

GREEN HELL

ARTHUR K. BARNES

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GREEN HELL

By ARTHUR K. BARNES

Author of "The Emotion Solution," etc.

The Planet Venus Is the Fester Spot of the Solar System—and No Wonder, with Its Strange Chloro-men and the Whizzing Flies!

The compact metal-walled house rose on its four spindly legs, twenty feet above the spongy earth. Around it, swirling sluggishly, clung the eternal Venusian mist, dank and hot and miasmatic.

A figure resolved slowly from the fog before the house, a young man dressed in the thin rubberized garments of the

Venus colonials, the broad-soled boots that enabled men to traverse the many dangerous spots of steaming marshland. The young man stared keenly at the house, then withdrew a few yards into the all-enveloping obscurity.

From the rotting bole of a fallen giant cycad he drew a tiny portable broadcaster, designed to operate on a tight beam. The diminutive microphone was equipped with a "scrambler" which made low voice tones high, and high tones low, thus precluding any danger of interception of a message except by someone equipped with an "unscrambler."

The man spent perhaps five minutes calling and delivering a brief message, after which he returned the equipment to its hiding place.

Once again he came into view in the little clearing before the house. Panting heavily, he climbed up the steps to the narrow, encircling, porch, then paused to wipe the sweat from his forehead and take a last look around. It was young Ben Frampton.

"God, what a hole!" he muttered aloud.

He had left the sweet, cool Earth scarcely two months ago, and had experienced only a half dozen or so of Venus' week-long, dragging days and endless, bitterly cold nights. Already he was heartily sick of the place. Despite the temperature-regulating layer of carbon dioxide in Venus' upper atmosphere, the strangling humidity and man-killing

heat was almost too much to bear. The sub-zero nights could be combatted with furs and heat units, but the heat—God!

Nor was that all. Frampton despised the ever-present, sickly grey-green mists that throttled vision and choked the lungs. He never wanted to see again the scanty vegetation, the tall, lonely trees shooting high through the fog desperately striving to reach the sun, broad-bladed leaves spread wide to catch ever faintest seepage of the rare rays of sunlight. He was nauseated by the innumerable corpse-white fungi that sprang up every day from the damp ground, with their puff-balls popping incessantly to cast their spores about and propagate their nasty breed the more.

He hated the devilish work that went on in that strange place. And most of all he had a deep-seated abhorrence for the company whose name was printed in chromium over the door of the station—*Interplanetary Enterprises, Inc., Station No. 9*. That was what made the planet such a fester-spot in the System. Well, it wouldn't be for long, Frampton thought grimly.

He went in and slammed the door. Quickly he stripped to the waist and reveled in the dry coolness of the mildly refrigerated interior. The sound of measured footsteps came from one of the two tiny bedrooms.

"Old-timer," Frampton called. "I'm back again. Good news." He paused to sniff at the lingering odor of disinfectant in the air. "Did you have a chem-spray while I was gone?"

"Old-timer" Ellerbee, station manager, entered the living room. He was old, with a seamed and weatherbeaten face and mild blue eyes that always seemed to be seeing distant places and things. The upper half of his body was badly scarred, relics of a thousand battles and adventures in the wild, frontiers of the System. He nodded.

"Yep. No use making you sit and hold your nose, too. So I cleaned up while you were out."

It was necessary to disinfect the place thoroughly every seventy-two hours, else Earthmen would quickly succumb to the strange and malignant bacterial infections that swarmed the hothouse that was Venus, and against which Earthly bodies have built up no defense.

"Compound's full again." Frampton sighed. "Ten greenies. Natives brought in the last one while I was down there. I suppose we'd better call for a freighter."

"No hurry," said Ellerbee presently, his old voice calm and unmoved. "Guess I'll run down and look the new arrivals over. Feel like going out again with me? No need to if you're tired."

Frampton opened one of the misted windows, cleared it with one sweep of his hand, and closed it again, staring out upon the dead face of the fog. Monotony. It would have driven men much stronger than Frampton crazy in no time.

But old Ellerbee seemed made of phlegm and whipcord. Somehow he managed to stick it out; he had been here four years now. Frampton looked at his superior for the hundredth time and found no answer to the riddle.

"I'll go with you," he agreed. "Need the exercise." He started to dress again, then turned impulsively to the older man. "Say, Old-timer. I've never asked you this. But why are you out here in this hell-hole? You ought to be back on Earth, taking it easy, living in comfort, having—" He broke off in embarrassment at having broken an unwritten law. "None o' my damn' business, I know. If I'm being nosey, just tell me to shut up."

Ellerbee smiled slowly.

"No, I don't mind telling you. Do me good to get it off my chest, maybe—" He spoke evenly, quietly. "It was just a bad break, I guess. I was with the Interplanetary Patrol. For twenty-three years I served, in the ranks and in command. I captained a space cruiser, a fighting ship. For years I had the power of life and death over my crew, and I never misused it. We built up a reputation as a scrapping outfit. Not a failure on our record. Then when I was due for retirement and a pension, I made a couple of mistakes. So here I am grounded, on this stinking planet, engaged in the filthiest traffic in the universe." Ellerbee's voice held no rancor, no animosity. It was almost as if the man's spirit were broken.

Frampton understood in a dim way. Habitual salute, absolute power, is a strange thing; it can color and warp a man's whole life. The gesture is one fraught with meaning—

respect, admiration, recognition of superior ability, authority. The captain of a space ship is the king of a tiny world, an absolute monarch.

In his ability to handle the incalculable energies at his command, and defeat time and space itself in his dash through the very stars, he is a minor deity, a god. For such a one to be shorn of his glory with a single stroke of the pen is very near to murder. Frampton nodded.

Ellerbee's voice droned on.

"Even as a captain the pay in the Patrol isn't high. I had but little saved. It seemed the only thing to do was to risk everything to make a small stake in the few working years I had left. This was my choice." He shrugged.

Frampton understood this more clearly. For the shipment of greenies now gathered in the compound outside, Ellerbee would receive about ten thousand American dollars. Frampton himself would collect about a thousand. And the Company would make about a hundred thousand, he thought bitterly.

"But think of the risks you're taking. The climate, the physical dangers of the planet here. And suppose you get caught by the police. You'd spend the rest of your life rotting in prison or exiled to a living death in the mines of Mercury. Old-timer, why don't you get out of here? Now!" He'd become quite fond of the old renegade. He even felt he'd confide in him fully except for the old man's creed of

unswerving loyalty to his employer, no matter whom it might be.

Ellerbe smiled faintly, philosophically.

"Shall we go?"

Frampton led the way out, pausing to shut the door tightly behind them. As he started to cross the porch, there came a sudden shrill whine and a simultaneous clang of metal. Frampton flinched automatically, then grinned sheepishly.

"One o' those dangers I mentioned a minute ago," he said, "I never can remember that those damn' whiz-bangs are already past by the time we hear the whine."

He stooped to pick up a tiny, heavily-armored, beetlelike insect where it lay squirming on the porch after hurtling into the metal wall of the house. "Hard to believe these things can go seven hundred and fifty miles an hour. Faster than the speed of sound." The insect was about the size of the point of a fountain pen, and its armor was sufficiently sturdy to protect it from most natural hazards to be encountered on its speedy travels. It could puncture dangerously a man's flesh, or slice a nasty gash.

Ellerbe was already halfway down the stairs.

"There's a fly back in South America that leaves these whiz-bangs standing still. Supposed to go better than eight hundred miles an hour."*

* The deer-bot fly.

Frampton didn't bother to answer. Talking at length in the steamy atmosphere left a man gasping. Instead, he followed the older man along the path, which was lined at intervals with phosphorus-tipped metal markers. Presently the compound loomed mysteriously from the grey opaqueness, taking shape as a simple corral of electrically-charged wires in the form of a rough square. In it, sitting or standing motionless and silent, were ten of the strangest of all creatures to be found on any of the known planets of the universe.

These were the chloro-men of Venus.

Through some unfathomable quirk of nature, this nearly extinct species represented a curious link between plant and animal worlds. Averaging about five feet in height, they were only semi-vertebrate in structure, having tough cables of cartilage supporting their bodies instead of bones. Their skin was a porous, bark-like substance, at once flexible and unbelievably tough. About seventy per cent of their "blood stream" was a compound almost identical with chlorophyll, the element which enables plants to absorb the energy of the

sunlight and use it for conversion of carbon dioxide into starches and proteins.

The presence of this chlorophyll in their veins gave the chloro-men a greenish tinge—hence the colloquial reference to them as "greenies." They had eyes and rudimentary ears, but neither mouth nor nose, since they ate and breathed like plants, through their "skin."

For locomotion, they depended on a sort of flowing pseudopodal motion of the under parts; though they had arms, there were no true legs. They moved but seldom, and always slowly.

Since the upkeep of these strange creatures was almost nothing, only CO₂ and a few minerals being necessary, and as they were very enduring and could work for great lengths of time without fatigue, they were highly prized by wealthy Tellurian and Martian landowners as slaves. But laws had been passed, forbidding capture or sale of the chloro-men.

They were declared contraband, and violators of the anti-slavery laws were liable to severe punishment. However, once on Earth, the excessive sunlight so stepped up the metabolism of the greenies that their normal life span of two or three hundred years was radically shortened. So the demand exceeded the supply, and the price went up, and smugglers with daring and cunning made fortunes by slipping through the blockade with their illegal cargo.*

* Once the greenies were in the rich buyers' hands, the law could be defeated by one of several methods. Sometimes the registration of a dead chloro-man was transferred to the new unlawful entry; or a newcomer was attributed to the result of a union between two slaves (which occasionally actually happened) bought before the anti-slavery law was passed. The law did not operate *ex post facto*.

"Poor devils," said Frampton bitterly, as the two men looked over the shipment. Their soft eyes staring appealingly in bewilderment always stirred the young man's pity. "This is a rotten business, Old-timer."

Slinking around the outskirts of the clearing were half a dozen of the scaly man-things native to the planet, awaiting their payment with candy and cheap, loud-ticking clocks and gewgaws. They represented the only source of supply for the slavers; an Earthman would hardly know where to look for the curious chloro-men, and the terrific climate wouldn't allow him to penetrate the unexplored wilderness very far.

Ellerbee nodded equably.

"Sure. It's rotten. So what? I've got no choice, son. A man must live. And besides, I don't believe they care about it much one way or the other."

Indeed, they were strangely apathetic. Though they might prove dangerous if aroused, because of their invulnerability

to ordinary weapons, they seemed to be without any will or desires beyond those of satisfying bodily needs. When hungry, they made a nerve-torturing humming sound in a sort of sound-box located in the head cavity. Raising and lowering the pitch sufficed as a spoken language.

Frampton looked up as if striving to pierce the clouds, then listened intently. Nothing.

"Just the same," he muttered, "I think you ought to get out of here. No place for you."

Ellerbee finished paying off the shy natives, who giggled and grinned and made loud smacking noises as they received their candy bars, and stared in wide-eyed ecstasy at the other gifts the old man's generosity netted them. Ellerbee looked at young Frampton out of inscrutable eyes.

"That's not the first time you've said that, son. Mean anything in particular?"

Frampton frowned helplessly and turned away.

"No. Let's get back to the station. You'll be wanting to notify the Company to send a freighter out here." The cheap, rattle-trap space ship whose crew no company would insure. The space ship that would take the chloro-men to a strange world, if it didn't fall apart in mid-voyage, where they would live and die in slavery. The young man's mouth twisted with a sour taste as the two of them finished the inspection and tramped soddently back to the house.

Young Frampton awoke from a restless sleep with the roar of rockets in his ears. He hastened to a window, opened it to sweep off the mist, then peered out. It was late. Another twelve hours and the long night would be on them.

"Rocket ship, son?" called Ellerbee from another room.

"Yeah. Can't see a thing, though. Listen." The rhythmic thunder of the rocket-tubes became irregular, sputtered feebly, then roared out full again. Several times the noise abated and picked up. "Hear that? Looking for us, probably. That's a landing signal."

"Right. Probably the Company ship."

Frampton hurried out without dressing, clattered down the stairs and around to the rear of the station. Here was a huge tank, with a four-inch pipe leading from it into the oblivion of the mist. A lever was thrown, and the throb of an electric pump began.

A quarter-mile distant, invisible from the station, was the landing field. A gigantic skeleton-work of lightweight pipes surrounded it, thrusting high into the air, equipped with hundreds of tiny high-pressure nozzles. Fluid from the big tank, a solution of calcium chloride, was pumped to the field and sent out in a lofty spray. The calcium chloride, with its tremendous affinity for water, quickly dissolved a vertical tunnel of visibility in the fog. Down this column of clarity the space ship could descend with safety.

The booming of the rockets, queerly distorted and muffled by the clouds, thudded louder and louder against the ear-drums, then abruptly cut off. The sudden silence was painful, and Frampton shook his head to clear the ringing in his ears. He swung back the lever, and the pump wheezed to silence. Fog would once again be stealthily closing in over the field.

Frampton returned to the station to wait for the ship's officers to arrive. For several minutes he stood on the porch, straining at the tomblike silence of this alien world, broken only by the whispered puffs of the fungi bursting their spore-balls now and then. No one came.

Frampton stirred uneasily. Old Ellerbee quietly joined him on the porch and spoke.

"Wonder what's keeping 'em. Hear anything?"

"Not a sound. Usually you can hear noises from the ship, or voices. But I haven't heard a thing. Could they be lost?"

Ellerbee shook his head.

"I checked the trail-markers to the field not thirty hours ago. Something's wrong. I think we'd better—"

His answer came instantly, the deadly hiss of a heat-ray that sizzled through the white mists and spattered molten metal from the wall of the station. The old man cried out

sharply, clutching his left arm as he lurched back through the door. Frampton dived in after him and slammed the door against a barrage of questing rays.

"Hurt?" cried Frampton.

Ellerbee didn't trust himself to speak. The sick odor of burning flesh stung the nostrils. As the old man's hand dropped away, an ugly, three-inch blackened spot was revealed high on his upper arm. He quickly opened a jar of sweet-smelling salve and slapped a generous handful on the wound. His eyes swam momentarily in tears of pain.

"That's better," he grunted. "Now let's get them!"

"Fine by me," ripped out Frampton savagely, rummaging in a locker for weapons. "What the devil's their idea, anyhow? Hi-jackers? If so, why try to murder us? They can have the damn' greenies for all I care."

The frightful hissing of several of the deadly heat beams sounded on the outer walls of the station. A front window fused and fell in, molten and steaming.

"They're taking no chances on being identified. If they were, the whole universe couldn't hold 'em. If the Patrol didn't run 'em down, the Company certainly would." Ellerbee turned, then looked at Frampton, mildly appalled. "Are those all the weapons you could find?"

In the young man's hands were four heat-ray pistols and one of the cumbersome but deadly single-shot cathode projectors, with half a dozen charges.

"Not prepared for a siege, are we?" Frampton smiled wryly.

The old man shrugged with fatalistic calm.

"Well, let's get to work with what we have."

Things began to hum. Every movement, every vague shape that wavered in the mist outside was the recipient of a red-hot blast. Every window, every aperture in the station walls, was a target for the raiders. Men screamed in agony now and then, their cries flat and echoless and strangely remote. Once or twice the blinding, deadly cathode bolts whammed against the metal wall. Frampton shuddered. Almost any kind of a hit with a cathode was fatal, horribly so.

There was perhaps twenty minutes of desultory sniping, with no damage to either side. Then the attack was renewed with vicious intensity *from above!* First intimation came to the defenders when the small skylight shattered in upon them in a shower of hot fragments of glass. Steaming bolts hissed in through the opening in the roof.

Ellerbee and Frampton scampered for the corners, out of the line of fire, gazing at each other with startled eyes. Ellerbee cautiously maneuvered himself to get a peep through the broken skylight. What he saw brought a chuckle to his throat. He beckoned to Frampton.

"Get an eyeful o' that, son!"

And Frampton did get an eyeful of the strange things that swooped down suddenly from the security of the mist, with faint swishing sounds, taking potshots at the station and skimming away again like an airplane strafing the enemy.

The bat-men of Jupiter! Strange form of intelligent life from the largest of the planets. Their six prehensile legs were now being used to manipulate a weapon of destruction. Built with sturdy frames to withstand Jovian gravity, but with thin, membranous skins and numerous air-pockets to make them a sort of semi-lighter-than-air creature, they were at home in the furious gales that rage eternally on Jupiter. Twin sheets of skin extending from front to rear, enabled them to glide with "wings" outstretched like the flying squirrel.*

* In the lesser gravities of the smaller planets, the Jovians found they could develop muscles that would actually move their winglike membrane up down, enabling them to fly awkwardly, instead of gliding.

A half-dozen experimental shots told Frampton the story.

"Old-timer, this is bad! They go too fast to get a bead on 'em. They're through a heat beam before it can do any damage!"

But Ellerbee, for the first time since Frampton had known him, had the gleam of animation in his eyes. Once

again he was commander, dominating, swift and concise.

"Think we're licked, eh? Get the searchlight!"

The young man gaped.

"Searchlight?" The station was equipped with a small but powerful spotlight, portable, which sometimes came in handy when emergencies arose during the long night.

"You heard me! The searchlight!" snapped Ellerbee.

"Yes, sir." Frampton slipped the coverings off the light and trundled it into the main room.

Ellerbee wheeled it into position, aiming up through the skylight.

"Stand by with your gun, ready for action! This is a trick I learned ten years ago."

As the next bat-man appeared from the clouds, Ellerbee snapped on the dazzling beam and pinned the strange creature in the air. To Frampton's amazement, the Jovian appeared to struggle in awkward panic, fluttering down the light beam in jerky circles, helpless.

"Get him!" Ellerbee's voice snapped in his ear, and Frampton went to work in earnest on his easy target. Soon the Jovian fell to the ground, twisted and smoking. A second bat-man was similarly brought down a charred crisp, a third, a fourth, a fifth. Then the aerial attack was halted.

Ellerbee switched off the spotlight and turned to Frampton, bright-eyed and triumphant. The old man was reliving the past. He was a fighting man once again.

"Phototropism," he explained. "The muscles of the Jovian's bodies are always taut, normally. When light falls sideward on an insect, it starts photo-chemical changes in one of the eyes, affecting one side of the brain. Muscle tension on the opposite side of the body is lost, and movement, whether walking or flying, will be in a circle. The Jovians, like moths, are not attracted by light, but are forced against their wishes to drop into its rays."

The siege settled down to a half-hearted sniping again. The station was gradually being sieved, and the refrigeration plant was working steadily to keep the temperature down.

"Doesn't seem to be many of 'em," Ellerbee remarked. "If the station walls aren't burned away, we may be able to hold 'em off until night, or till the Company ship arrives."

Hard on the heels of his remark, a faint, sinister humming made itself faintly heard through the murk. Louder it came, half-wail, half-moan, rising and falling an octave at a time.

"The greenies! They've been freed!" Ellerbee cried.

He paused a moment to listen intently. From long association Ellerbee could interpret many of the strange

voice-sounds of the chloro-men, even converse with them haltingly.

"They've been drugged," he said excitedly. "Turned against us somehow. Look!"

Framptom moved over to the front window. Just emerging from the twisting fog came a ragged line of the strange creatures, eyes rolling weirdly, arms waving. Skulking behind them for protection came a few hesitant figures of the hi-jackers.

Framptom raised his weapon, but Ellerbee grabbed his arm.

"No!"

Framptom wrenched free.

"What d'you mean: no! You can't be thinking about your ten thousand now, surely! They mean business. They're dope-crazy. It's kill or be killed, man!"

Ellerbee shook his head.

"That's not it. D'you suppose those fellows are risking the value of what they came here to steal? Not a bit of it. Those greenies are hard as the devil to kill. They have to be literally cut to shreds. We've already burned out one heat-ray gun. It'll take two more probably to stop that advance."

Framptom stared at the deliberate advance, ponderous and inevitable as a Juggernaut.

"Then what—"

Ellerbee cut him off, began speaking rapidly in brittle, to-the-point phrases. As the younger man listened, admiration and respect brightened on his face. When the old man finished, Frampton whirled like a cat.

"I got it," he snapped, and ran for the rear of the house. He found time to wonder fleetingly how he had ever thought Ellerbee a broken and pitiable creature.

In a small storeroom he seized the last remaining keg of salt under one muscular arm and scrambled through a window onto the encircling balcony. A narrow catwalk ran from the balcony to the big calcium chloride tank, and he ran across recklessly. Quickly tapping the keg, he dumped its contents into the tank, then hurried down a ladder to the ground.

The wicked hiss of an adversary's heat-ray greeted him, coming so close he felt the singe of its passage. He ducked behind the tank for safety. For a minute the two of them played a cat-and-mouse game about the tank, but Frampton was wild at every second's delay. Desperately he jumped into the clear to duel it out with his opponent. Then, from above and behind, came the snap and thunderclap of a cathode bolt as it ripped past his shoulder. Electricity transmitted on ionized air hurled him to the damp soil, left him momentarily dazed, paralyzed.

He glanced behind him painfully. Old Ellerbee had deserted his post to cover his young partner. He pointed

silently with the muzzle of his gun to the dead and twisted body of the man who had out-flanked Frampton in the obscurity of the mist, and who had been about to cut him down.

Frampton shivered, and cold sweat popped out on his brow. He jumped to his feet without further waste of time and ran to the lever controlling the electric pump, threw it over. A half-dozen powerful twists shut off the flow of fluid through the pipe to the landing field. He unrolled the thick coils of emergency hose that hung on a prong beside the tank and ran back to the station.

In Ellerbee's absence, the chloro-men, with their slow gliding movement, had reached the steps already. Behind them, growing more and more bold, slunk the scavengers, unkempt, bearded outlaws. Frampton slipped underneath the station platform, aimed the hose at the horde of greenies, and opened the nozzle.

A gigantic stream of concentrated solution of calcium chloride and sodium chloride sprayed a blinding shower over them. They paused. The weird humming changed key. Frampton thought he detected a note of panic, of fear. And he smiled, half grimly, half pityingly.

The chloro-men turned to flee, obeying their near-dormant instinct of self-preservation, but they were far too slow. They turned a sickly, washed-out color. They began to shrink, rapidly sagging in collapse under the deadly spray. In three minutes they lay on the ground twitching limply, scattered green blobs of helpless cells.

With the first shower from the hose, the mist had thinned in a wide arc before the station, and the raiders, after a sharp exchange with Ellerbee in which one man had gone down with his face a hideous blackened ruin, quickly retreated to the shelter of the clouds. Frampton shut off the hose, opened the pipe to the field, and left the pump going. Scaling the ladder up the side of the tank, he quickly made his way back into the station. A triumphant Ellerbee, shook hands with the grinning Frampton.

"Boy! That got 'em, Old-timer," Frampton exulted. "Just as you said. But what exactly was it that struck them down?"

"Plasmolysis. You sprayed 'em with a salt solution much more concentrated than the solution in their individual cells. Exosmosis resulted, the water passing from the cell sap outward through the cytoplasmic membrane. The vacuoles in each greenie became smaller, and the cytoplasm shrank from the cell wall. They literally *wilted* before your eyes."

Frampton risked a glance through one glassless window.

"Dead?"

"Oh, no. That's the beauty of it. Those creatures are much more resistant than an ordinary plant. They'll come around good as new in a few hours. Plenty o' moisture in the atmosphere always, so they can easily refill their cells when the salt solution disappears."

The exultation of the defenders was short-lived, however. Made more desperate by approaching nightfall, the raiders rolled a felled tree into view in the clearing around the station. From its shelter two sultry, crimson beams played hotly on one of the stiltlike legs that supported the corners of the station.

The acrid odor of molten metal assailed the nostrils. The station began to quiver jerkily, then sagged heavily, at the corner as the leg snapped. Ellerbee and Frampton slipped and fell, rolled down the sharp incline into the corner where they bounced in a tangle of arms and legs as the house swayed, still supported on three legs.

The heat-rays outside began working on a second support.

Frampton grinned.

"Begins to look like the finish. Night won't be here in time to help do anything but preserve the bodies."

Carefully the two of them crawled up the slanting floor to remove their weight from the weakened side. Ellerbee's serene, faded eyes didn't even blink at the prospect. He gloried in this chance to die fighting.

"We can cross the catwalk and perhaps escape into the mist," he suggested. "Though if the Company ship doesn't arrive before night, or if we get lost—" He spread his gnarled hands suggestively.

"Just the same," said Frampton cheerily, "we're going to take that chance. Get moving, Old-timer."

Cautious reconnoitering failed to disclose any lurking figures at the rear, a circumstance suspicious in itself. But the second support in front was already buckling under the strain, groaning. So Ellerbee slid out the window onto the catwalk and moved quickly over to the tank.

Down the ladder he went, and what noise he made was covered by the throb of the pump, and by the bang and clatter of the movable furniture as it rolled forward and smashed into the front wall. Ellerbee vanished into the safety of the mist.

Frampton darted forward to follow, but as he did so, the vicious rip of a cathode-bolt slammed the air. Before his eyes the catwalk burst asunder into a dozen twisted fragments, and, striving desperately to leap the remaining distance to the tank, he fell.

The slightly lesser gravity and the spongy soil tended to break the force of his fall, but one ankle turned under him as he struck. Pain knifed up through his leg, and he bit his lips to stifle a groan. He was through.

"Run for it, Ellerbee!" he bellowed into the obscurity of the mist. "Don't wait for me!" Then he crumpled to the ground despairing as Ellerbee came at a clumsy run out of

the fog in a frantic effort to rescue his injured partner. But in vain.

Like sinister ghosts a half-dozen black-winged creatures materialized from the murk in a ragged circle about the two men. Their man-made weapons were held in readiness as they squatted in silent threat on the damp ground. Behind them, resolving into focus like a television close-up, came the leaders of the raiding party—black-bearded fellows, dressed dirtily and cheaply, with grinning white teeth and a predatory gleam in their eyes.

"Toss your guns this way," called one of them in gruff command.

Ellerbee glanced about sharply.

"You're going to murder us anyhow," he answered loudly. "Why shouldn't we fight it out? If you want us to give in quietly, give us some guarantee we'll not be burned down."

The raider's reply was instantaneous. He flipped up his gun and bored a sizzling hole high in Ellerbee's thigh. The old man dropped his weapon and convulsively clutched at the wound. Bitter curses came to his lips. The bat-men raised their weapons to finish the job, aimed. A thin scream zipped past, and another, and then a host of them. The metal walls of the drunkenly sagging station rang sharply in a devil's tattoo.

There came the *thunk* of tiny projectiles whipping into soft, membranous flesh, the buzz of a ricochet as they struck

glancingly off a thick skull. A swarm of whiz-bang beetles had hurtled blindly into the clearing.

The Jovians let out a series of hoarse yelps and took to the air as the whiz-bangs riddled their frail bodies. The dark-faced outlaws hesitated, then flung themselves to the ground in compact, curling balls, the only protective measure possible. Frampton seized Ellerbee about the waist, recklessly attempting to drag the two of them to the shelter of the mist, but it proved too much for him. The whiz-bang beetles had blundered their deadly way through the clearing and vanished before the two men had even reached the calcium chloride tank.

But as the raiders picked themselves up from the wet earth, and as the ugly, winged Jovians swooped back to rest, a shrill whine split the silence in ever-increasing volume. All activity was suspended in mid-moment.

Everyone recognized that shrill crescendo—the motor of one of the new centrifugal flyers, the stern of which contained a centrifuge potent enough to move a mountain, with millions of tiny rotors running in blasts of compressed air, millions of tiny tops generating sufficient energy to hurl the ship through space at terrific speed.

Ellerbee looked at Frampton in startled incomprehension, then at the still pounding electric pump. Frampton read, the thoughts as they passed in review in the old man's eyes. The field was under spray, and the new arrival would be able to land. Frampton had deliberately left the spray apparatus going; therefore he expected the ship.

Company ship? Not likely. The Company owned a few of the new centrifugal flyers, but they wouldn't risk one to the vagaries of the slave-smuggling trade. If not a Company ship, then what? Very few private concerns could afford them. Was it the Interplanetary Patrol? Was Frampton, then, a Judas!

Explanations were cut short by the sudden cessation of the centrifuge motor, the breaking out of distant battle, shouts and the crack and hiss of guns. This quit as suddenly as it began, punctuated by a deafening concussion and the far-off rain of metallic debris following the explosion.

"There goes their rocket-ship!" cried Frampton delightedly.

Raiders and their Jovian allies alike vanished toward the landing field.

"And there go the hi-jackers!"

Ellerbee clamped his jaws tight and struggled to his feet. The wound itself was not dangerous, as the heat-ray's passage cauterized it instantly. But the leg was weakened considerably, and the old man was forced to hobble along on one foot.

"And here goes Ellerbee," he said, half bitterly, half sorrowfully. He hopped away toward the mist curtain that shrouded the little clearing.

Frampton, also favoring one leg, jack-rabbited after his partner and gently sat him down on the ground.

"Oh, no, you don't. You stay right here," he grinned.

Ellerbee grimaced in pain.

"Kind o' rubbin' it in, ain't you, son? I didn't think you'd arrest me—"

Another spasmodic burst of firing sounded nearby, then footsteps sounded through the murk, approaching invisibly. Presently a squad of men appeared, wearing the uniforms of the Interplanetary Patrol. They were led by a lieutenant, who came to a halt before the two men on the ground.

"Lieutenant Howe reporting, Captain Frampton," he saluted, smiling.

"Excuse the apparent discourtesy, Lieutenant, but I find it painful to stand. You scattered those hi-jackers?"

"To the four winds, sir. A short wait should bring the slave-ship right into our waiting arms, and another link in this rotten traffic will be wiped out. Is this your prisoner, sir? Shall we put him in irons?"

Ellerbee lay face down. At the words he rolled over.

"Not at all," Frampton cried heartily. "This is my colleague, Ellerbee." He stretched out a hand and pulled the old man to a sitting position, then spun his fluent falsehood.

"He had himself busted out of the Patrol in order to work himself into the slave-ring. He's got a future in the Service."

Ellerbee and Frampton exchanged a long glance, in which Frampton paid silent and whimsical tribute to the creed of loyalty and that prevented him from revealing his true status before now. Old Ellerbee glanced down at the tiny token left in his palm when Frampton's helping hand had pulled him upright. It was metal, cut in the form of an all-seeing eye, mirroring the sun and the planets. The letters I.S.S. were embossed on it. The Interstellar Secret Service!

Ellerbee clutched it tightly and thrust his shoulders back. It was plain what that token meant to him—respect, honor, manhood, all those things that had been stripped from him four years before. His eyes were strangely misted as he looked around the clearing. The young lieutenant, Howe, clicked his heels and saluted smartly.

"At your service, sir," he said.

[The end of *Green Hell* by Arthur K. Barnes]