye, space funeral for Cap'n Future would be best," Ezra said.

"I agree," the Brain replied. "Run the Comet up to that little planetoid yonder, Grag."

The hurtling world was only a few miles in diameter, a harsh, barren, airless rock. In space suits, the Futuramen, Ezra and Jean emerged from the

Comet and laid the dead, frozen form on a rocky crag. In the starlight, Captain Future's rigid face seemed to be looking up at them. Ocho gently took the emblem-ring from his finger.

"So it ends," Simon whispered. "The boy we reared on the Moon, the man who brought law to the System— It all ends here."

They returned to the Comet and cast loose from the planetoid. Grog turned to Ocho, who stood at the breach of the ship's proton gun.

"Now," rumbled the great robot.

Ocho unloosed a proton beam of terrific intensity that struck the planetoid on which the dead man lay. The rock began blazing up in dazzling brilliance, consuming itself and the dead man on it, the mighty funeral-pyre of space was like a new little sun.

"They'll see merely a new star on all the worlds," the Brain said broodingly. "They won't know it's the passing of their champion. Head toward the Pleasure Planet, Grog. There's nothing left now but vengeance."

CHAPTER XIV

In the Meteor Storm



SLOWLY Captain Future came back to consciousness. His head was throbbing with pain, for he had been knocked unconscious at the circus. Now he felt he was tied to a metal stanchion of some kind. From

the steady drone of rocket tubes, he knew he was on a space ship. Curt Newton was an expert on interplanetary craft. He could tell one make from another by the sound of their rockets. The deliberate pounding of a Crab-Cholo was far different from the staccato rattle of a fast Kalber, or the continuous shriek of a Turk. He recognized the drumming drone that was characteristic of a Rissman cruiser. At once, remembrance came

to him. He had entered Ul Quorn's Rissman cruiser, had been searching in the Number One cyclotron for the space stones, when—

"Knocked out and captured, like a groan space boy!" Captain Future groaned disgustedly. "How the devil did they do it without my hearing them come up behind me?"

He forced his eyes open. He was tied to a stanchion in one corner of a small, bare, metal cabin. One small porthole window gave a limited view of the star-jeweled vault of space.

"Heading through the asteroid zone," Curt muttered, observing the positions of stars. "Straight for the Pleasure Planet. I might've known."

As the door opened, Curt stiffened in his bonds. Ul Quorn and Mrella entered, followed by the cup-eared Healer and the Chameleon Man. Quorn's handsome red face was composed, but there was a gleam of exaltation in his eyes. He greeted Curt with ironical courtesy.

"Feeling better, Captain Future? I've been unable to look in until now. Had to lay a course through the asteroid zone."

"How did you knock me out so efficiently?" Curt asked coolly. "Just as a matter of scientific interest, I'd like to know."

"I'm glad to tell you," Quorn said. "My Plutonian dwarfs are experts in the use of the Plutonian sound-spear, the boomerang that's attracted by sound. It always hits its mark, even around corners. Also just as a matter of scientific interest, Future, why wasn't I able to kill you in the circus? I turned the life disintegrator force on you several times when you weren't looking. It hadn't the slightest effect on you."

Curt smiled. "That was easy. I realized from my examination of Lester's body, that a certain chemical paint would be proof against the life-disintegrator force. I painted myself, under the swamp man make-up. Ocho didn't need any, for the force wouldn't affect synthetic flesh."

"You are a brilliant scientist, Future?" Quorn exclaimed.

"And now that the exchange of compliments is over, what next?" Curt asked calmly.

"First, the space stone you got at Deimos from Rok Olor," said the mixed-bred almost pleasantly. "You beat me to it nicely there, Future, but I know you have that stone on you right now."

CURT wished he didn't have the space stone in his belt, for a search by the Hearer soon discovered it. U1 Quorn's eyes were bright as he took the brilliant stone and stared at it.

"Five," he muttered. "Five parts of Thuro Thunn's secret. Only two more—"

"Two more space stones, yea," Curt remarked calmly. "Unless I am wrong, there is only one more part. The seventh space stone isn't part of the formula, but it is the crux of Thuro Thunn's secret, nevertheless. Am I right?"

Quorn looked startled.

"You've guessed Thuro Thunn's secret? You're the only man beside myself who's ever done so!"

N'raia had watched with smoldering eyes. Now she cried impatiently:

"Why don't you kill him at once?"

"Soon, my dear," Quorn soothed ironically. "I want to be sure that this space stone isn't a clever fake of Future's. Also, I want him to know just who I am, before he dies." "I know well enough who you are, Quorn," Curt said contemptuously. "You're a renegade scientist who's willing to bring disaster to whole worlds."

"My name is not Quorn at all," said the mixed-bred quietly. "Does that surprise you? It's a fact. My mother's name was Quorn, but my Earthman father's name was Victor Corvo."

"Corvo?" Captain Future stiffened with amazement. "You don't mean that your father—"

"Was Victor Corvo," Quorn repeated softly. "He was killed by your robot, android and Brain on the Moon years ago, when you and I were infants. Do you understand now why I hate you and your Futuremen so deeply, my dear Captain Future?"

"So that's why Simon, Grog and Othe thought there was something familiar about you," Curt Newton muttered. Then the tanned face of the captive wizard of science hardened.

"Your father deserved to die, Quorn. He murdered my own parents to steal their scientific secrets. He was a ruthless criminal."

"Despite that, he was my father," U1 Quorn replied. "We Martians carry feuds from generation to generation. I've waited a long time to settle this account with you and your Futuremen." Quorn turned to the Chameleon Man. "Watch him while I check this space stone with the others. If it's the real stone, we'll delay no longer the pleasant task of ridding the system of Captain Future."

Quorn left the cabin with N'raia and the Hearer. The Chameleon Man remained. Standing with a drawn atom pistol, he watched Curt with an alert, nervous gaze. Captain Future thrust aside his amazement at discovering that U1 Quorn was son of Victor Corvo, who had murdered his own father. That explained a lot of things, but it wasn't important now. What was important was the necessity of getting out of his cell, and at once.

But how? He was tied to a stanchion in the corner of the cabin, by stout strips of Platonian leather. He might be able to work himself loose, for he knew tricks with ropes and knots. But if he tried it, the Chameleon Man, only a few feet away, would stop him. Curt Newton attacked the problem with all the resources of his powerful mind, exactly as though he faced some puzzling problem of scientific research. His racing brain examined and rapidly discarded several possibilities.

THE Chameleon Man, the hollow-eyed blue Saturnian who could change color at will, watched Curt every moment. Now and then the sharp signals of the meteor alarm could be heard from the control room, followed by a blast of rocket tubes to avoid the meteors of the asteroidal wilderness. Each time the cruiser veered, the standing Chameleon Man lurched to one side or the other, thrown off-balance.

Curt noticed that. The fact that his legs were not tied to the stanchion gave Captain Future the opening he had been looking for. He waited, listening tensely for the meteor alarm. It buzzed three times, indicating

meteors ahead and to the right. The cruiser veered sharply to the left. Curt growled inwardly. Why couldn't those meteors have been on the other side?

Then his fervent prayer was answered. The distant meteor alarm buzzed twice, warning of meteors to the left. Curt drew up his knees slightly. An instant later, as he had expected, the cruiser veered sharply to the right. The Chameleon Man was again thrown off-balance. He lurched a little to one side—toward Curt!

Captain Future's legs suddenly shot out, caught the guard in the pit of the stomach. The Saturnian freak was hurled back, gasping for breath and unable to shout. His head struck the cabin wall so sharply that he fell unconscious. Instantly Curt was busy with the strips of Plutonite leather that held him to the stanchion. Shrinking his arm muscles and slipping his wrist temporarily out of joint proved painful. But Curt set his teeth and persisted until he had loosened one hand behind him.

The Chameleon Man began returning to consciousness. Curt worked frantically to release his other hand. The freak staggered dazedly to his feet, just as Future succeeded in freeing himself. The Chameleon Man grabbed up his atom pistol and leveled it at Curt's breast. Captain Future leaped in at the freak, diving under the weapon and against it to force it to fire upward. The Chameleon Man had been pressing the trigger. Curt's lunge knocked his weapon back. The streak of force from the gun tore into the freak's own breast. He crumpled, dead. Captain Future realized the peril of his predicament. He must get out of this ship, taking Quorn's five space stones with him if possible. But escape was more important, to beat Quorn to the Pleasure Planet and the last two space stones. Overcoming Quorn and his crew of freaks was out of the question. Curt knew that too vast an issue depended on him to take such a mad risk. He must use some stratagem. But what? His eye fell on the dead Chameleon Man.

"That's it!" he breathed.

Curt Newton still wore the belt which contained his emergency scientific kit and make-up case. He

snatched out the case and began applying his art of disguise to the dead freak.

WAXITE pads changed the shape of the Chameleon man's features. Artificial curly hair, stained red, went onto his skull. A smooth cream made his face tan instead of blue. Curt put his own zipper suit on the dead freak, and slipped his croblem-ring on the finger of the corpse.

"Can get it back later, if my little plan succeeds," he muttered. "Have to risk the ring, though, or everything may fall through."

The transformation was uncanny. The dead Chameleon Man was now an exact duplicate of Captain Future himself. Curt tied the corpse to the stanchion. Then he went to work with the make-up on himself, staining his face blue, dyeing his hair, changing his features, donning the freak's clothes. When he had finished, Curt was a double of the dead Chameleon Man. He had exchanged identities with the freak!

"It may work," Curt whispered tensely. "It has to."

The tread of feet outside told him of Quorn's return. Curt thrust the freak's atom pistol into his own belt. He looked up with assumed nervousness as Quorn, N'rala and the Hearer entered the cabin. Quorn saw the dead man tied to the stanchion. The mixed-breed turned stormily on Curt.

"You fool, why did you kill him?"

"He was trying to escape," Curt answered in the whining voice of the real Chameleon Man: "I had to stop him."

"You could have called me," snapped Ul Quorn. "I wanted the pleasure of seeing him squirm before he died."

"He wouldn't have squirmed," N'rala said thoughtfully, looking at the dead pseudo-Future. "He was too strong for that."

Quorn's rage faded as he stared mutely at the dead man.

"You are right," he admitted. "There was real genius to that man, foolish as were the altruistic ideals he followed. Even now that I have settled part of the old feud between his family and mine, I almost regret hav-

ing extinguished as great a scientist." The mixed-breed shrugged. "Well, there is no profit in being sentimental about it. Toss his body out into space."

Curt helped the Hearer cast the dead body out through the air-lock. It gave Captain Future an uncanny feeling to see what looked like his own dead body drifting off into the starry void. Quorn gazed ahead through the swarming specks of light that were the numberless asteroids and meteor swarms of the zone.

"Now for the Pleasure Planet—and the last two space stones," the mixed-breed said to N'rala. "We have five of them. Just these last two to get, N'rala!"

"They may be the most difficult," the Martian girl warned. "Subas Uam is wily. It will be hard to trick him."

"I beat the unbeatable Captain Future," Quorn reminded her.

Casually Captain Future sauntered back along the passage from the air-lock vestibule, and entered the cyclotron room. The six squat, massive machines were droning steadily, producing the atomic energy which was released from the rocky tubes to drive the swift Rissman. Since the mechanisms were almost completely automatic and controlled from the pilot room, no one was on duty there. Curt grabbed up a wrench and sprang toward the Number One cyclotron. Again he began removing his radiation-proof cover.

"If I can get the stones and escape from this damned ship, things will look up," Curt panted. "The asteroid of the Hermit of Space isn't far from here. I could contact the Cowet there."

"What are you doing?" demanded a voice from the door.

Curt spun in alarm. The Hearer stood at the door. The uncanny freak had detected the sound Curt made in disassembling the cyclotron, and he had come to investigate. Curt knew he was about to shout an alarm, for suspicion was flaring in his eyes. Captain Future leaped in and brought his gun butt down on the Hearer's head. But the freak uttered a broken cry!

Shouts from the fore part of the ship answered it. Curt knew it was too late now to get the space stones. Quorn's suspicions would soon expose the trick of imposture he had played.

"Must get out of here now, or not at all!" Curt gasped.

He plunged toward the air-lock vestibule, grabbed a space suit and an impeller. Hurriedly he scrambled into the suit, for he realized that the paramount necessity was to beat Quorn to the Pleasure Planet. Getting the last two space stones was vital. It was too late now to try to get the other five stones. Quorn already knew those parts of the formula, anyway.

Curt glimpsed Quorn, the Plutonian dwarfs and the other freaks rushing down the passageway. Captain Future touched the stud that sent the outer air-lock door flying open. The air in the lock whiffed out into space. Curt made a powerful spring into the void, away from the traveling ship.

His leap sent him flying far out into the empty, star-jeweled blackness, carrying him entirely clear of the ship's gravitational attraction. Looking back, he saw the Rissman rocketing on at high speed. But a moment later,

[Turn Page]

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he bit his lip worriedly. The ship was turning around.

"Coming back after me!" he exclaimed. His keen mind attacked the problem swiftly. "That swarm's my best bet—if I can make it."

Not far from him rushed a cluster of glinting specks of light, one of the largest of the hurtling, tumbling meteor swarms of the zone.

Curt turned on his impeller, using the rocket flash of the tube to kick him through space toward the massed planetoids. If he could get into the swarm, Quorn wouldn't dare follow him in with the ship. The fact that he would also be in deadly danger scarcely mattered to Curt. Facing danger was a habit with him.

He used the impeller continuously to urge him on toward the swarm. Now he could plainly see it as a great field of whirling, sipping meteors, from sand-grain size to enormous, jagged masses.

He glanced back again. The Risman was coming after him with all rockets blazing. Quorn had seen and understood the maneuver. He was using every erg of the cruiser's enormous power in trying to cut off Captain Future before he could enter the swarm. . . .

CHAPTER XV

The Hermit of Space



LOOKING back, Captain Future had seen the Risman cruiser thundering down on him, plumed with tails of fire from its blasting rocket tubes. Now he realized that Quorn was trying to run him down in space,

smash him against the cruiser's bow! Curt floated in space, waiting, as the ship rushed toward him. It took steel nerve to let that monstrous murder craft boom toward him. But he made no move until the Risman was a few

hundred feet away. With a sudden flash of his impeller, he slipped aside.

The Risman grazed past, its rocket blast glaring in his eyes. The cruiser curved up sharply to avoid the meteor swarm, rolled over in a sharp space-spin. It came around in a broad curve to repeat the maneuver.

"Not this time, Quorn!" Captain Future gritted.

The minute the cruiser had passed him, Curt had turned on his impeller full force to carry him to the very edges of the rushing, tumbling, hurtling, whirling planetoids that swarmed between Jupiter and Mars. An instant later, he was flying along with the pack. All he could do was pray for fast reflexes. If one of those jagged rocks hit him, he knew his career was finished.

He chuckled as he saw the Risman veer sharply away from the meteor swarm, ending its pursuit. If Quorn apparently was of no mind to risk suicide by following Curt into the swarm. With visible regret, the Risman turned and moved away, disappearing in a counter-sunward direction through the asteroid zone.

"Continuing to the Pleasure Planet, to get Bubas Uum's two space stones before I can interfere," Curt guessed. "Now where is the Hermit of Space's worldlet? If I can call the Futuremen from there to come in the Comet, I can still scramble Quorn's orbit."

No man could know the entire complex wilderness that made up the asteroidal zone. But Captain Future knew that maze of tiny worlds and meteors better than any other man. He had friends on some of the little planets. One of those friends was the Hermit of Space. Curt had figured, before escaping from the Risman, that the Hermit's asteroid was nearby.

Emerging with immense relief from the dangerous meteor swarm, Curt Newton floated in space. He peered through his helmet till he located the small green speck of the Hermit's worldlet. He used the impeller to kick himself toward that small point of light. Before long, he was floating down to its surface.

It was a green, forest-covered, park-like little planet, with a clear, thin atmosphere, shining little streams and

lakes, and an abundance of strange animals and vegetable life. Captain Future fell toward an open glade in the forest. Though he used his impeller to brake his fall, he rolled over and over when he landed. He got to his feet, gasping for breath.

"Now where is the Hermit?" he mused. "I suppose the old fanatic is as opposed to science as ever, but he must have a televisior stowed away somewhere for emergency use."

CURT started traveling through the forest in a widening spiral. Presently he found a well worn path. It led from a fishing place on the shore of a small pond through the forest. After taking time out at the pond to remove his now useless Chameleon Man disguise, Captain Future followed the clearly marked path.

Faint sunlight flickered down through the queer, flat fronds of the green-trunked trees. Grotesque little furred, winged creatures like flying rabbits flitted to and fro, nibbling on the high branches. Curt noticed other forms of the strange indigenous life of this isolated little world. Borers inserted their serpentine bodies into tree-trunks and hollowed them out from within. Asteroid bees flew in a compact conical formation at such speed that they could drive through obstacles like a bullet.

"Well, here we are!" the wizard of science exclaimed gladly.

He stepped into a small clearing where stood a rough, sturdy cabin of green tree-trunks, with a thatched roof. There was a wattle chimney, and a small garden, and a number of queer little animals lounging in front of the heavy plank door.

"Hello, Hermit!" Curt shouted cheerily. "You have a caller!"

The door of the cabin burst open. Out of it bounded an irascible, elderly Earthman with a long white beard and mane of white hair. Dressed in tanned skin jacket and trousers, he waved a club threateningly.

"You got the bell off this asteroid!" the old man roared angrily. "I won't have curiosity-seekers from all over the System coming here to bother me, and—"

He stopped, peering more closely at

Curt Newton. He recognized the tall figure, red hair and good-humored face of the young scientific wizard. The Hermit's anger disappeared.

"Captain Future?" he cried in welcome, dropping the club. "Well, that's different. Don't mind your stopping, but this flood of visitors I've been having lately has got me good and mad."

"How many visitors have been here?" Curt asked him.

The Hermit scratched his head.

"Well, there was one Mercurian explorer two years ago, and two Jovians hunting metals last year. I might as well be living back on one of those crowded, crazy worlds, if I'm going to have hordes of people like that dropping in here."

"Three visitors in two years?" Captain Future repeated. He chuckled. "That's a lot, all right."

"It's a lot too many!" shouted the Hermit. "If people keep swarming in on me like that, I'll have to find another asteroid."

Captain Future had known the Hermit of Space for several years. The Hermit was an old Earthman who was fanatically anti-scientific, passionately convinced that mechanical progress was all wrong for the race. Disgusted with the super-scientific civilization of Earth and the other planets, the Hermit had sought out the remote little asteroid, where he had made a solitary home. Curt had once chased away a crew of space bandits who wanted to make the asteroid their base. Because of that, he was the one person the Hermit would tolerate.

"But where's your ship?" the Hermit asked puzzledly.

WHEN Curt told him the story, the Hermit roared with rage.

"I always told you your gallivanting around in space would get you into trouble! That's what happens when people take up with these scientific ships and machines, instead of living a natural life."

"I've got to call the Futuramen to come here in the Comet," Curt told him. "Haven't you a televisior here?"

The Hermit looked outraged.

"A televisior? I wouldn't have no such machine on my world! Why, I caught myself using a stick to pry out

a stone with one day. I realized that I was using a lever, the first of all machines, so I threw it right away. Yes, sir. I wasn't going to get that curse of machinery started here."

"All right, don't blow your rockets about it," Curt soothed hastily. "I guess I can make a television. I have the tools in my belt. It's lucky I took it off my dead double and put it under my jacket."

"Hate to see any machinery built here, but I guess it's all right if you're really in trouble," growled the Hermit.

The old man watched with dour disapproval as Captain Future began building a television transmitter from raw materials. It was a task that only the wizard of science would have attempted. Curt first took from his belt the super-compact tools and instruments he habitually carried in it. Then he assembled the materials he needed. His tiny atomic torch melted certain minerals down into glasslike, which he carefully fused for his two big vacuum tubes. Metal from his space suit he used for tube-elements and wire-strips.

He did not attempt to create a vision-transmitter. He would be satisfied to get a vocal message through to the Futuremen. As he worked, the Hermit's queer asteroid pets gathered around to watch, and the Hermit lectured him severely.

"All this space flying and talking across the void and other scientific nonsense—how much happier has it made people?" the old fanatic demanded. "Weren't people happier in the old days on Earth, when they didn't know any science and lived a normal, natural life?"

"According to that argument"—Curt grinned as he worked deftly—"people were happier still when they were just ignorant savages long ago, and didn't even use fire."

"Now you're twisting my words around," complained the Hermit. "You're like everyone else. You won't argue reasonably."

Presently Captain Future straightened, his task finished. He had created a crude but powerful, efficient transmitter, powered by a chemical battery he had compounded of natural chemical salts.

"Ought to work," he mused. "As near as I can calculate, it's tuned to the wave the Futuremen and I always use. Here goes, anyway." He spoke loudly into the makeshift microphone. "Captain Future calling the Corner! I'm on the asteroid of the Hermit of Space. Come at once!"

He repeated the message at intervals of five minutes, for an hour. Then he turned off the rough transmitter.

"Nothing to do but to wait now," he explained. "Hope they got it."

"It won't work, you'll find out," prophesied the Hermit. "Machinery always fails you when you depend on it. But while you're waiting, how about something to eat?"

SHADOWS were falling across the small clearing as the brief day of the spinning little asteroid came to an end. The Hermit brought out fruit and odd cooked plants. He and the wizard of science ate at a little table in front of the cabin. Curt looked up into the heavens, blazing with a jungle of stars and spanned constantly by the fire-flashes of meteors. Far away in the starry wilderness, he saw a tiny yellowish point of light that he knew was the asteroid called the Pleasure Planet.

"Quorn's nearly there by now, preparing to take the last two space stones—the last trick of the game," Curt muttered worriedly. "Why don't the Futuremen come?"

"Don't have any meat, because the animals of this place are so tame, I can't bear to kill any of them," the Hermit was saying. "Look at that one there. It's a meteor mimic. Ever see one before?"

The meteor mimic was a small animal, so named because it was found only on some of the larger bodies of the asteroid zone. It was a fat, bulbous white creature with a doughy-looking body on four shapeless legs, and two solemn, staring big eyes. It had the unique ability of controlling the shape and appearance of its body at will. It could cause its cells to assume new forms with protean quickness, enabling it to mimic anything its size.

It was sniffing around Curt's television. Suddenly its body spun and

changed—and there seemed two televisions resting on the ground! Then the one of them flowed back into the fat little animal.

"See, isn't the thing clever?" chuckled the Hermit. "It's always fooling me, mimicking something or other. Pretty nuisance!"

Curt declined the Hermit's offer of a bunk in the cabin, and slept under the meteor-blasted sky that night. He awoke with thin pale sunlight of the asteroid dawn in his eyes. He looked anxiously into the brassy heavens, but there was no sign of the Comet. Reaching down to pick up his belt from the ground, he discovered there were two belts, exactly alike. The one he tried to pick up writhed and changed in his hand. Instantly it became the meteor mimic.

"Your friends didn't show up, eh?" said the Hermit, emerging from the cabin. His beard waggled in satisfaction. "I know it. Machines always let you down. Now you can stay here with me and live a natural, normal life without scientific nonsense."

"Not me!" Curt exclaimed, his eyes lighting. "Here comes the Comet now!"

HIS ears had detected the thin, buzz-saw whine of rockets which came from only one ship in the System. Around from the right side raced the Comet, landing with a roaring rush in the little clearing. Otho, Grag, the Brain, Joan and Ezra Gurney poured from the ship and ran toward Captain Future.

"Chief, we couldn't believe our ears when we heard your call!" babbled Otho, his green eyes gleaming joyfully.

"We thought you dead, Master," Grag boomed. "We found your body in space and gave it space burial. What happened?"

Curt rapidly told them what had occurred. Ezra Gurney slapped his knee in delight when he heard.

"You sure tricked that devil Queen this time, Cap'n Future," the veteran cried. "That double trick was the best yet."

Joan's expression was soft with happiness.

"We are glad you escaped, lad," said Simon.

That was all, but all knew what the words meant, coming from the austere Brain. Otho handed Curt the unique emblem-ring.

"Took this from your body, Chief, as a memento of you."

"I'm certainly glad you did," Curt said thankfully. "I hated to risk losing the ring. But Queen would have noticed if it hadn't been on my dead double. I meant to go back later, if possible, and find the body in space. I'd mentally marked the location, velocity and direction. But we're blasting now for the Pleasure Planet! I think the last round of this contest for the space stones and for Thaur's secret is going to be fought there."

"Say, what in the Sun's name is that thing?" Otho blurted.

He was looking at the little meteor mimic. It had been mimicking a flying rabbit which had alighted nearby. After perfectly impersonating it, the mimic casually changed back into its own form. Captain Future explained to Otho, who had never seen the species before.

"Why, that creature's the best disguise artist in the System, outside of myself!" Otho exclaimed. His eyes sparkled mischievously. "Wouldn't it give Grag's moon-pup a fight? Eek wouldn't have a chance against a creature as clever as that."

"You're space-struck!" bellowed Grag. "Eek would wipe up the floor of the Comet with that disgusting little beast!"

"May I have it for a pet?" Otho asked the Hermit.

"Sure, take it. The damned thing's a nuisance to me."

Otho picked up the meteor mimic. The little animal looked up with solemn, friendly eyes. Suddenly he changed himself into a replica of the square gravitation equalizer on Otho's chest, and as quickly changed back into his own form.

"You see, he likes me!" Otho said. "I'll call him Oog."

"You're just adopting him because you think he'll be able to whip Eek!" Grag scolded loudly. "It won't work. You'll find out that Eek will chew him to ribbons."

"I'll stand your watches for a year if Oog doesn't knock Eck silly in five minutes," Otho challenged.

"And I'll stand a year's watches for you if Eck doesn't send your Oog howling in two minutes," Grag said furiously.

"All right, you're on," Otho said. "Come and watch me win my bet, folks."

The android and the angry robot hastened toward the *Comet*, Otho carrying his new pet. As the others followed, Joan asked Curt worriedly:

"Won't the two pets really hurt each other?"

"I'll separate them before they can," Curt assured her. "Let's see who's the best scrapper, Oog or Eck."

THEY entered the *Comet*. Eck, the small, gray, bearlike moon-pup, had been gnawing on a fragment of copper. It came trotting eagerly forward when Grag called out in his booming voice. The moon-pup stiffened and stared with beady, bright eyes at Oog as Otho put the meteor music down. The fat, little, white protean beast stared back solemnly at Eck.

"Go ahead, Oog—tear him apart!" Otho urged. "Give him the works. That moon-pup's a big coward, anyway."

Grag was speaking loudly, too, voicing the message he was also communicating by telepathy to his pet.

"Mop up the ship with that fat little monster, Eck!" Grag boomed. "Don't show him any mercy."

All watched intently as Eck and Oog slowly approached each other. They came face to face, crouched and eyed each other. Then, to the surprise of all and the consternation of Grag and Otho, the two little animals began to rub noses in friendly fashion. They gambled about on the floor, playfully chasing each other.

"Devils of space, they're playing!" Otho moaned in dismay. "Go ahead, Oog. Knock that moon-pup even crazier!"

But all the attempts of Grag and Otho to incite the two pets to battle failed. Oog and Eck behaved like long-separated brothers. Finally, in an ecstasy of happiness, Oog used his

mimicking ability to make himself into an exact double of Eck. Ears Gurney shouted with laughter.

"You've got two pets now, Grag—both alike."

"Which of them is Eck?" Grag boomed bewilderedly.

Oog solved the problem by returning to his normal form. He gambled up to Otho and rubbed against his leg.

"You're a disgrace, Oog," growled Otho disgustedly. "How you can associate with that miserable moon-pup, I can't imagine."

"All right, you two," Captain Future interrupted. "We have to blast for the *Pleasure Planet*." He called out the door of the *Comet*, before he closed it. "See you again, Hermit. I'll bring you a new power plant."

"You know damned well I don't want any of your constounded machinery!" yelled the old man.

As the *Comet* rose from the little asteroid, they saw that the *Hermit* was already using a big stone to demolish the television transmitter that Curt had built.

"Won't have any science on his world," Ears chuckled.

Grag took over the controls. The rockets blasted full power as the *Comet* laid a course through the crowded asteroidal zone toward the *Pleasure Planet*.

CHAPTER XVI

Pleasure Planet

The authority of the Solar System Government and its laws shall extend to every celestial body that revolves around the Sun.



THE framers of the Constitution of the Solar System Government supposed that that provision would insure the reign of order on every speck of matter in the System, be it planet, asteroid, moon or meteor. But they reckoned without the devious, subtle

ingenuity of a certain Jovian named Bubas Uum. He saw in that paragraph a gaping loophole.

Bubas Uum was a notorious inter-planetary gambler whose semi-criminal activities had already won him a term in the dreaded prison on Carberus, the moon of Pluto. He had started a hidden gambling resort in the jungles of his native world. But after the Planet Police raided it and he was convicted, he had decided not to defy the law. Evading it was more profitable and less wearing.

Through a dummy company, Bubas

Uum bought sole title to a small asteroid lying on the extreme outer edge of the asteroidal zone. He had it fitted with air and water creators, and built on it gambling palaces and pleasure gardens—all quite openly. The Planet Police had watched, ready to raid him as soon as he started operating.

Then Bubas Uum had sprung his surprise. Secretly he had had the little asteroid fitted with rocket tubes of gigantic power, enough to move it in space like a great ship. He turned on those tubes. Their blast impelled the little world against its normal orbit. Instead of moving on in its orbit, the little planetoid remained stationary in space—relative to the Solar System.

Thus the Pleasure Planet, as he called it, did not revolve around the Sun but remained in one position in space. And thus, according to the Constitution, the law of the Solar System Government did not extend to the Pleasure Planet. The Planet Police had no authority there. The only authority was the word of fat, wily Bubas Uum, its owner.

The Pleasure Planet was, in fact, a

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The Pleasure Planet was, in fact, a lawless little world in the very heart of the System. Gambling flourished there on a lavish scale. Illicit inter-planetary drugs could be purchased openly. The only restrictions were the discreet ones imposed by Bubas Uum's yellow-uniformed guards. From all the nine worlds came the rich, the bored, the dissipated, to enjoy themselves without restraint on the Pleasure Planet.

It was this notorious little world that loomed up now before the swift Comet. Curt Newton looked thoughtfully toward the asteroid, glittering

like an alluring golden globe in the starry heavens.

"Cut around to the night side, Otho," he ordered. "The City of Chance, as Bubas Uum calls his resort, is there."

"Still don't see just what you and Joan can do alone against that fat towin spider and Quorn," complained Ezra.

In the last few hours, Curt had again changed his appearance completely. Staining his red hair black, making his face white, pallid and weak-looking, and donning a silken suit made him look like a typical idle young Earthman. Joan had similarly made up as a sophisticated, spoiled terrestrial girl.

"Bubas Uum has the last two space stones that we must get before Quorn does," Curt explained. "It would be almost impossible to steal the stones from Bubas' vaults. He guards them with devilish ingenuity, as plenty of thieves have found out. The best chance for me to get the space stones is to win them from Bubas Uum—to gamble at his place till I take everything he has including the space stones."

"You got a great chance of breaking Bubas Uum?" Ezra snorted. "Why, everybody that comes to this poisonous little world of his goes away without a cent. His crooked games fleece them all."

"I know that," Curt admitted. "But ingenious as Bubas' crooked games may be, maybe I can be a little more ingenious."

THO began to laugh.

"I get it now, Chief. You're going to go Bubas one better—out-crook his crooked games!"

"That's the general idea," Captain Future said. "It's fighting fire with fire. I want only the space stones. Anything else I win from him can go into interplanetary charities, where it'll do more good than in that fat crook's vaults."

"What about us, Master?" Grag asked. "Don't we go with you?"

"Grow up, Grag," jeered Otho. "That would be a fine giveaway for the chief, to have you come clanking in there with him."

"While Joan and I are in there,"

Curt said to Otho, "I want you to try to find out where Quorn and his cursed freaks are, and what they're doing. The chances are that Quorn is trying to steal the space stones. That mustn't happen. And you, Simon. Will you check a scientific point for me? Remember our old atomic compression experiments? Will you see if you can deduce just how far that process could be carried? Grag will stay here and help you."

The Brain's lens-eyes fixed intently on him.

"Lad, do you mean that Thuro Thuum's secret formula is connected with a process like that? Why, it's fantastic!"

"Perhaps, but I fear it's quite possible," Captain Future retorted, his face somber. "You know now why I'm so worried, Simon."

"Yes," muttered the Brain. "That means whole worlds—"

It was as though a cold breath of alien menace blew over them. The others, puzzled, watched Curt and Simon.

"Coming round to the night side, Chief," Otho called from the controls. "We'll hit the City of Chance in half an hour."

"Land secretly outside the city's spaceport," Curt ordered.

The Comet was now flying low over the dark side of the Pleasure Planet. Starlit gardens and parks showed vaguely underneath. They passed over a gigantic atomic power plant. At the center was a cluster of colossal rocket tubes that projected straight out from the planetoid's equator, and were steadily streaming fire.

"Them's the tubes that keep the Pleasure Planet hangin' motionless in space," commented Ezra. "Confounded that wily Bubas Uum!"

"And there's the City of Chance," Joan said eagerly.

It showed far ahead as a mass of fairy towers, blazing with red, blue and golden light. Hotels, theaters, houses of amusement gathered around the central tower of the Palace of Hazard, as Bubas Uum grandiloquently called his main gambling hall. The Comet came down in a quiet park not far from the green lamps of the spaceport. Captain Future made sure the

little instrument he had fastened under his jacket was functioning correctly. Then he turned to the girl.

"All right, Joan," he said. "Remember your part."

"I've always wanted to be a spoiled daughter of the rich," said his pretty companion. "This is my chance."

"You know what you and Greg have to do, Otha," Curt said as he opened the door. "And Simon, work hard on that problem."

THE wizard of science and the girl agent stepped out into the soft, summery night of the Pleasure Planet. The air was balmy, spiced with scents of flowers and strange shrubs that had the faint chemical tang characteristic of synthetic atmosphere. Curt and Joan moved over the soft turf, skirting the spaceport that was crowded with passenger ships and luxurious space yachts which had brought pleasure-seekers from every world.

The two entered the City of Chance as if having come from the spaceport. A broad avenue, paved with mosaic marble from Uranus, and bordered by tall, graceful, feathery palm trees from Venus, led straight through the city toward the golden Palace of Hazard.

Richly dressed men and women from every planet elbowed Curt and Joan on the walk. Rocket cars purred softly through the streets. Music was gay from many of the pleasure-houses along the way, and there was a great amount of chattering and laughter. Under the splendid night sky of flashing and fading meteors, the brilliant City of Chance seemed indeed a magical place.

But Captain Future's keen eyes discerned the haggard strain on many of the faces, the false note in much of the laughter. He knew how many people came to the Pleasure Planet for an exciting vacation, and left it as paupers, stripped of all their possessions by the games of Bubas Uum.

"It's time something was done about this place," he muttered, "no matter whether System law is helpless or not."

Yet as he thought this, Curt Newton was careful to maintain the expression of a bored, sophisticated young Earth-

man. He and Joan looked around negligently as they approached the Palace.

"I feel lucky tonight," Curt said, loud enough to be overheard. "Let's try the radium-roulette game."

"It's pretty steep, even for you," drawled Joan.

"What if I do drop a few thousands?" Curt replied casually. "I'll simply televise Dad for more. The old boy will send it."

They were going up the steps into the splendid vaulted foyer of the Palace. Here and there stood kreen-eyed, brassy men in gold uniform, with holstered atom pistols—Bubas Uum's private guards.

"Welcome to the Palace of Hazard," an unctuous yellow Uranian official greeted them. "The radium-roulette room? Right ahead."

Curt Newton and Joan passed through other gambling halls. From the rooms of planetary slot machines, in which small-time gamblers were trying to make all nine planets appear in a row and win a big stake, they went through the "quantum-dice" rooms and their clicking tables.

The radium-roulette salon was biggest of all, for at this game was the highest play in the System. It was a circular silver chamber with a vaulted ceiling in which artificial stars winked softly. At the big table in the center was gathered a dense little throng. Curt pushed his way through.

"Do you mind letting us at the table?" he grumbled. "I want to play, not watch."

"Better not play now, Earthman," warned a Venusian onlooker. "There's some Martian here who's winning millions. You can't buck him."

"Nobody can scare me," Curt said disdainfully.

He reached the edge of the table. Then Curt received a shock. Ul Quorn and N'raal sat across the table from him!

THE Martian mixed-breed's handsome red face was smooth and composed as he played. In front of him was a stack of silver thousand-dollar chips, and a small pile of golden hundred-thousand chips.

Bubas Uum, the notorious pro-

priest of the Pleasure Planet, sat at the end of the table, watching UI Quorn. He was obese to a repulsive degree, his great puffy body overflowing his chair, his bald head and green-skinned face glistening with perspiration, his small eyes alarmed.

"Bubas Uum is badly worried," chuckled the Venusian behind Curt. "That Martian has won millions, and he keeps playing."

UI Quorn glanced up as Curt and Joan seated themselves. But he did not penetrate their disguises.

"One million even on Twenty-eight," said the Martian softly.

The thin, blue Saturnian croupier looked at Bubas Uum.

"Take the bet," said the obese Jovian in a harsh voice.

A few others around the roulette table laid smaller bets. Then the Saturnian touched the starting button. The apparatus of the game was a hemispherical cup three feet across, in the middle of the table. This cup was lined with one hundred small numbered pockets. At the center of the cup was a tiny pivot on which rested a minute grain of pure radium.

Curt Newton knew the principle of the game quite well. The pivot which bore the grain of radium was spinning swiftly. After two minutes, a mechanical control unlocked a neutron ray from the ceiling. It struck the grain of radium in such fashion as to smash just one single atom of the radium, producing alpha particles. Which-ever numbered pocket the particles entered was the winning number. It was, in theory, absolutely impossible to cheat in a game so scientifically contrived.

The alpha streak flashed from the radium grain suddenly, as an atom was smashed. And the little streak struck a pocket near Quorn.

"Number Twenty-eight wins," said the croupier dazedly.

A low murmur of amazement went up from the spectators.

"Pay the winner thirty million-dollar chips," ordered Bubas Uum harshly, sweat rolling from his chin.

The croupier pushed the platinum chips onto the numbered square on the table. But UI Quorn let them remain there.

"All thirty-one million on the same number," he said calmly.

This time the cries were loud and unconcealed.

"Thirty-one million on a single number! If the Martian wins two more like that, he'll win the Pleasure Planet itself from Bubas!"

"And that," Captain Future reflected tensely, "is just what Quorn is trying—to break Bubas Uum and get the Jovian's two space stoncs. The same game I came here to play myself, and he's using the same scientific means I brought, to make sure he wins." Curt surreptitiously touched the little instrument under his jacket. "We'll see if we can't change Quorn's luck."

CAPTAIN FUTURE laid a small pad of interplanetary banknotes on the table.

"Fifty thousand on Number Seventeen," he said loudly.

UI Quorn didn't even look up at him. The Martian was too sure of winning. As the croupier started the radium grain spinning, Curt pressed the little instrument under his jacket. It was a small, specially designed mechanism that could project a powerful magnetic field along a narrow beam. Magnetic force deflects alpha particles in flight. Curt meant to use that principle to win, as he knew that UI Quorn was using it. The alpha particles flashed.

"Number Seventeen wins!" was the cry.

A million and a half in chips was pushed on Curt's number. And UI Quorn's thirty-one millions were gathered by the banker. Quorn looked up, he and N'raia plainly amazed.

"They can't understand why his device failed that time," Curt mused.

Staring at Curt and Joan more closely, UI Quorn's dark eyes narrowed. Recognition leaped into them.

"Hello!" he said coolly to Curt. "Didn't know you at first."

"Glad to see you." Curt grinned. "It seems we're playing against each other, eh?"

"Place your bets," the Saturnian croupier was calling.

Captain Future and UI Quorn be-

gan playing against each other for stakes that meant the fate of worlds!

CHAPTER XVII

The Last Space Stones



QUIETLY Captain Future allowed a million in chips to remain on Number Seventeen. Not to be outdone, Ul Quorn placed a similar amount on Twenty-eight. The croupier pressed the starting button.

The radium grain began to spin. The crowd around the table watched in hushed, taut silence. None watched more closely than fat, sweating Bubas Uum.

Curt used his elbow to direct the invisible narrow-magnetic field from the instrument under his jacket, so the alpha discharge would be drawn into Number Seventeen pocket. He knew Quorn was using a similar field, so he made his own as strong as possible. The alpha streak flashed as an atom was automatically smashed in the radium grain. The streak flashed toward Curt's side—

"Number Seventeen wins again!" bawled the croupier.

"Pay him," said Bubas Uum in a strangled voice.

Thirty million-dollar chips were pushed on Curt's number.

"I'm letting it ride," he said coolly.

Quorn pushed out a mass of chips.

"Ten millions on Twenty-eight."

The crowd gasped. Again the alpha particles flashed. And again, drawn in by Curt's stronger, invisible magnetic field, they hit Pocket Seventeen.

"Gods of Venus, this Earthman has won nine hundred millions!" blurted a spectator behind Curt.

"Bring chips and pay him," Bubas Uum ordered, his voice rising to a shrill, knife-edged tone.

Guards came hurrying with masses of chips. There were not enough million-dollar ones. A mass of smaller

denominations was placed in front of Captain Future. Ul Quorn was glaring at him with pure hatred in his eyes. Curt knew that Quorn was cursing inwardly because his own secret alpha deflector field had not the power of Captain Future's and could not buck it.

"Let it all ride on Seventeen," Curt stated.

"Nine hundred million on one number?" gasped the croupier. "It's impossible!"

Curt looked coolly at Bubas Uum. "You've always bragged that no stakes were too high at the Pleasure Planet. What about it?"

Bubas Uum looked as though he were about to have apoplexy. But he finally managed to reply.

"I'll—I'll take the bet. You can't win again. But I can't cover the odds with cash. I—I'll have to put up the Pleasure Planet."

"I'm in on this play, too," Ul Quorn interrupted. He pushed all of his remaining chips forward. "There's over six hundred million here. It all goes on Twenty-eight."

"Gods of Jupiter, I can't cover that bet either, except with the Planet!" exclaimed the Jovian hoarsely. "The odds are fifteen thousand to one!"

Curt's keen eye saw Quorn's hand slide smoothly under his jacket. He realized the mixed-breed was setting his own magnetic deflector to highest possible strength, so it might overpower Curt's field.

"Maybe he can make it this time," Curt thought despairingly. "My own field's at its top strength."

There was nothing to do but go ahead. The croupier already had touched the starting button. The radium was spinning. Every watcher was wire-tense. This single play was for the highest stakes in history, for the Pleasure Planet itself. Yet only Curt and Quorn knew the real stakes—the last two space stones which held the mighty secret of Thuro Thoun! The neutron beam flashed down. As another atom was smashed, the alpha streak flared out.

"Look!" someone yelled wildly. "Seventeen has won again!"

It was true. Curt's powerful magnetic field had overpowered Quorn's.

Again he had forced the alpha particles into Pocket Seventeen.

"This Earthman has won the Pleasure Planet from Bubas Uum!"

But Bubas Uum scrambled to his feet.

"Guard!" he bellowed.

GOLD-UNIFORMED men came running, atom pistols in their hands. Bubas pointed furiously at Ul Quorn.

"Hold this Martian and the Earthman! There's something crooked about this. I just saw the Martian fumbling under his jacket!"

Captain Future, realizing the imminent peril of discovery, jumped up and reached for his own concealed proton pistol. He was too late. Guards behind seized him. Other guards had seized Joan, N'rala, and Ul Quorn. Bubas Uum waddled forward and tore open the mixed-blood's jacket, revealing a small, flat, quartz-lensed instrument.

"I thought so," grated the fat Jovian. "He's been cheating."

"So has the Earthman," retorted Quorn, glaring at Curt. "Look under his coat too and you'll see."

Curt's zipper-jacket was torn open, exposing an instrument similar to the one worn by Quorn.

"They've both been cheating!" Bubas Uum cried hoarsely. "Take them and their companions down to our prison. We'll teach them what happens to people who try to get crooked with our honest games."

Manacles of steelite were clapped on Captain Future's wrists. He and Joan, with Ul Quorn and N'rala, were hustled out of the radium-roulette room, down a narrow stairway to the sub-level basement carved out of the rock under the Palace of Hazard. The guards hauled them into what was evidently one of the cells of Bubas Uum's private prison. A rock-walled chamber without windows, and with a heavy steelite door, it was lit by one feeble quartz bulb.

The four manacled prisoners were fastened to fetters in the rock wall. Captain Future looked across the cell at Quorn and the Martian girl.

"You certainly scrambled the orbits for us all, Quorn," he said coolly.

"Why couldn't you have been shrewder?"

"I denounced you myself rather than let you win everything," stated Ul Quorn. "You will never get those space stones."

Curt laughed, though he did not feel mirthful.

"You're too sure, Quorn. You were just as sure you had killed me on your ship."

"That," Quorn conceded, "was a clever trick, Future. Maybe we could think up another like it to get out of Bubas' clutch."

"I know how far I could trust you," Curt said calmly. "There'll be no deals between you and me, Quorn." He turned to the girl. "Chin up, Joan. We're not blasted out yet!"

"You would be now if I had a pistol and could use it," snapped N'rala.

The door opened, and Bubas Uum waddled into the room with two of his guards. The fat Jovian's puffy green face was working with indignation as he surveyed his prisoners.

"So you would cheat, would you?" he shrilled. "You'd use your scientific tricks to swindle an honest radium-roulette game?"

"Cut your rockets, Bubas," scoffed Curt Newton. "Your game is crooked, and I knew it. You have a synchronized timing device built into your radium-spinner, so you can call your winners at will. But it wasn't good enough against the tricks Quorn and I used, that's all. Cheating a crooked swindler like you isn't a crime."

BUBAS UUM'S jaw dropped in surprise. Then a look of eager interest livened his flabby green face.

"How did you do it, Earthman?" he asked. "This new method of cheating you've worked out—if I knew that, I could be sure of absolute control over the winners at the game. I will make a deal for your freedom if you tell me the secret of it."

"So you can fleece more deluded people of even more money?" Curt sneered.

"He'll never deal with you, Bubas," interrupted Ul Quorn. "It's Captain Future himself you're talking to!"

Bubas Uum recoiled from Curt as

though he stood on the edge of a deadly pit.

"Captain Future!" he rasped in obvious fright. "What are you doing here?" he demanded nervously. "System law doesn't apply to this planetoid. You've no right to be here. I can have you executed, and nobody can do anything to me for it."

Curt looked at the Jovian with contempt.

"You fat green toad, I'm glad I came here. It's time this place was cleaned up."

"Future's trying to deceive you, Bubas," explained Quorn. "He didn't come here to investigate your place, but to get those two space stones you own."

"How do you know that?" Bubas Uum asked suspiciously.

"Because I want those space stones myself," Quorn admitted. "That's why I was trying to win everything you had, including the stones, since rumor has always said you wouldn't sell them. I will make a deal with you, Bubas. Give me those two space stones, and I'll fix up every gambling game here with such scientific tricks that you can never lose unless you want to. I can do it. You've heard of Doctor Quorn, the scientist?"

Bubas Uum considered.

"I'd hate to give up the space stones, they're so rare and valuable. I could torture all your knowledge out of you, Quorn."

"Torture a secret out of a Martian?" jeered Ul Quorn. "It's never been done in the System's history, and you know it."

"All right," Bubas Uum reluctantly agreed. "You get my two space stones, Quorn. But first you have to prove that your devices will give me absolute control of my games."

"I'll make sketches of instruments that'll enable you to control all your games," Ul Quorn proposed quickly. "You give me the two space stones, and you can keep me locked in here till you're satisfied my controls work. Isn't that fair enough?"

"It sounds fair," Bubas said cautiously. "If you're locked in here, there's no way in which you can trick me."

"Of course," Quorn declared, a

shadow of mockery in his eyes. "I only stipulate that you allow N'rale to return to my ship now, and that you give me a space suit, which I shall need for a certain purpose."

"Don't be a fool, Bubas," Captain Future broke in. "Quorn is planning something with those space stones that will put you and all the rest of us in his power."

"What could I do with a few jewels?" Quorn asked scornfully. "Ignore Future, Bubas. You know he's the enemy of your kind."

"I know," Bubas Uum muttered, "and I'm going to work out some way to dispose of him and his pals without having it traced to me. You draw your sketches now, Quorn, while I get the space stones."

Quorn and N'rale were unmanacled. The Jovian and his guards left.

"GO and wait in our cruiser with the freaks, N'rale," Quorn ordered. "All hell will break loose when Bubas Uum finds me gone from this cell."

"How can you go anywhere, with guards outside?" N'rale protested.

Quorn smiled. "I'm not really going out of the cell. I'm going into another universe. And when I come back—"

The Martian girl departed. The guards let her pass, as Bubas had instructed. Quorn, ignoring Curt and Joan, began drawing sketches on a small pocket pad. Captain Future watched helplessly. How was he to thwart the cunning scheme that Quorn had developed?

There was a sudden uproar in the distance. Bubas Uum came running in, disheveled and excited. Behind him were four of his guards. Bruised and battered, they dragged in Otho the android!

"Sorry, Chief," Otho panted as he saw Curt and Joan fettered to the wall. "I was down in Bubas' vault after the space stones. Like a fool, I let them take me by surprise."

"Fasten him to the wall near the other two," Bubas ordered furiously. "The cursed demon, he knocked three of my best men cold!"

"You'd better send out men to hunt for Future's ship and the other Futuremen," Ul Quorn warned. He

handed the Jovian the sketches. "Here you are. Have instruments made according to these designs and attach them secretly to your games. They'll do the work. You can pick your winners every time. Now how about the stones and the space suit?"

Bubba Uum, after doubtfully examining the sketches, brought in a space suit, and then handed over the last two space stones. One was brilliant red in color. The other jet-black.

Captain Future stiffened at sight of that black space stone. He could glimpse something tiny imbedded in its surface—something that looked like a single grain of ordinary Martian red sand. Curt knew that that sand-grain was the very core of Thuro Thuun's tremendous secret, the pivot on which Quorn's vast, menacing plot revolved.

Bubba Uum departed with the sketches, after posting guards outside the door. Quorn smiled mockingly at his fettered enemies.

"You're about to see my final victory, Future. That will be your last sight."

"I never admit defeat until the last hand is played out," Curt Newton said, with a coolness that belied his inward despair.

Quorn laughed. "The last hand is played out, and you know it. Watch me, as I wring the last of the ancient secrets from the space stones—and go where Thuro Thuun went two hundred thousand years ago to win the mastery of worlds."

Captain Future saw Quorn range the first six space stones in a row, setting apart the black seventh stone. Blue, green, white, yellow, violet, red glittered the six stones. Quorn brought out a tiny X-ray generator, turned its radiation on the stones, listened. Curt knew the stones were giving up the entire formula to Quorn. Quorn crouched, listening to the mental message from past ages. Finally he straightened triumphantly.

"The last of the formula!" he exclaimed. "Now I can follow the trail of Thuro Thuun into the infinite!"

RAPIDLY the mixed-breed donned the space suit. Then he fastened to its belt a flat, disk-shaped

instrument of blue metal, from which sprayed tiny wires in a hemispherical cup. He smiled at Curt.

"I've had this mechanism ready for weeks, Future. Built it according to the directions in the first space stones. But I had to have the part of the formula in the last stones, to know how to operate the process safely."

"I know what that mechanism is," Curt retorted. "And I tell you that you can't succeed in this mad plan."

"Thuro Thuun succeeded ages ago. So will I!"

The mixed-breed was like a man transformed by overpowering emotion as he put on the glassite helmet of the space suit.

"What's he doing?" Joan whispered awedly to Captain Future.

Quorn, garbed in the space suit, reached and touched one of the switches on the back of the queer blue mechanism at his belt. An aura of golden radiance sprang from it, enveloping him. He seemed to flinch and shudder from the shock of that glowing force. Then an incredible thing happened.

"Devils of space, he's getting smaller!" yelled Otha.

Ul Quorn's space-suited figure was shrinking in size. He was now only four feet tall, and growing even smaller.

"It's impossible—we're dreaming!" Joan gasped.

"No, he's using Thuro Thuun's secret formula, which enables one to change size at will," gritted Curt.

Ul Quorn was a foot high, but he continued to shrink till he was only an inch high. A tiny space-suited pigmy, he ran toward the black space stone lying on the floor. They saw the infinitely tiny, still shrinking figure climb up on the seventh space stone and run toward the red sand-grain imbedded in it. Then the homunculus became too small for them to see.

"He's disappeared into that grain of sand!" Otha yelped.

"He entered the sub-atomic universe inside that sand grain," Captain Future explained hoarsely.

Otha stared. "You mean—that the speculations of the old scientists were right—that there exist sub-atomic uni-

verses, each atom of which is—a miniature solar system?"

Curt nodded, his face drawn and haggard.

"Yes. That sand grain is a tiny galaxy of such atomic systems. Thuro Thun long ago found the secret of changing size. He went down into that sub-atomic galaxy. Now Ul Quorn has used the old Martian's secret to follow him down into that tiny galaxy. Quorn means to unlock a forgotten threat in that miniature universe."

CHAPTER XVIII

The Subuniverse



READILY Captain Future understood the malefic possibilities of the situation, while Otho or Joan were completely baffled. But they read in his drawn face the desperate nature of the peril.

"What can we do?" Joan whispered.

"If I could also get the whole formula from those space stones and build a size-changing mechanism like Queen's, I could go after him into that atomic galaxy," Curt declared.

Joan paled. "That would be awful—to go down into another universe, and risk all its unguessable dangers."

"No use worrying about it, for we're chained here, and we'll soon be quietly murdered by Bubas Uum," Curt muttered. "And Quorn will come back from the sand-grain universe, with—"

"Curse it, if I could just get my hands out of these manacles!" swore Otho, twisting furiously.

The android's words gave Curt an idea. Faint hope dawned in him. Maybe Captain Future wasn't counted out yet! They were hanging from the wall-fetters to which their manacled wrists were hooked, but their legs were free. Curt raised his legs.

Hanging by his wrists, he touched Otho's belt with his feet.

"What the devil, Chief?" said the android mystifiedly. "This isn't any time for acrobatic tricks."

"This particular acrobatic trick may get us out of this cell," Curt said rapidly. "Listen, Otho. If I could get the chemical oil that softens your flesh out of your make-up kit, I could use it on your wrists. You could slip out of your manacles."

"Blazing meteors, I never thought of that!" Otho cried.

"Hold still, while I try it," Captain Future said. "Have to get these shoes off. Can't grip anything with my feet unless I do."

Curt kicked off his low space shoes. Then, hanging by his fettered wrists, he raised his legs until he could fumble at Otho's belt with his bare feet. His toes worked feverishly till he got Otho's make-up pouch open. By skillful manipulation, Captain Future pawed out of the pouch the flat sprayer flask of pink oil he wanted.

Otho's synthetic flesh could be softened by application of this oil, then molded like plastic. The android took advantage of that phenomenon in making up his marvelous disguises. Captain Future meant to use the oil now for another purpose.

Holding the sprayer flask between his feet, he raised it up near Otho's fettered wrists. Curt pressed the bulb with his ankles, and a fine spray of the pink chemical oil covered Otho's wrists. Quickly the the synthetic flesh of the android's forearms began to soften to puttylike consistency. It would remain in that state for only a few minutes, but that was enough for Otho. He pulled his wrists and hands until they easily slipped through the handcuffs.

"Good work, Chief!" he applauded as he stepped away, free. "I'll have Joan and you out in a minute."

Otho had to wait a few minutes for the flesh of his wrists and hands to re-harden. Then, with a tiny tool from his belt, he began to work on their manacles until both Curt Newton and Joan were freed.

"Now what?" Otho whispered tensely. "The door's locked and guards are still outside."

"Make up as Bubas Uum," Curt ordered. "It may take them by surprise and get us out."

SWIFTLY the android, the greatest master of disguise in the System, used the softening oil on his head and body. He remolded himself into the puffy figure and face of Bubas Uum. Then, with his stains and dyes, he made himself the exact replica of the fat green Jovian.

"How's it look, Chief?" he asked in Bubas' voice.

"Diagnosing but good," Curt said quickly. He had been gathering up the seven space stones and thrusting them into his belt. "Now call the guards. Pretend you've been in here all the time."

Otho went to the little loophole in the door and called to the guards outside, using Bubas' harsh, shrill voice.

"All right, men. You can let me out of here now."

A guard peered in and seemed thunderstruck at sight of Bubas Uum. Otho stood so the guard could not see Curt or Joan.

"Why, I thought you had left, Master."

"You fool, you're seeing things," Otho snapped. "Open up!"

The guard wonderingly obeyed. As the door swung open, Otho and Curt leaped out on the two gold-uniformed men. The guards, taken by surprise, went down under hammerlike punches. Curt and the android dragged the stunned men in and locked the door.

"Now out of here to the Comet," Curt cried. "Lead on, Otho."

They hurried down the passage and up a back stair. Another guard at the top drew his stem pistol. He replaced it when he saw what seemed to be Bubas Uum leading the other two.

"It's all right," Otho said harshly to the man. "Stand aside."

They emerged into the soft, summery night of the Pleasure Planet. Hastening away from the brilliant Palace of Hazard, the three companions left the City of Chance by dark back streets. Soon they were skirting the space port, racing away from a sudden clamor behind them.

"Found out we escaped," Curt

panted. "Hurry!"

He grabbed Joan's hand, half-dragging her along. The Comet loomed out of the darkness. Without pausing to look back, they rushed into the ship.

"No time to explain now—they're after us!" Curt panted to Grag, Simon and Ezra. "Blast off the Planet at full rockets, Grag!"

The big robot jumped for the controls. Abruptly the Comet screamed up into the darkness. When it was clear of the planetoid's atmosphere, it zoomed out of the night-shadow into clear space.

"That's far enough," Curt ordered. "Hold her here and keep circling the Planet." Then he looked at the Brain, and his face was grim as he spoke.

"It's what we guessed, Simon—a sub-atomic universe, that Thuro Thuan entered long ago. Quorn's down in it now."

"What are yuh talkin' about?" Ezra asked, mystified.

Curt brought out the seven space stones. He pointed to the black jewel on the face of which was imbedded the red sand-grain.

"A tiny universe is in that grain of sand, Ezra. And a sleeping threat lies in it. Quorn's trying to unloose it for his own purpose. He's down there, in that sand grain, this very minute. He mustn't succeed. Which means that I have to go after him."

"Are you crazy, to talk about goin' into a sand grain?" Ezra Gurney blurted.

PAYING no attention to the old man's bewilderment, Captain Future was ranging the first six space stones on the laboratory table of the cabin, beneath a swinging X-ray projector.

"These six stones contain Thuro Thuan's mental record of how he went down into the sand grain universe," Curt muttered abstractedly. "The seventh stone contains the sand grain itself. First we've got to hear the formula of Thuro Thuan—all of it, at last."

He started the hard radiation pouring down on the space stones, one after another. As the superpowerful radiation hit the gems, it seemed to all of them that the mental voice of the long-

dead Martian scientist was speaking clearly in their mind. A section of his message was coming from each of the six stones.

"I, Thuro Thuum, am a scientist of Mars. Our world is dying, our civilization withering. I sought to find a new universe—a sub-atomic solar system—to which we could migrate. Having found a way to increase or decrease size at will, I believed there must be many habitable sub-atomic planets in the atoms of our world. With the aid of my discovery, I became small and went down into a grain of desert sand. As I had expected, it contained a whole galaxy of atomic systems. But only one of them, the system of a great red sun, was habitable.

"I found peril there, for the red sun's worlds were inhabited by atomic people who desired to migrate upward—into our System! Thus had I put my own people in danger, for the atomites tormented me to lead them back whence I came. I pretended to agree, and said I would return with many such mechanisms as I wore. By thus beguiling them, I prevailed on them to let me go. When I returned, I resolved never again to unlock that danger. It would be better for my people to struggle against the death of their world than to risk being crowded off it.

"Naturally I do not wish to destroy my great discovery, and therefore do I put it into these stones. It may be that in some future day the people of my world will face absolute disaster. Through this formula, they may take refuge in some different sub-atomic universe. Great care will have to be employed in selecting a world, however. In order to enter the infinitesimal, it was necessary for me to slow the rotation and revolution of every celestial body in the grain of sand. Since their days and years are now much the same length as ours, the inevitable death of that universe has been partially averted.

"I leave my secret to be used only in the last extreme, in the hope that the atomic peoples have solved their difficulty. If they have, then the size of men may be increased or decreased by a simple process of force-condensa-

tion, or accretion. The sub-electron, the ultimate unit of matter, is really only a particle of force. It can be condensed or expanded by draining its force or adding force to it, by using positive or negative charges.

"A small generator must be constructed, which shall be capable of emitting vibrations within the thirteenth division of the eighth octave of the electro-magnetic spectrum. These are the carrier waves, which must be so projected by the generator as to enclose the subject and affect every atom of his body and clothing. These carrier waves must be used to transmit a pure charge of negative undimensional force to his atoms, when he wishes to reduce size.

"The stronger the negative charge, the smaller he becomes. Similarly a positive charge must be used when one wishes to grow larger. But should you use this process, be sure not to enter the sand grain universe. The pitifully crowded people of its last dying worlds, who begged me to lead them up into my own System, might use force to make you do so. Sad as is their plight, we cannot allow them to enter our own System."

CAPTAIN FUTURE switched off the X-ray projector and looked around at the faces of Joan, Kara, and the three Futaremen.

"Now you know Thuro Thuum's story," Curt declared. "The irony of it! He went down into the sub-universe, looking for worlds to lead his people to. Instead, he found worlds whose people were in even worse plight than his. No wonder he was afraid to use the process again."

"It's unbelievable," Joan whispered. "A race struggling against extinction, down in a dying universe in that grain!"

"And Ul Quorn is down there, too," Curt reminded. "His plan is perfectly clear. He can bargain with that wretched, hard-pressed atomic race, agree to lead them up into our System if they obey all his commands. And they're apparently in such dire straits that they'll do it."

"Say, it'll be easy to get Quorn then!" Otho cried. "He's down in the sand-grain universe. We'll just de-

stroy the grain with a Bash of force, and that's the end of Doctor Quorn!"

Curt looked at him sternly.

"It would be the end of the atomic race, too—a race that's making a pitiful last fight for life in a dying universe."

"No, we couldn't destroy them," the Brain rasped. "Thuro Thurn couldn't bring himself to a crime like that. That's why he must have imbedded the sand grain in the seventh space stone, hoping, perhaps, that some day he could help the atomic race."

"The only way to stop Quorn from playing on that wretched people's disaster is for me to go down after him," Captain Future said. "Simon, we've got to build a generator like the one Thuro Thurn's record describes. Quorn took weeks to build his. We must build ours in minutes."

"We'll try, Curtis," rasped the Brain. "Though whether or not we can do it—"

"There's nothing the four greatest scientists in the System can't do!" cried Ezra Gurney loyally.

They began a period of tense, unceasing toil in the laboratory-cabin of the Comet, as the little ship circled the Pleasure Planet. Captain Future, renowned wizard of science, and the three Futuremen, were racing against time and using every iota of their unparalleled scientific abilities.

Ezra and Joan Randall watched, silent and a little awed. They had seen the Futuremen work together before, but even they had never seen such swiftness, such machine-like cooperation and sureness, as Curt Newton and his three companions now displayed.

The disklike generator took shape on the laboratory table. Greg and Otha brought separate parts of it for assembly. The keen lens-eye of the Brain watched each detail of the process, and his rasping voice spoke in terse monosyllables, as Simon examined the work of Curt's flying hands.

"Now the test," the Brain muttered at last. "Hook it to the gages, lad. The carrier wave first. Good, it checks." *

"How about the force charge?" Curt asked. "Negative, Otha."

"Not truly undimensional," rasped

the Brain. "Tune it again."

Curt touched a screw lightly.

"Now?" he asked tautly.

"Checks," rasped the Brain succinctly. "It's finished, lad."

Curt straightened wearily, his eyes swimming bleakly from the hours of labor with the machine's tiny parts.

"I'm going at once," he rapped out. "Get me a space suit and an impeller. Greg."

"Why the space suit?" asked Ezra puzzledly.

"There's no air between the worlds of any universe, Ezra."

THE space suit was brought, and Curt donned it. He attached the disk-shaped generator to his belt. Before putting on the helmet, he spoke to the Brain.

"If I fail to come back, Simon, don't let Quorn emerge from the sand grain."

"We won't, lad," promised the Brain. "But be careful."

"I have an idea how to beat Quorn, if I can get to those atomic people," Curt said. "I can offer them a chance for life, without the necessity of their crowding our own System."

The others looked curious, but Curt did not explain. He had put on the helmet hurriedly, and was swiftly turning on the generator at his belt.



He felt the terrific shock of the negative force as the golden aura of carrier waves enveloped his body. The shock passed quickly. Curt looked around. The cabin and the people in it were all growing vastly larger. Then he realized that it was he who was shrinking.

Outward expanded the cabin walls. Hunger grew his friends. They were like giants now, bending over him.

He guessed he was only a foot high when he motioned Grag to put him up on the table, which seemed a vast metal plain. He was only inches high. He ran toward the black space stone. By the time he reached it, it was like a huge, polished black mound as high as his head. Curt knew then that he was less than an inch in height.

He clambered up on top of the smooth jewel. It was like crouching on a low, rounded, black hill. At the center of its summit was what seemed to be a big, jagged rock. It was the sand grain! Curt climbed up and stood on the jagged rock. He could barely make out the misty, colossal figures of his friends. They were shadowy giants, growing larger and more indistinct. The rock below him was expanding outward into a craggy plain. He knew he must be completely invisible to the others.

As he grew still smaller, the rock plain under him was expanding further, becoming rougher and rougher. He tumbled down into a small gully, which, a few moments later, was a deep abyss. The abyss deepened until he was falling. The rock walls had become tenuous, had changed into a swarm of widely separated, spinning globes. The whirling globes were the atoms of the sand grain, he knew. He was floating in space—interatomic space.

No, interstellar space! For he saw now that each atom was truly a star system, with worlds revolving around a central sun. A universe of suns and worlds swarmed in the sand grain. But it was a dead universe. The suns were black and burned-out cinders, the worlds barren, airless, lifeless, a universe that had long ago entered its last, dying phase. Then, far away across the galaxy of dead suns, Curt Newton saw a spark of somber red. One red sun still burned with faint life!

"That's it," he breathed. "The sun of the atomic people that Thuro Thurn described. And Quorn is there!"

He checked his shrinking, turning off the generator. With his impeller, Captain Future started projecting himself like a giant through the interstellar spaces, toward that distant red sun.

CHAPTER XIX

Giant from the Stars



MINUTE as he was.

Curt was still colossal in size, compared with the sub-universe into which he had come. But he meant to refrain from dwindling down to comparatively normal size until he was near the red sun

whose worlds must hold the atomic people Quorn was seeking. It gave Captain Future an uncanny sensation to float past dead suns that seemed hardly larger than his own head.

Then Curt stiffened as he perceived a great black mass approaching him from the red sun. At first he thought it was some voracious dead star roaming the interstellar spaces. Then he realized that it was man-shaped—that it was a man wearing a space suit! As colossal as himself, in comparison to the universe around them, the vast human body, as it came on through space, was growing!

"Ul Quorn," Curt gritted inside his helmet. "I might have known he'd see me."

He understood everything in a flash. Ul Quorn, on the worlds of the red sun, would inevitably see the vast form of Captain Future shrinking down into this sub-universe, and would realize he had been followed. Now the mixed-breed was advancing.

"Means to get me right here!" Curt mused swiftly. "That's why he's using his mechanism to grow larger. But he mustn't get any bigger!"

Turning his impeller on to full power, Captain Future hurled himself through the interstellar spaces toward the oncoming figure. Two giants, rushing between the dead suns, were about to meet in deadly combat! That, Curt knew, was how it must look to any awe-stricken beholders on the tiny atomic worlds.

Then there was no more time for thought. Quorn loomed just ahead, his anger-contorted face clearly visible through his glassite space-helmet. The mixed-breed was letting go of his impeller, snatching an atom pistol from his belt. The streak of white fire blasted toward Captain Future.

But Curt had already sent himself lunging to one side by a blast from his impeller. The fire streak grazed past him, struck a dead little star system behind him. It sent the dark, stardry, lifeless worlds blazing up in leaping flame.

Curt Newton had his own proton pistol in his belt, but he dared not use it to fire at Quorn. If he missed the mixed-breed, he might hit the tiny red sun and the worlds that lay beyond his ruthless enemy. And so huge was their comparative size, the pistol blast might well destroy the sun and worlds of the atomic people.

"Must stop him from getting bigger," Curt reflected.

He swung the tubelike impeller fastened to his belt, sent himself curving upward and then down again. The rocket blast of the impeller hurled him in a looping lunge toward the mixed-breed. Quorn fired hastily again, but Curt's unexpected curve upward had upset his calculations. He missed.

Next moment, Captain Future hit the mixed-breed's floating figure. They grappled there, two men floating in space between the tiny star systems of the sub-atomic universe. Two unthinkable colossal giants, measured by standards of the universe around them.

QUORN hammered at Curt's helmet with his pistol, seeking to crack the glassite and let the air escape from the suit. Yet Captain Future, for a moment, made no attempt to resist that assault. He was fumbling at the disk-shaped size-changing mechanism which the mixed-breed wore at his belt. Quorn was already larger than Captain Future. He must not continue to grow! Curt's hand found the switch and turned it. The golden aura of force that had enveloped Quorn vanished. The Martian ceased to grow.

"Always knew I'd kill you some day!" Quorn was panting.

His voice reached Curt by conduction through their contacting suits. Quorn had desperately turned his pistol against Curt's breast, intending to fire and risk the danger that the atomic flash would scorch himself at these close quarters.

"No you don't!" Captain Future cried.

By a convulsive twist of his body, he raised his arm in time to knock Quorn's gun-hand away. The glaring bolt from the pistol flared off into space between the tiny suns. Curt twisted the gun from Quorn's hand by a cunning trick of *seper-ju-jutsu* Otha had taught him long ago. He hurled the pistol off into space, saw it attract a dead sun that was hardly as large as itself.

Quorn seemed to have gone mad with hate and fury. He tore at Curt's helmet, trying to unfasten it. Grappling as they floated in space, they were drifting toward a small, dead system that revolved around a tiny dark star. They blundered into that system—and shattered it! The worlds and their dead sun flew in all directions, smashed apart by the battling giants.

Curt knew he must end this quickly or they would blunder likewise into the system of the tiny red sun, and destroy the atomic people. He got his hand behind Quorn's neck, feeling through the flexible fabric for the right spot. Quorn was unscrewing Curt's helmet, but Future continued to press through the fabric, locating the exact spot at the base of Quorn's skull. Then he pressed hard through the heavy material.

It was the old Venusian nerve-stunning trick, a pressure upon a vital nerve-center that paralyzed all nervous activity and made the body absolutely helpless. Curt felt Quorn stiffen suddenly in his grasp. The furious attack of the mixed-breed instantly ceased.

"Devils of space, it was time I got him!" Captain Future panted.

His helmet was almost completely unscrewed. His first act was to screw it tightly again. Then he looked about. He and the unconscious Quorn were

still floating in space between the tiny, dead sun systems of the sand-grain universes. The one glowing sun was still near.

Curt impelled himself toward the red star, keeping a grip on Quorn. As he approached, Captain Future turned on the size-changing generators of both Quorn and himself, to make both of them shrink in size.

Six planets revolved around that last dying sun of the dead universe. Each world, Curt saw, was completely covered by a transparent roof or shield. He impelled himself and Quorn toward the biggest world. By the time he and the unconscious mixed-breed fell toward it, they were both normal in size, by the standards of the world on which they were landing.

"Maybe should have gone back to our System without risking coming here," Curt muttered. "But I couldn't leave these people without hope."

HE and Quorn landed on the transparent world-roof, the blasts of the impeller braking their fall. Curt dropped the senseless mixed-breed, and looked down through the roof. He saw that, even though shielded by the transparent ceiling, this was a frigid, dying world.

Bleak, barren tundras of drab grass stretched in the ominous bloodlike glow of the dying sun. Here and there were tiny frozen lakes. Far away, he glimpsed an ancient, towering black city of grotesque architecture.

"Dying, all right," Captain Future thought. "The last sun of a waning universe—so far gone toward death that its rays, even through this shield, can't keep this world or the others warm."

He glimpsed a door in the transparent roof opening, miles away. Small, swift rocket fliers zoomed up and rushed toward him.

"Now I'm in for it," Curt thought. "I may have got myself into a devil of a fix by trying to help these people."

The fliers rushed down on him, and landed on the roof a short distance away. From the enclosed craft emerged a score of men who wore thick, wadded garments against the bitter cold of the surface.

"A human race!" Curt exclaimed in surprise. "Long ago, some forgotten people of our own System must have come down and colonized this sub-universe."

The men were tall, fine-looking individuals, with thick, dark hair and large-pupiled eyes, and the whitest skins Curt had ever seen. They carried rods that he guessed were weapons. The eldest among them, a massive-faced man whose hair was gray and whose face was deeply lined with the years, spoke bewilderedly to Curt.

"You are another Giant from the Stars. We saw you fight and overcome the other one. Yet he said that he was the true Giant. He spoke this tongue the first Giant taught us."

Captain Future realized that this man was speaking to him in an ancient, great-sounding form of the Martian tongue.

"We should slay this new Giant!" one of the other men was arguing. "Has he not slain the true Giant who promised us new worlds?"

"Wait!" ordered Captain Future in Martian. "This man who lies at my feet . . . Did he promise to lead you up into a greater, younger system?"

"Aye, that he did," answered the old leader. "He said, when we asked him, that he was the Giant from the Stars, whose coming the ancient prophecy predicted."

"The prophecy?" Curt repeated. "You have remembered for so many centuries?"

"There was no other hope for us. Ages on ages ago, when the Giant visited our universe, we were dying out, for our universe was almost dead. He went back to his universe, but he had promised to return and lead us to new worlds. Most of us have hoped inwardly, though outwardly scoffing at the legend, for our savior did not return. We thought it the superstitious wishful-thinking of the ancients, but we hoped in our hearts. All we have done to save our race has served only to prolong its miserable existence, without correcting the fundamental cause—the death of our stars."

The pathos of it struck to Captain Future's heart. These courageous people had built a roof for their world, tapped the internal fires for warmth,

huddled together, though they constantly faced inevitable extinction?

"Only a short time ago came the man who lies at your feet," the old man said. "When we asked him if he were the Giant from the Stars, he said he was. He told us to make weapons, and obey him, and he would lead us into a new universe."

"He led, for he was not the Giant of the prophecy," Future explained. "He sought to take you into war and disaster to serve his selfish ends. The system into which he would have led you would have repulsed you, had you followed him into it."

A LOW wail of despair went up from the atomic men.

"Then our last hope is gone? Our race must die, despite all we have done?"

"No!" Curt Newton said emphatically. "I'm going to return with this man to my universe. But I promise you that before long your dead universe will become a vast new universe of countless young suns and habitable worlds."

They looked at him doubtfully.

"How can a mere man cause that?" the old man whispered.

"Trust me, for I shall do it," Future replied.

They looked into his steady eyes. The power that had won for Captain Future the trust of scores of different planetary races, won again.

"We trust you," said the old leader. "We believe that you are indeed the Giant from the Stars, whom we have long awaited."

Captain Future picked up the unconscious form of Ul Quorn, and donned again the helmet he had taken off in order to speak.

"Stand a little away from me, for now I return with this captive to my own universe," Curt said. "And you may be sure that you will not wait long before this universe of yours is revived."

In awe, they moved back as Curt turned the switches of the generator at his own belt and then Quorn's. The bright aura of force enveloped them. The transparent-roofed world, and the men standing nearby, seemed to grow rapidly smaller. Captain Future and

his senseless prisoner were towering up rapidly in size.

A powerful blast of his impeller sent them floating free from that little world. Floating out into the interstellar space of the tiny universe, they were two ever-growing giants. Curt moved rapidly away from the little red sun, to avoid all chance of harming its worlds as he and Quorn grew. Now he and his unconscious prisoner were again colossal in size, and the dead suns about them seemed but swarming specks.

Those swarming specks were condensing into glittering spheres—molecules! And the molecule spheres, drawing together into a solid mass, were forming solidity around them. He used the impeller to drive them upward, till they were in a deep abyss between walls of jagged rock. The walls were closing in on them with terrifying rapidity, as they continued to grow.

He scrambled up to the lip of the abyss, drawing Quorn with him. He stood upon a great mass of rock that was steadily appearing to shrink in size as the two men grew. The rock mass shrank until it was a boulder set atop a smooth, rounded black hill—the sand grain imbedded in the black space stone!

Captain Future slid with his captive down the side of that hill, onto a smooth metal plain that he knew was the table in the laboratory-cabin of the Comet. He and Quorn were now an inch high. He looked up and saw the huge figures of Otho and Grag, Era and Joan Randall, bending over him. He waved his hand to them.

A FEW minutes later, both Curt Newton and his unconscious prisoner were normal-sized men, as big as the others who crowded around them in the laboratory of the flying Comet.

"Chief, you brought Quorn back!" cried Otho exultantly. "What was it like down there?"

"It was a dying universe, as Thuro Thunn described it," Curt answered. "I have promised its people it will be restored."

"How can you do that, Master?" asked Grag puzzledly.

Instead of answering directly, Curt told them briefly what had happened.

"We've got Quorn and we're going to get those freaks of his on the Pleasure Planet," he declared. "With the evidence we have, and what those poor freaks will give to save their own skins, U Quorn is going to Interplanetary Prison for life."

"Let's kill Quorn!" Otho protested. "He'll always be a danger, for he'll always know that size-changing secret."

"No, he won't," Captain Future said. "Simon and I are going to take that secret out of his brain, by the mental eraser."

"Aye, lad, that would be a wise precaution," rasped the Brain.

They stretched the senseless Quorn on the table. Joan and Ezra watched fascinatedly as Curt and the Brain utilized the mental eraser, one of Captain Future's greatest inventions. The device could rearrange the neuron patterns which constitute memory in the brain, and thus wipe out any specific memory.

"That's done it," Curt said finally. "He'll remember everything he ever knew—except the secret of the size-changing formula."

CHAPTER XX

New Universe



HE touched Quorn's neck, to release the pressure on nerve centers and let the mixed-breed awake. As he waited for the prisoner to regain consciousness, Captain Future turned to the lithic, tense android.

"Otho, you and Grag rig up a big damper-beam projector, a hundred times the power of our small one. It shouldn't take you long. And, Ezra, call Planet Police Headquarters for a strong force to raid the Pleasure Planet and seize Bubas Uum and Quorn's accomplices."

"But Cap'n Future, we can't do that!" Ezra protested. "The Pleasure Planet doesn't come under System law."

"It'll be under System law by the time the Police get here," Curt retorted. "Ah, our friend is awakening."

Quorn, returning to his senses and realizing what had happened, looked as if he would burst into livid denunciation of Curt. Surprisingly, though, the mixed-breed folded his arms and smiled.

"You win the game, Future," he said calmly. "My congratulations—What's it to be for me—Interplanetary Prison on Cerberus?"

"Yes, Quorn," Curt answered. "You'll be sent to Pluto's prison moon for life."

"Life is a long time," Quorn shrugged. "I don't think any prison can hold me that long. We may meet again."

"Cerberus will hold you," Curt predicted grimly.

"The damper projector's ready, Chief?" Otho reported a little later.

He and Grag had built a heavy, cylindrical machine.

"Good. Turn its damper beam full power on that big rocket-propulsion plant of the Pleasure Planet."

Ezra slapped his knee in delight.

"I understand now! At last Bubas Uum's little hell-world is going to feel the law!"

They watched from the control room as Otho sent the invisible, powerful damper beam lancing down through space toward the flaring rocket tubes which kept the Pleasure Planet motionless in space. That beam of invisible force, tuned to inhibit completely the production of atomic force, began operating for only a few minutes. Suddenly the giant rocket-tubes of the planetoid ceased to flame. The damper beam had smothered the cyclotrons!

As they watched, they saw that the Pleasure Planet was beginning to move. No longer restrained from a natural orbit, it was drifting away, falling into an orbit.

"The Pleasure Planet is now revolving around the Sun, and therefore comes under System law," Captain Future stated. "When the Planet Po-

lies get here, they can take over everything."

"And one of the worst little bell-spots in the System will be wiped out forever!" Erag cried.

Ul Quorn had watched with the others. There was a ring of real admiration in the mixed-breed's voice when he spoke to Curt.

"Future, you and I together could have conquered the System. The praise they give you so unreservedly is all merited.

Curt Newton grinned faintly at the arch-enemy he had finally trapped.

"I don't mind admitting, Quorn," he said, "that you nearly had me under a dozen times. I'll never feel completely safe till you're out on Cerebus."

IN the laboratory-home on the Moon, weeks later, Curt Newton straightened from the labor upon which he had been engaged. A flood of sunlight penetrated the glassite ceiling and drenched his unruly red hair and tall figure. Then it glistened off a bulky, tubelike instrument suspended in a metal frame on the table. Captain Future raised his voice, calling into the rooms that opened off the main laboratory.

"Grag! Otho! Bring Simon here. I want you all to see this."

Grag came clanking into the room, carrying Eek upon his metal shoulder.

"Otho will have to get rid of that meteor mimic pet of his!" the robot boomed indignantly. "I can't keep Eek away from him."

Eek's body underwent an astounding change, metamorphosing suddenly into a fat, white little animal with solemn eyes.

"It seems Oog has fooled you again, Grag," chuckled Curt.

Angrily Grag dropped the meteor mimic to the floor.

"He's always mimicking Eek, and I don't know which is which!"

Otho had entered, carrying the Brain's square case. He put Simon down on his pedestal by Curt, and wrathfully turned on Grag.

"Can't you keep that damned moon-pup of yours away from Oog?" he stormed. "He's a bad influence."

"A bad influence?" bellowed Grag.

"Why, you thick-headed rubber doll—"

"Cut your rockets," Captain Future ordered. "I want to show you something. I told you that I had promised these people of the sub-universe I would restore their universe to life."

"Sure, I remember, and I still don't see how you can ever do it," Otho replied.

"I've been making a new type of electro-microscope, using Thuro Thuur's carrier wave principle," Curt Newton said. "It's strong enough to permit clear vision of sub-atomic particles."

"Say, that is something!" the android declared, impressed.

"Take a look through it at the sand-grain universe of the atomic people," Captain Future invited.

He had placed the space stone that held the imbedded sand grain under the bulky microscope. Through the instrument, they could clearly see into the tiny universe of dead, dark suns.

"It is an extinct universe," Grag boomed. "Nothing could restore it to life, Master."

"Now look at this little crystal cube," Curt directed.

He had placed a little inch-square cube of gleaming crystal under the microscope. They stared down at it, one after the other. Through the microscope, the crystal cube seemed to be another sub-atomic universe. But this was a new, young universe of tiny, flaming white suns and many planets.

"Now watch," Captain Future said.

He carefully picked the sand-grain from the black space stone and placed it on top of the crystal cube. From a small copper tube, he loosed a tiny flash of force upon the sand grain. The grain of sand was instantly fused into the substance of the crystal cube, entering into chemical combination.

LOOKING through the electro-microscope, they saw that the dark suns of the sand grain universe were now scattered amid the flaming young stars of the crystal-cube universe. The red sun of the atomic people was now surrounded by countless hot stars and warm worlds.

"By all theimps of space, you have given those atomic people a new uni-

verse!" Otho cried. "One that they can expend into forever!"

"It's a good deed that you've done, lad," rasped the Brain.

Curt smiled at the crystal cube.

WELL, their prophecy has come true at last. The Giant from the Stars kept his promise. He picked up the crystal cube. "I'll put this with the space stones in the trophy room."

"That's the biggest trophy we've brought back yet," Otho yapped. "A whole universe, eh?"

Curt took the crystal cube and the seven space stones into the heavily locked room that had been excavated from the solid rock behind the laboratory. He put the items down amid the strange, unfamiliar objects, each of which represented one of his past exploits.

When he returned, he found the Brain looking up with his lens-eyes through the glassite ceiling, at the great green sphere of Earth that bulked in starry space. Captain Fu-

ture stood for a moment looking thoughtfully up at it.

"They've no idea what you did this time," Simon rasped gently. "They know only that the Pleasure Planet is now under System law, and that a certain Doctor Ul Quorn is in Cerberus Prison for life."

"Better for them not to know," Curt breathed. "The North Pole signal didn't flash this time. They need never suspect the Futuremen were out."

The Brain eyed the white, icy North Pole of Earth. From it always flashed the red signal to Captain Future on the Moon, when urgent peril demanded the aid of the wizard of science.

"No, the signal didn't flash this time," muttered the Brain. "But it will flash again. As long as there are unscrupulous men to plot against the people, as long as dark evil spawns danger to the System, just so long will that red beacon call to us for help. And just so long, while we live, will we answer."

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