

Interplanetary Stories

WINTER
1933



HUGO GERNSBACK
Editor

WONDER

Stories
Quarterly

NOW
25
¢



"Interplanetary Bridges" by Ludwig Anton

*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook ***

This eBook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the eBook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the eBook. If either of these conditions applies, please contact a <https://www.fadedpage.com> administrator before proceeding. Thousands more FREE eBooks are available at <https://www.fadedpage.com>.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. IF THE BOOK IS UNDER COPYRIGHT IN YOUR COUNTRY, DO NOT DOWNLOAD OR REDISTRIBUTE THIS FILE.

Title: Exiles on Asperus

Date of first publication: 1933

Author: John Wyndham (1903-1969) (pseudonym: John Beynon Harris)

Illustrator: Frank R. Paul (1884-1963)

Date first posted: December 12, 2022

Date last updated: December 12, 2022

Faded Page eBook #20221223

This eBook was produced by: Alex White & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpCanada.net>

This file was produced from images generously made available by Internet Archive/American Libraries).



(Illustration by Paul)

The surviving Batrachs fought with each other to escape through the narrow doorway.
A bellow of rage came from Angus as the men rushed forward.

EXILES ON ASPERUS

By

John Wyndham

Writing under the pseudonym John Beynon Harris.

First published *Wonder Stories Quarterly*, Winter 1933.

This story is an unusual interplanetary tale. But it is even more unusual for the insight of the author into the possibilities of other races, alien to humanity developing in the universe.

Humanity, as our author shows, developed upon the earth because of its wonderful adaptability. We can stand, relative to other terrestrial animals, great extremes of hot and cold; thirst and hunger, privation and disease. Therefore we conquered the planet.

But there might come a time when our adaptability might be a disadvantage; and when creatures less adaptable and more fixed in purpose could overrun and even enslave us. How that could be done, in an unknown part of the solar system our author shows in this intensely exciting story.

Foreword

Whatever our private opinions—and they may differ a great deal—of the administration of Earth's colonies in the Solar System, we are, nevertheless, proud of their existence. Not only do we admire the men who founded them, but we are even prouder of the endurance of danger, hardship and discomfort by those who developed them. Few of us would care to spend even a week at a trading station upon Venus, yet many a man has worked for years in that eternal blanket of steamy mist, helping to increase Earth's comfort and wealth.

Not many of us would endure without protest a term of scorching by day and freezing by night upon the desert plains of Mars—that greatest of our colonies, so woefully mismanaged until the revolt of 2077, as to be like a stinging slap in the face of Justice. And still greater would be our trials if we should be forced to fight against the gravitation of the major planets.

Earth has cause, indeed, to be proud of all her colonies—all, that is, save one. The name of this one colony will be found in no directory; it is officially unrecognized. It is severed and will remain severed, probably forever, from its parent world. Its men hold no communication with us, and it is long since we have heard how they fared. A conspiracy of silence has closed down on its unfortunate existence, and one of our earliest—though involuntary—settlements is unknown to most Earthmen even by name. Its story is unique.

CHAPTER I

Misadventure

A violent shock threw the navigator of the *Argenta* forward in his chair so that he sprawled across his control desk. His two companions in the navigating dome staggered and slid across the deck plates. The clangor of a dozen or more alarm bells jangled throughout the ship. Angus McDowell, the chief engineer, made his way back to the desk, ruefully rubbing that part of his head which had met the wall.

“What the hell—?” he began in a mildly surprised tone. The third man, Joe Seely, scrambling from the floor, cut him short.

“Holed, sure as we’re living,” he exclaimed. “These ruddy asteroids!—where’s the damage, David?”

The navigator turned to look up at the rows of indicators mounted to the left of his desk. In the middle of the top row a red light was winking briskly.

“Guard room,” he reported.

“Hell!” Joe, who was officer of the watch, tore out of the navigating dome and they could hear his voice bellowing orders down the corridor as he ran. Angus strolled closer to the desk. His was a lanky, angular figure possessed of long arms and big joints. He showed no smoothly rounded muscular development, but those who had once tried conclusions with his tough, sinewy frame seldom wished for more. A long faced Scotchman, this, who had never known Scotland. The product of ancestors bred in the shipyards of the Clyde; inheriting their engineering tradition with their blood. His manner towards the navigator was slightly paternal.

“Serious, Sonny?” he asked.

David shrugged his shoulders. A few years in the service had already given him a degree of that fatalism characteristic of so many space sailors.

“Final for those who happened to be in the guard room. That indicator means that they hadn’t a chance to plug the leak. All their air was gone in two seconds. For the ship as a whole, not very serious.”

Angus nodded relievedly. “Surprising it wasn’t my engines. We do have a bit of luck—sometimes.” He paused before he added: “Think I’ll cut along and have a look at the mess.”

Angus clattered across the room, bending his head as he passed through the low exit. David returned to his calculations and corrections. No one was to blame for the accident. Approaching the asteroid belt, above the plane of the ecliptic, one could do no more than plot a course avoiding the larger, known fragments of rock, and trust to luck for the rest. Luck, on this occasion, had been less unkind than she frequently was.

Angus, making his way forward, toward the guard room, found a knot of men crowded around the entrance. Above the door, now automatically sealed by air pressure, a red danger light glowed steadily. Joe Seely was, with some difficulty, climbing into a space suit and attempting to bawl his orders above the continued clamor of the alarms. As the bells abruptly ceased Angus heard him say:

“Six men to bring the portable airlock. Snap to it.”

The six raced off down the passageway while he still struggled with the intractable garment. When, at last, the stiff folds had been tugged up and the fasteners securely fixed, he

picked up the air tanks and examined the dials. He dropped them disgustingly.

“Half pressure—criminal carelessness. Somebody’s in for it over this. You!” he roared, startling a near member of the crew, “new oxygen pack. Jump to it!”

He lifted the space helmet and, turning it over between his hands, examined it with caution.

“Hm. Appears to be satisfactory,” he admitted grudgingly.

Angus with a grin placed his big hand on the other’s shoulder.

“Now, don’t you get rattled, laddie,” he advised. “Gettin’ rattled never did a man any good. He forgets details if he gets all het up—and you only forget details once in space.”

For a moment Joe seemed inclined to resent the warning. Then he smiled back and nodded. Angus was an oldtimer and privileged. Besides, he had spoken the truth: Joe had been getting windy.

The party returned bearing the portable airlock. It was in the form of a hollow box built of steelium sheets, but it lacked one of the longer sides. Around the six feet by four of this missing part, it was heavily faced with rubber. In the side opposite the space was set a door. The men fitted the contrivance over the guard room door so that side flanges slid over bolts provided for the purpose. While they worked hard with spanners to secure it, another of the crew attached the pipe which would later exhaust the air. Joe watched fidgeting impatiently until the spanners were laid aside.

“Finished?”

“All correct, sir,” the leader assured him.

“Good. Give me a hand with this helmet.”

Half a minute later he was inside the lock. He made sure that all was in order and the door safely bolted behind him and gave the starting signal of three taps on the metal wall. The pointer before him began to back swiftly as the pump did its work. In a short time the pressure became low enough for him to open the guard room door and, with a rush, the remaining air dissipated into the vacuum.

Joe moved clumsily over the threshold and surveyed the room. It was not a pleasant sight. It was, in fact, far worse than he had expected. For one thing there had evidently been far more men in the room than was usual at any one time. Their lifeless bodies seemed everywhere. Sagging in their chairs, fallen forward across the tables or sprawled on the floor wherever the sudden going of the air had left them. Their faces were a grey-blue and their mouths lolled open to show grey tongues.

Their fingers were tight clenched as though in a last, despairing clutch at receding life, and their eyes, fantastically protruding, seemed still to stare at death. The eyes of some had left their sockets. From the noses and ears of many, little streams of blood had spurted to be frozen by the cold of space. Joe felt sick. It was not the first time he had seen men dead from exposure to the vacuum, but it was the first time he had seen them in such numbers.

He counted more than thirty—almost the entire corps of guards snuffed out in a single moment. For what purpose they had all been assembled at once, he could not guess. He pulled himself together and brought his mind back to the practical aspect of the situation.

“It’ll be tough work looking after the prisoners now,” he muttered.

He looked along the room and saw on the port side the three-foot hole which had caused the tragedy. Beyond, he could look out into space—a velvet blackness, pricked by distant stars. He turned to starboard in search of the corresponding hole and saw with a shock that there was none. He had never heard of a meteorite failing to pass clean through any ship it had

struck. It became plain that here was a chance in several million. The object must have been moving at a speed but little different from their own. Its force at the angle of impact had only, therefore, been sufficient to carry it through one side of the *Argenta*. A short search for the cause of the mischief revealed it lying beside one of the corpses at the foot of a stanchion. The stanchion, massive member though it was, had been badly bent by the encounter. Joe whistled softly in surprise as he looked down. Instead of the irregular lump of cosmic rubbish he expected, he found himself gazing at a dented, steelium cylinder.

"A message rocket," he muttered. "Now what the—?"

Bending down, he rolled it over and felt for the catch which would slide the message compartment cover aside. He found it and gave the necessary combined pressure and twist. The lid snapped back to reveal only a single sheet of paper which he snatched up hurriedly and stuffed into a pocket of his space-suit.

After a few more minutes of cursory examination of the room, he crossed to the wall and lifted down one of the emergency plates which must be carried in all rooms and cabins. Leaving this handy, he returned to the doorway and gave the signal taps for the admission of air. Then he hurried back to the plate and held it over the hole waiting for the air pressure to lock it into position with a weight of fifteen pounds to the square inch. It could not keep out the cold of space for the vacuum in that section of the double hull had been destroyed, but it would keep in the air and artificial warmth could be supplied for the time taken in repairs.

Some little time passed without result. Evidently there had been a hitch somewhere and again Joe began to grumble over the inefficiency of the *Argenta's* crew as he waited for the valve to open. At last, however, the needle of the wall dial flickered and began slowly to turn. Soon it became unnecessary for him to hold the emergency plate. He turned off his air supply and removed his helmet as the pointer neared the fifteen mark. Then he strode over to the door of the lock. He began to speak angrily as he opened it, but the words died as he stared at a pistol ominously facing him.

"Both hands up, please," said a voice quietly.

His helmet fell with a crash as his hands rose.

CHAPTER II

Revolt

Joe emerged from the lock and looked wonderingly around the semi-circle of facing men. They were short, large-chested men with brown faces and hands. The meaning of the situation struck him with an unpleasant jolt.

"The Martians—the prisoners," he exclaimed.

Thus did the widespread Martian revolt of 2077 affect even the *Argenta*, far out in space.

The man who held the pistol answered Joe.

"The Martians, yes, but it is you Earthmen who are the prisoners now." His speech was both good and fluent though, like that of most of his race, he retained the characteristic lilt.

Joe could see Angus at the rear of the group, towering over his lesser captors. The Scotchman was manifesting no little irritation:

"—lot of lousy sons of misbegotten desert rats. You'll see what you'll get for this, you—ugh." The speech ended in a grunt as a pistol jabbed uncomfortably in his ribs. Joe turned back to his captor.

"This is piracy. You know the penalty?"

The Martian smiled. "This is more than mere piracy—it is revolution. Everywhere the Martians are turning upon their oppressors. You thought that we were crushed. You thought that you had stamped out the last spark of our spirit when at length you caught Sen-Su and condemned him and us to exile. That was a foolish thing to do. Our plans were already made. By the arrest of Sen-Su you gained us more support and lit the fuse of the revolution. Every loyal Martian knew the date and the time."

As he finished, another group approached down the corridor. Joe could see that it comprised most of the ship's officers including David Robbins, the navigator. One, however, he missed.

"Where is Captain Briscoe?"

"Unfortunately, he is dead," admitted the Martian.

"If you killed him, you swine—" began Angus.

The other shook his head.

"We did not. He succeeded in killing two of us, but when he saw that we had really got the situation in hand, he shot himself. It was a great pity. There would have been no dishonor for him in surrender."

Joe believed him. He knew the old captain for a man of dogged pride; incapable of surrender while the means of death remained.

"And what's to be done with us?" he asked, hoping his uneasiness was not audible in his voice.

"For the present you will be confined in the officers' mess. Your crew is now occupying our cells."

By this time the two groups had joined and were moving on together. At the door of the mess room they halted. Each of the seven officers was first searched for concealed weapons and then passed in. Finally the door was closed and bolted upon a very dejected group of men. Only Angus retained the spirit to express his opinion of the situation: it appeared to amount to a withering blast of non-repetitive profanity.

"All right, all right," counselled Joe after a while. At another time he might have admired Angus' linguistic attainments, but at present they seemed unhelpful. "Just forget the Martians' ancestors for a bit—they're dead, anyway. The trouble now is, what are we going to do? We can't sit down under this."

"Do? What the hell can we do? I don't mind telling you it's the last time I ship on a ruddy convict carrier. What sort of filthy mess are they making of my engines, I wonder? A lot of stinking, bladder-chested—"

"Oh, cut it out. Have we got any weapons?"

David jerked open a drawer which he remembered to have contained a pair of pistols. It was empty. A search of the room soon revealed that the Martians had been over it in anticipation of their hopes.

"Hm, they're no fools." Joe noticed the door at the other end of the room. "Try that door, David."

David walked across and rattled the handle vainly. He shook his head.

"They seem to have caught us properly," he admitted. "What puzzles me is how they worked it. They can't have known that we were going to be holed."

"No. That must have been just luck," Joe agreed. "Judging from what the man with the gun said, it was all pre-arranged. The guards being wiped out meant that they caught us sitting instead of having to fight. But I'd like to know just how they got out."

As he spoke, he had been unfastening the space-suit which still encumbered him. He struggled awkwardly out of it and threw it into a corner. Torrence, the first officer, had made no comment since the calamity. Now he began to speak. Since the death of the captain, he became senior officer and, therefore, in command; none of those present had seemed to appreciate this, and his tone showed his resentment. He was unfortunate in that a peremptory knocking at the door cut him short halfway through the first sentence. All the men turned surprisedly. This seemed an unusual courtesy to prisoners.

"Unbolt this door at once," demanded a Martian voice while its owner rattled the handle.

David was about to call out that it was already unbolted, but, at a sign from Angus, he stopped. The Scotchman rose swiftly from his chair and lifted it above his head. He crossed the room and posted himself behind the door.

"It's not bolted," he called.

He braced himself, ready to crash the chair upon the head of the first comer. The rest prepared to spring for the fallen man's weapon and charge the door.

Disconcertingly, a voice addressed them from behind.

"Ah," it said, "a little reception committee. I thought there might be, so I took the precaution of entering by the other door."

They all whipped round to face a Martian who was accompanied by armed guards. Angus shamefacedly lowered his chair. The newcomer was short, even for his race, but his proportions were excellent, and in his carriage was a dignity utterly different from the frequent pomposity of small men. A slight smile crossed his clean-cut face at the sight of their surprise.

"A little ruse of mine," he explained.

"Who are you, and what do you want?" Torrence demanded curtly.

"My name, probably familiar to you, is Sen-Su. Till lately I was one of your prisoners."

"The Martian nationalist?"

"Yes, and no doubt you have all heard many unpleasant things about me—probably are wondering what particular form of torment I have in store for you. They have made quite a

bogey of me on Earth; I assure you they exaggerate. It has been a Governmental policy to malign me—Governments have to create thorough-going villains. In private life we should call them liars, but in public life they are propagandists.”

“Well?” Torrence attempted to make it clear from his tone that he was prepared to waste very little breath and time with a man of an inferior race.

“I have come primarily to express my regret at the death of Captain Briscoe. I assure you I regard it as a serious stain on an otherwise successful coup.”

There was no immediate reply from the Earthmen. They had not been taught to believe that Martians held to such a standard of behavior. In fact, it was frequently stated that no Martian knew the meaning of the word “honor.” David studied the little brown man and saw sincerity in his eyes. There was no mistaking the real thing. Moreover, many times in the past he had doubted that the Martians were such scum as Earth, in general, credited them with being. He looked around at his silent comrades and took it upon himself to reply.

“We thank you for that,” he said.

Angus, after a puzzled stare leaned over towards him.

“I believe you’re right, Sonny,” he confided in a hoarse whisper. “He means it.”

Torrence cut in with a sharp demand to know Sen-Su’s intentions. The other raised his eyebrows at the tone, but his voice remained even as he answered:

“That is simple. Our parts are reversed. For you, the fate which was to be ours: for us, the occupations which were yours.”

“You intend to maroon us on the planetoid, Asperus?”

As Sen-Su nodded Torrence broke out wrathfully:

“You won’t get away with that. All the ships in the Solar system will be at your heels. Far better surrender quietly now.”

Sen-Su smiled again, tolerantly.

“I see you do not yet understand. This is no isolated reversal for Earth. It is a fight for liberty. Everywhere, save on Earth itself, Martians have by this time risen in thousands, determined as only a persecuted people can be, to end Earth’s oppression. You came to Mars and found an old race—old, before yours began. We were prepared to be friendly, but you let loose your adolescent cruelty upon us. You could not understand that a people may outgrow the futilities of war and strife. You called us decadent and weak.

“This impression, colored with fictitious stories of our vices, was suggested again and again to all Earthmen, and, such is the immense power of suggestion scientifically sustained we became to your minds, monsters of depravity. The truth—that we were an old race, resting as a man rests when his work is done—was not allowed to percolate into your thoughts. You have disturbed our content; stirred us from our peace, and your oppression has meant our rejuvenation. Old Mars has had to arise in all her ancient might against alien barbarians.”

The first officer stepped forward with fists clenched.

“Barbarians? *You* call *us* barbarians?”

Pistols waved him back. Sen-Su shrugged his shoulders.

“If a demonstration of barbarity were needed, you have given it. You react like an animal.”

“But you cannot hope to subdue Earth and all her millions,” Joe objected. “For one thing, there are not enough of you.”

“True. And that is not our intention. For one thing, it would be as barbarous as your treatment of us. We merely refuse to let ourselves and our planet be further exploited for one-

sided gain. Now, I will leave you—I have important matters to attend to. I trust that I have made the situation clearer.”

The Martian party retired leaving an astounded group of prisoners behind them. The situation had indeed been made unpleasantly clear. Sen-Su’s manner and restraint in itself had been a shock to men who had been taught to consider all Martians as mere semi-civilized degenerates who should be thankful to Earthmen for introducing the strong hand of control. His moderation was a contradiction of all their schooling. Torrence expressed his ill-controlled anger in threats. Angus, for once, was silent. He looked thoughtful.

“You know, Sonny,” he remarked after a while to David, “I’ve got a feeling that there’s a deal in what the man said.”

David nodded his agreement.

“I know. I’ve got that feeling, too. Of course, we always have been told what swine the Martians are, but how much of that is just politics? Has any of us here ever really known the Martians?”

Torrence looked across and became conscious again of his position as first officer. His anger, moreover, had not abated.

“So that’s the way of the wind? Not only is our ship seized by pirates and our captain killed, but we have traitors among our own officers.” His voice was truculent. “Well, we know how to deal with traitors, don’t we, boys?”

He looked around as he finished the question, but the response was curiously half-hearted. Most of the men turned their gaze aside rather than meet his. Angus stared at him with a pair of cold, hard eyes.

“You’re a fool—but for that, I’d knock your rotten teeth and your insults down your throat together. I’m every bit as much against the Martians as you are, but that’s no reason for fooling myself with a deck of lies.”

“You’re calling me a liar?” Torrence rose.

“It seems to me we’ve all been hearing or telling lies about Mars, but that doesn’t say I’m backing the Martians. If somebody in the Solar System has to get a bad deal, I’m still going to do my best to see it’s not Earth.”

“You were talking sedition,” Torrence retorted doggedly. “You and Robbins, there. As senior officer it is my duty—”

Angus had crossed and stood over the other, his long arms swinging ready.

“Your duty is what? You miserable little half-baked, wooden-headed—”

Joe Seely hurried to intervene. He swiftly retrieved the paper he had stowed in the space-suit pocket and waved it at the rest.

“Say, here’s a bit of news for you,” he called loudly. “That thing that broke into the guard room wasn’t a meteorite—it was a message rocket.”

They all turned incredulously. Message rockets, as they all very well knew, had been banned by government decree for over twenty years.

“You mean to say the thing lodged aboard us?” David asked.

“I do, and here’s the message.”

Joe unfolded the paper carefully and laid it on the mess table. The others, forgetful of the brewing fight, came clustering round him.

“The fellow who invented those things ought to have been sent off in one himself,” said Angus. “It’s a safe bet they’ve wrecked more ships than they’ve ever saved.” He leaned over Joe’s shoulder and peered down at the sheet.

The date at the head was the fourteenth of August in the year 2052 A. D.—twenty-five years ago. For that quarter of a century the message rocket, having missed its objective, had been floating aimlessly in space, to end by causing the death of thirty and more good men. It was no wonder the devices had been banned. The message was brief, but plain:

“Rocket ship, RED GLORY (C. O. 1009), passenger liner bound from Earth to the Moons of Jupiter. Disabled in the asteroid belt, and wrecked by forced landing upon planetoid believed to be Asperus. 300 survivors. Radio out of commission. Send help.”

The signature at the foot read: *“James Stuart. (Captain).”*

Angus bent down to look more closely and assure himself that there was no mistake.

“Old Jamie, by the Lord. It’s a small system. Does anyone remember a rescue from Asperus?”

No one did.

“Then it’s odds on he’s there still—if he’s alive.”

“If they navigate properly, we should make Asperus in a couple of days,” remarked David.

“And, by the look of things at present, we’ll have plenty of time to make a search.”

CHAPTER III

On Asperus

The imprisoned officers crowded to the windows as the *Argenta* slowed for her landing by circling about Asperus. The planetoid, although larger than Eros, had been discovered later, possibly because its orbit is almost circular while Eros, traveling his very oval path comes close to the Earth at times. Another difference between them is that Asperus is a spherical body while Eros, strangely enough, is not.

The name, "Asperus," denotes, as it should, a world craggy and broken to the last degree of roughness, but it carries also a suggestion of barren severity which is entirely misplaced. On the contrary, vegetation is profuse.

As they watched the tumbled landscape far beneath, David gave such scraps of information as he could dig out of his memory. The diameter, he told them, was just under five hundred miles, though the density of the core was many times greater than that of Earth. The period of rotation was almost exactly twelve hours, and its year, 1,600 earth-days in length. Geographically he could tell only that it possessed two large seas, much broken with islands. But the men paid him little attention, they were far too interested in examining for themselves the world which must support them for an indefinite length of time.

Profuse is an inadequate word to describe the vegetation which clothes this pocket planet. They could see all the land wrapped in a green blanket from which, here and there, only the craggiest of spires pierced upwards in their rocky nakedness. Foliage sprang from every pocket of soil, bushes waved atop the most unlikely peaks and festoons of swaying creepers hung down from the ledges like green waterfalls pouring into the still denser growths below. Occasional gleams of water showed where steep-sided clefts had succeeded in trapping miniature lakes, and, infrequently, there occurred larger, shadowed valleys which could show level ground dotted with not inconsiderable trees. As the *Argenta* swept nearer still, a half-checked exclamation burst from Angus. He pressed closer to the window.

"What is it?" asked Joe, beside him.

But Angus made no reply. For the present he was keeping to himself the knowledge of a bright, metallic glint which had flashed from one valley. He marked the spot mentally by the queerly twisted crag which dominated it.

The ship, now traveling slowly, searched for a landing. A few moments later she was sinking gently to a green spread berth. Joe voiced the general sentiment as they touched.

"Well, we might be in a worse hole. There's certainly no desert here like there is on most of Eros. Even the mountains don't seem so high when you get the right proportions—nothing like Earth's mountains although they're so broken."

Doctor Cleary, the medical officer, surveyed the scene less kindly. It would probably, he thought, mean a lot of work for him; this transferring of species to an alien world was not always the simple matter it appeared. But he made no comment; optimistic men are healthier than pessimists.

An audible bustling began to take place about the ship. There came a clang as the exit ramp was lowered. They watched the twenty-eight members of the crew march out under an escort of armed Martians, and turned sharply as the door of the mess room was flung open.

"This way!" ordered a sing-song voice.

They were conducted first to their cabins where it was permitted, under supervision, to collect such personal belongings as they might wish to take, and thence to the open. Sen-Su, personally supervising the expulsion, regarded them negligently as they passed him, but as they stepped off the ramp, he gazed more intently and a line appeared between his brows.

"Fu-Tan," he called, "how many officers are present?"

"Six, sir."

"There should be seven."

The man addressed as Fu-Tan looked puzzled for a moment, then:

"The tall man, the engineer, is missing," he said.

"Find him at once."

It was a mystery how Angus had managed to slip away. Neither the Martians nor his companions had noticed his going. Fu-Tan raised his lilting voice in orders. The business of unloading supplies for the exiles was suspended while all but a handful of guards joined in the hunt. It proved brief, for the *Argenta* was deficient in good hiding places. An approaching hubbub in the corridors soon suggested that the escaper had been caught; muffled broadsides of blistering blasphemy tended to confirm the suggestion. Angus, still muttering and cursing, appeared at the head of the ramp and was hustled down. Sen-Su smiled at his angry face.

"No stowaways on my ship," he said.

Angus' reply was unprintable, but had the other looked a little more closely he might have discerned an unaccountable gleam in the engineer's eyes.

The unloading of food and medical supplies was resumed. Reports on *Asperus* stated that edible fruits grew abundantly so that the preserved food was more of a luxury than a necessity. When all the cases had been stacked, each man was given a broad-bladed, razor-edged knife some eighteen inches long.

The guards filed back into the ship. The ramp was withdrawn and its covering port made firm. A preliminary roar came from the rocket tubes. The *Argenta* lifted a trifle by the bows, then, with a blast of power, she was gone, climbing on a steep slant into the heavens. Gloomily the stranded Earthmen watched her shrink.

"Well, it can't be for long," said David, at length. "Once they find that Sen-Su's in circulation again, they'll realize what's happened and send for us."

"And a pretty pack of fools we'll look," returned Joe. "The marooners marooned . . . What the devil's the matter with you?"

Angus, to whom the last part of the remark was addressed, was emitting a series of explosive grunts, suspiciously like laughter.

"Well, for a queer sense of humor, commend me to a Scot. What's so damned funny about this, I'd like to know?"

Angus got a hold on himself. "Sen-Su thinks he's marooned us."

"Not a bad think, either."

"Yes, but he can't get away. I wasn't trying to stowaway. I got along and opened the draining valves. He's not got enough fuel left to get clear. Our job was to dump him and his bunch, and we've done it in spite of them."

"I'll be . . . So that was your little game. Angus, you're a genius." Joe slapped him on the back.

The spirits of the whole company rose. Even though they had lost their ship and been stranded, Angus had saved them from falling down on the main job. After a hurried

discussion, it was decided to put some distance between themselves and the valley. When the Martians should notice their supply dials, it was considered likely that they would head back there, and no one was anxious to try conclusions with a shipload of angry Martians. The next question arose over the direction to be taken.

"I suppose one way's as good as another?" asked Joe.

"No," Angus advised. "Down to the south of this I saw something as we came over, and I'm willing to bet it was the wreck of the *Red Glory* or some other ship."

"Taking a lot on yourselves, aren't you?" suggested Torrence. "I'd just like to remind you again that I am in command here." He looked round to see how this information was received. The men's expressions told him little. No one wished to mutiny, but if it came to a choice of leadership between a man promoted through influence, and one who had roughed the ether for many a year, they knew which to prefer. Joe Seely set himself to manage a tactful interposition with the result that the party moved to the south under the nominal leadership of the first officer, and the practical guidance of Angus.

Travel across Asperus was a curious sensation for Earth-bred men. Those with experience of planetary exploration managed to adapt themselves in short time to the low gravitation, but the novices continued to overshoot their aims again and again before they learned to gauge truly the amount of effort required. It was exasperating for these tyros to be carried sailing past their objectives by ill-judged bounds, but there was little danger of harm since descent seemed a matter of floating down rather than of falling. For half an hour Angus set a stiff pace, launching in a series of powerful leaps over such country as would have baffled all but the most skillful climbers had they had to contend with earthly gravitation.

He noticed as he went that the mountains were pitted with frequent caves, some obscured by screens of bushes and creepers, but others showing as stark, black holes in naked rock faces. The thought struck him that they might prove useful hiding places in case of pursuit. There was some grumbling from the rear about the unnecessary speed, but Angus knew what he was about. He was convinced that the *Argenta* would make for the valley where she had set them down, and his ears were wide open.

At the first mutter of distant rockets he gave the order to take cover and they crouched in the bushes, watching the ship as she swung like a silver shuttle above them. She sank slowly down behind crags they had already crossed. Angus gave the "all-clear," and moved on in fantastic, flying leaps towards the south.

Night fell with surprising suddenness. Angus had hoped to reach the wreck while daylight lasted, but Asperus' swift revolution whisked the shrunken, distant sun out of sight while the rugged landmark was still several miles ahead. They were left without light save for the sheen of accompanying asteroids and the glimmer of far-off constellations, almost unaltered. Travel over such country became well-nigh impossible.

Torrence suggested that the short night should be spent in one of the many caves, and Angus offered no objection. They had secured a good lead over the Martians and, even were their trail to be discovered, little or nothing could be done until dawn. One of the men reported a huge cavern a few yards back. Torrence found it and led them into the gloom; his sword-like knife ready to his hand.

Angus struck a match, carefully shielding its rays from the entrance. By the flicker they could see a floor some twelve feet across and so dry as to be dusty, stretching back into the

body of the mountain until it became lost in the blackness. The sides curved up into an arched roof five feet above their heads.

“Excellent!” pronounced Torrence briskly. “It is dry, the entrance is not likely to be discovered and it is easily defensible.”

Angus started to speak and then restrained himself. The first officer was touchy and would certainly take any objection as a new attempt to belittle his dignity. Nevertheless, the engineer was uneasy though he would have been hard put to adduce any reason for his misgiving. Perhaps he had inherited a lingering fear of those hobgoblins and gnomes who had, according to legend, so sorely harassed his Celtic ancestors. Whatever the reason, it caused him to lie close to the entrance. Soon the sense of disquiet passed and he, like the rest, save for the sentry at the cave mouth, was asleep.

He awoke with a start. His hand already gripping the knife by his side. From somewhere came the whispering swish of a faint, ghostly movement. He looked towards the entrance and half started up. The sentry was no longer standing silhouetted on the ledge. A faint shuffling on the other side brought him round, trying vainly to pierce the wall of darkness. Stealthily he drew his feet up and settled the long knife more firmly in his hand. A scrape and the clatter of a loose stone jerked his head back to the entrance, and he drew a sudden breath. Black figures were stirring; indistinct outlines against the dark sky. Moving shadows: not the short Martians he had half expected, but grotesque, shrouded figures, six feet and more in height.

CHAPTER IV

A Sudden Discovery

It was no time for inquiry; the vanished sentry told enough. Already a pair of the creatures were within the entrance. He could see them bending ominously above his sleeping friends. With whirling knife he leapt silently upon them. He felt the keen edge bite home and, simultaneously, there came a cry. A scream, but a scream no human throat could give; a mournful ululation with a harsh stridency which shredded the silence.

Confusion broke loose. The men sprang up, startled, yet bemused with sleep, and groping for their knives. The black prowlers retreated before Angus' circling blade, making headlong for the open. Twice more he felt the steel cleave deep before he gained the cave-mouth. The air sang in his ears with the shrill screams of alarmed and injured creatures.

He saw a half-dozen launch themselves into space as he came out upon the rocky ledge. Black forms which fell for a moment and then spread monstrous wings to check the fall. He watched them move in slow, powerful beats as the creatures rose and banked. Not for an instant did they check their desolate cries. Harshly the sound echoed in the shadow-hidden valley beneath and from further and yet further crags sprang answering cries like the wailing of funereal despair. A crescendo of screeching lament tortured the still night to pandemonium.

Mixed with the shrilling came the hoarser cries of striving men. Behind Angus a crowd of milling figures struggled and slashed in the dark, combating invisible opponents. With a stentorian command he dispersed the panic of their rough awakening and shook them into reality. They lowered their weapons and stood alert, breathing hard. From the dark, mysterious tunnel behind came the sounds of hurried feet mingled with those of occasional cries eerily echoing against the walls; sounds which grew fainter as their makers fled into the rocky heart of the mountain.

"What—what were they?" Torrence's dignity had fallen away and his voice was shaky.

Angus made no reply. Instead, he struck a light and counted the white, startled faces about him.

"Twenty-seven."

Nobody commented, but a number of heads turned to let their owners gaze fearfully into the blackness whither two officers and six men had passed to an unknown fate.

"And Davie, and the rest are at the mercy of these blasted things—whatever they are," growled Angus.

With the dawn they were able to examine the bodies of two of the assailants Angus had felled. They were bipeds, and that, together with the disposition of organs common to most mammals, gave the impression that they were at least semi-human. Other characteristics did their best to counteract the impression. The creatures were a dull, metallic grey in color, tall, thin and fragilely made. Attenuated arms, so long as to reach almost to the feet, were linked to the legs by enormous spans of membranous wings. Their only weapons appeared as cruelly curved claws at both the fore and hind tips of the wings. The size and shape of their half-human heads seemed to suggest an intelligence of some order. High enough, at least, to embarrass seriously a small party armed only with knives.

Nevertheless, Angus wished to lead a rescue party. He was dissuaded only with difficulty. The others managed, at last, to convince him that it would be more than foolhardy under the circumstances to attempt the exploration of the unlit caverns containing unknown numbers of the winged creatures. David Robbins, Doctor Cleary and the six men with them must be abandoned for the present, at least. When—and if—they should discover the *Red Glory*, they would have a stronghold, and—they hoped—weapons.

“The best thing we can do now,” said Joe, in conclusion, “is to get right along, before those Martians get busy. They’re sure to be on our tracks after that hullabaloo last night. We’ve got to settle with them before we can get a line on these flying screechers—the betting is that our men are safe for a while, if they’re not dead already.”

For an hour Angus led on, leaping prodigiously, climbing and scrambling through valleys choked with foliage and up precipices whose faces were hidden behind thick tresses of creeper. If he had any doubt of the direction, any uncertainty; no suspicion of it was allowed to appear. They paused only once. Beside a stream in one of the lesser valleys, a man caught his foot in something which rattled drily. He jumped back with a cry which caused the rest to stop short.

“What is it?” Joe called.

“A skeleton, sir,” the man reported.

Joe came back. He saw at a glance that the bleached bones were human. Tangled among the ribs, he caught a glint of metal and drew out a slender chain on which swung an identity disc.

“Will Fording, Chicago, Radio Operator, *Red Glory*, (C.O. 1009),” he read.

He picked up the rifle which lay beside the remains. It was utterly useless and caked in the rust of many years accumulation.

“Poor devil—wonder what got him?” he murmured.

He dropped the gun and slipped the identity disc in his pocket. The party went on its way slightly chastened. So far they had encountered no sign of native animal life beyond the grey creatures and a few insects. The radio operator might have died of sickness or accident—it was impossible to guess with the little they knew of this queer planetoid.

An hour later, they breasted the final rocky ridge to gaze down on a sight which brought excited exclamations from them all. Close to the far side of a valley somewhat larger than any they had yet encountered lay a space ship of antiquated design. Her untarnishable plates still glittered in the sunlight, but half surrounding her were deep growths of a sturdiness which told that it was many years since she had sunk to this, her final, berth.

Angus’ sharp eyes picked out the name *Red Glory* inscribed in faded letters upon her prow; beneath, half obscured by branches, he could make out a part of her Chicago registration number. But it was not the sight of the ship which had caused the party’s surprise. They had expected no less. Their exclamations were due to the fact that the undergrowth before the entrance port had been cleared away. A broad path led from the ship to several acres of cultivated plots beside the stream which wandered down the centre of the valley.

Joe, for one, felt a rush of relief. Since the previous night’s encounter he had been aware of growing doubts that any of the *Red Glory*’s complement could have survived.

“*Red Glory*, ahoy,” yelled Angus.

No voice replied though he fancied he saw a flicker of movement at one of the cabin windows. There was no wave of a welcoming arm such as he had expected. They hastened

down the steep wall and across the valley floor. Midway up the cleared track to the open port, a voice called them to halt. Before and behind them figures oddly clad in rough materials stepped from the concealing bushes. All were men, and all held rifles trained upon them. A young man—Angus estimated his age at twenty-three or four—stepped forward and approached with wary suspicion.

“Who are you, and where do you come from?” he asked.

Torrence replied, and the young man watched him intently as he spoke. He seemed slightly at a loss. As he began to reply a figure made its appearance in the entrance of the *Red Glory*. An old man who stooped, and whose white hair hung down upon the shoulders of his coarse woven coat, but who still gazed with keen eyes from a weather beaten face.

“Jamie!” cried Angus. “Jamie, don’t you know me?”

The old man’s face cracked into a smile.

“Aye, Angus, lad, it’s you all right. Come along in and bring your friends with you.”

With one hand he waved away the riflemen who appeared bewildered, but retreated obediently.

“Well I’ll be damned,” muttered Joe, “does he think we’ve just dropped in to supper?”

Angus grinned.

“You could never surprise old Jamie—no one ever has.”

Accompanied by the riflemen who had not entirely lost their suspicion, the party filed aboard the ship.

They entered the main living room to see a group of girls arranging baskets of strange Asperian fruits on the tables.

“Ye’ll be wantin’ some food, I doubt,” said Jamie. “And ye can talk while ye eat. We heard your rockets yesterday,” he continued. “The first rockets I’ve heard in twenty-five years—man, it was grand; like music.”

As the tale of the *Argenta* was told, more and more men and women and a number of children came crowding into the room. With some surprise Joe noticed the predominance of youth. There might have been perhaps thirty persons of middle age, and a few besides Jamie of advanced years, but the rest fell, almost without exception, below the twenty-four level. A number of them were introduced including the suspicious young man who had waylaid them. He, it transpired, was Andrew Stuart, son of old Jamie. Greta, one of the most attractive of the girls, was his wife.

Jamie heard their story through with little comment, but at the end he called Andrew to him and directed that a scouting party should be sent out. He looked a little worried as he turned back.

“We’ve got to keep these Martians away,” he said. “’Tis a pretty situation—they’ve got a good ship and no fuel, while we’ve got a useless ship, but there’s plenty of fuel in her tanks yet.”

“Have you got rifles for us?” asked Angus.

“Aye, and pistols—more than we can use.”

Angus looked surprised, but a look in the old man’s eye checked his question. He decided that Jamie had been doing a little gun-running as a sideline, and would not relish inquiries. Instead, he asked:

“What about your story? And what about these flying things? We’re all sort of mazed.”

Jamie began his history from the disablement of the *Red Glory*. They had run into a meteor shower and had been lucky in not being carved to bits. Happily most of their score of leaks had been small, but the radio had been demolished and the relief operator who was in the room at the time, killed. One mixing chamber for gases had been wrecked, putting a number of tubes out of action.

They had set about limping for the nearest approaching body which they had believed to be Asperus. And, thanks to the low pull of the planetoid, managed a successful, if ungraceful landing. Thereafter a number of message rockets had been dispatched without result. The exact number of survivors, including passengers and crew, had been three hundred and seven.

In those first days Asperus had seemed a not unkindly place. It produced the necessities of life in abundance, and there was a feeling that fate might have been far more severe. Then, a week after the landing, fifty of their number, many of them women, disappeared. A search party was sent out and never seen again. Up to this time they had seen nothing of the grey, winged creatures which they later came to call by the name of "Batrachs." A second search party met a similar fate and still more of the survivors disappeared until, at last, Jamie had taken a firm stand.

Every sunset the door of the *Red Glory* was closed and locked and remained thus until dawn; nobody, under any circumstances, being permitted to go out by night. The numbers had now been reduced to sixty-five, omitting children. The Batrachs made bolder by their captures had besieged the ship for several nights, but, finding it impregnable, at last abandoned the practice. For several years now no member of the *Red Glory* colony had set eyes on a Batrach.

The creatures were strictly nocturnal in their surface operations, and the men became no less strictly diurnal. From that time the little colony had begun to prosper. Jamie from his position as captain had slid to the status of patriarchal ruler.

"But these Batrachs?" inquired Angus. "You had guns to fight them with?"

"Yes, we had guns," Jamie nodded, "but so had the expeditions and they never came back. After all, laddie, a gun, even if it fires rocket shells, is at a disadvantage in the dark, and the Batrachs don't come in ones or twos, but in thousands. You were lucky last night; the only reason you are here now is that they didn't expect you. If they had been prepared—" He spread expressive hands and shook his head.

CHAPTER V

To the Rescue

Sometimes, Jamie admitted, he had thought of leading out yet another search party, but it was his duty to stay with his ship and protect the survivors to the best of his ability. There had been marriages. Jamie, as captain, had performed them, even his own. He had now become, he said proudly, not only the father of two boys and two girls, but a grandfather as well. The Batrachs, in his opinion were the only unhealthy things about Asperus; all the children of the colony had flourished though he considered them slightly underdeveloped muscularly by reason of the lesser gravitation.

Angus, seeing that the story was tending to become a family history, pulled him back to the subject of Batrachs. Couldn't Jamie give more details about them? What did they do with their prisoners? What was their level of intelligence? Did they ever use weapons? He extracted little. Jamie considered them almost equal to men in intelligence—save that they never used weapons; of their treatment of prisoners he could say nothing, for no one had ever returned to tell. His tone showed plainly that he thought no one would, but Angus had different ideas on that subject.

Talk was cut short by the return of a scout who reported that the Martians were encamping in the next valley. Thoughts of rescue were temporarily put aside. Sen-Su and his little lot must be settled first.

First officer Torrence again emerged from that oblivion to which events seemed to condemn him. He proposed a sniping party. The suggestion met with a cold reception which genuinely astonished him. Angus was particularly incensed.

"This is not a murder gang. Our orders did not extend beyond marooning a bunch of political prisoners. They didn't ill treat us when we were at their mercy—"

"They're nothing more than a lot of damned pirates, and the penalty for piracy is death."

Angus kept his temper with difficulty.

"That's as may be. If they had been real pirates, we'd now be so many corpses floating out there in space. I, for one, refuse to shoot them down in cold blood. They treated us well."

"They murdered Captain Briscoe."

"That's a lie!"

"This is mutiny." Torrence's eyes were gleaming. He turned as though to appeal to old Jamie, but Angus cut him short.

"I don't care if it's sacrilege—I'm not going to do it. Get that?"

Joe joined Angus. He, too, preferred mutiny to murder. Torrence glared helplessly. The odds were against him and he was wise enough to know that the men would back Angus in any dispute. He could do no more than give in with bad grace. The party would stay in the *Red Glory* and let the enemy fire the first shot, if shots there must be.

"It's checkmate," said Angus. "Sen-Su will realize that mighty soon. Jamie tells me there are plenty of supplies aboard and they couldn't get us out for months. My only worry is that if they keep us cooped up here we shan't be able to find out what's happened to Davie and the others."

All the men of the colony were called in for safety's sake. There was little over an hour of the short Asperian day remaining, and there was the risk of their being cut off by a party of

Martians. Once or twice glimpses were caught of the little brown men on the escarpment of the further side, apparently bent on reconnaissance.

“Cooping up” seemed to be the program, for when Torrence went to the entrance port with a rifle in his hands, the warning smack of a bullet on the steel side above him, caused his hasty retreat. Angus grinned when he heard of it.

“Teaching the sniper a few tricks, are they?” he said.

Night closed in without any further signs of activity. The port of the *Red Glory* was swung to and locked by old Jamie in the manner of one performing a ceremony. All sound of the outer world was shut away. The Martians could do what they liked; no portable weapon would be capable of making so much as a dent in the space ship’s armor.

Angus awoke with a hand shaking his shoulder. He looked up to find Joe bending over him.

“Blast you, what’s the matter?” he mumbled sleepily.

“Looks like a deputation. Get your clothes on and come along.”

Dawn had just broken and from the windows of the living room they could observe three Martians who stood looking towards the ship. They had reached the beginning of the cleared pathway and were plainly ill at ease. The central figure upheld a stick to which was attached a piece of dirty, white rag. It was obviously intended for a sign of surrender. But why, Angus asked himself, should the Martians wish to surrender? All three men had evidently suffered rough handling for their clothing was little more than a covering of tatters stained with blood. After a short consultation the two flanking men lifted their empty hands above their heads and all three advanced. Old Jamie hesitated a moment and then unlocked the port, beckoning to them to enter. The questioning he left to Angus who began with the monosyllable;

“Well?”

The middle man, looking askance at several pistols trained upon him, lowered his flag of truce and answered with the characteristic lilt:

“We have come to surrender.”

Angus frowned. This was not his idea of Sen-Su’s methods.

“And the rest of you?” he asked.

“There are no more.” The Martian spoke slowly and with a depth of dejection.

“Talk sense. There were ninety-seven of you. Where are the rest?”

“All gone. We were attacked. Great winged monsters which screamed fell on us out of the night. We shot at them and then we fought them hand to hand, but it was dark. There must have been thousands of them. We three got separated and they overlooked us or thought we were dead.”

“All the rest are dead?”

The Martian shook a sorrowful head as though he considered the indignity greater than death.

“Only a few. The rest they took away. In the fight they seemed flimsy, but their wings are strong. They lifted our men, two to a man, and flew off with them.—I don’t think they took them far. We came to you because”—he hesitated uncertainly, uncomfortably—“because you are our kind,” he finished abruptly.

Angus studied him hard, seemed satisfied, and nodded.

“We’ll go and see your camp. Maybe we’ll learn something there.”

Torrence demurred. "It's a trap. They knew they couldn't touch us in here, so they're getting us into the open."

Angus ignored him. The first officer's prestige had fallen to zero with the defeat of his sniping proposition. A dozen men, including old Jamie, set out to investigate.

The Martians had made a clearing for their camp, and when the Earthmen reached it they stopped to gasp aloud. The brown men had excelled themselves. It was the scene of an epic battle. Slaty, grey winged bodies strewed the place—literally hundreds had fallen in that fight. Not only was the ground a bloody shambles of hacked and twisted forms, but in the surrounding trees and bushes hung the corpses of those shot in mid-air. Lanky shapes, somehow unclean, their listless great wings stirring in the gentle breeze like patches of dirty sailcloth, while the steady drip-dripping of their crimson blood incarnadined the leaves below.

For some moments no one spoke. In Joe's mind arose the dim memory of old engravings depicting hell. Then Angus broke the silence.

"What a carnage. I've seen slaughter in my time, but this . . ."

The three Martians went forward and examined the dozen or more bodies of their men lying among those of the grey attackers. The wing talons had made them unpleasant sights.

"Sen-Su?" asked Angus as they returned.

They shook their heads. The leader was not with his dead.

Angus threw back his head and looked speculatively up at the caves in the valley sides. Below one a glimmer of something bright caught his eyes. He pointed it out to Jamie, and the old man brought a pair of binoculars to bear.

"The buckle of a belt," he said, "a broad, Martian belt."

Angus gave the order to return to the ship.

"You're not going after them?" inquired Torrence.

"That's just what we damn well are."

"But they're enemies and it's our duty—"

Angus stepped close to him.

"See here, you know too doggone much about duty. The Martians are human beings—they're our own kind. What's more, there are our own men to be found too. If you think I'm going to stand by without reason while men of Earth, or Mars, are in the power of these repulsive spawn of miscegenation, you'd better think again. Get that?"

Torrence wisely withdrew. Old Jamie proved reluctant to let them go, and sternly forbade any of his colonists to take part. He did his best to dissuade Angus though his manner showed that he had little hope of succeeding. Perhaps he spoke from a sense of duty, for when he found that the other was determined, he became lavish in his offers of weapons.

Rifles were discarded as unsuitable, but he insisted that each man should take several pistols since, in the unlikely event of success, the rescued must be armed. He pinned most faith to the long knives which would be invaluable for in-fighting. In addition, he insisted that all the available lamps be collected and affixed to the chests of the rescuers.

The *Red Glory* colonists collected to bid them farewell. There was a suspicion of envy in the eyes of some of the younger men, but Jamie's word remained law.

"Good luck, laddie, and God be with you," said the old man to Angus.

He watched the twenty-seven from the *Argenta* and their three Martian companions with wistfulness as they scaled the valley wall. That was the spirit which had taken the Earthmen all over the system. Confidence that they could not lose the game. The last figure turned and

waved a hand as it disappeared over the skyline. Old Jamie sighed. He wished he were young again, he'd show them—but he wasn't young. He was an old man, and getting sentimental.

He sighed again and turned back into the *Red Glory*.

CHAPTER VI

The Captives

David awakened to a species of bedlam. He could hear Angus' shouting voice making a bass accompaniment to an unearthly screeching. He heard the other men jump up from sleep and leap into action. He started up with them, fumbling for the knife in its scabbard by his side. His hand was upon the hilt when long arms wrapped around him, pinning his own arms. He cried out. Dimly he could see furious activity taking place in the cave-mouth; dark shapes which jerked and fought. He struggled against the retaining arms aware only that this was an attack, by whom or what, he could not tell, though his mind jumped to the conclusion that the Martians were somewhere back of it.

He opened his mouth to call again, but before the cry came something was wrapped around his head. A dark sheet of unfamiliar substance which, by its feel, sent a surge of panic through his nerves. He lashed out as far as he could reach with his feet, but a moment later they were snatched from under him and secured by arms which seemed to wrap themselves more firmly about his legs than any human arms could hold. He wriggled, trying vainly to jerk off the grip. Through the shroud about his head he could still hear the sounds of turmoil, but they were swiftly growing fainter, and he could tell from the motions of his captors that he was being carried away.

At length the sounds dropped behind altogether, and the silence of their progress was broken only by soft footfalls and occasional, high pitched cadences from his bearers. He succeeded in twisting his head in the folds which covered it, and began to breathe more easily. With a faint hope, growing ever fainter, he strained his ears in hope of pursuit. At last, hope died altogether. Perhaps all his companions had also been captured; perhaps they were dead; he did not know. He was only aware that all hope of rescue had gone.

For seeming hours the steady progress continued. At last his bearers seemed to find their method of transport inconvenient. They halted and set him on his feet. The arms about him remained inexorable, but the stifling cover was removed from his head. Thankfully he drew great breaths of fresh air, but he could see no more than before. The darkness was solid; unrelieved by the faintest glimmer. There came sounds of much movement near at hand. A few shrill notes such as he had heard before, and a grunt which might have come from a human throat. His heart bounded, and he decided to risk the return of the stifling cover.

"Hullo? Who's there?" he asked quietly.

An exclamation of surprise came out of the darkness.

"Cleary here. That's Robbins, isn't it?"

"Anyone else?"

There was no answer.

"I'm sure there were some others," said the doctor's voice. "But they're not here now," he added a little unnecessarily.

"What are these things, and where are we?" said David.

"Lord knows what they are, but we're certainly somewhere inside Asperus."

The captors continued to ignore their prisoners' talk. After a few minutes rest they picked them up once more and continued their way through the darkness. This time progress was less uncomfortable, since there was no smothering cover.

“Do you know how many there are?” David inquired.

The doctor did not.

“If we could only see what they’re like, I’d feel less uneasy,” he said.

They carried on a conversation in desultory phrases for some time. David had long ceased to struggle, and, as a result, his captor’s hold had insensibly loosened. With the utmost caution he pressed his arms a little outward. His hand was already near his knife; with a little more play he might be able to snatch it out.

The ruse began to work. The arms did not tighten with suspicion, but eased a little to rid themselves of the strain. David was beginning to extend his elbows further when the party came to a sudden stop.

From the darkness ahead came the click of something hard against metal, followed by a grating sound. Gates opening, David guessed. A moment later they stopped again and a similar series of sounds denoted another gate. Within a few minutes David began to see the first dim signs of reflected light on the wall where the tunnel turned, many yards ahead. He waited with a quickening excitement until he could see his captors. Two were carrying him, and, by turning his head, he could see two more dealing with the doctor. He took a deep breath and snatched for his knife.

The movement was a complete surprise. The first his bearers knew of it was that the blade was in his hand—it was almost the last they knew, for he cut at them savagely. Their screaming cries were deafening in the enclosed space. The hinder pair rashly dropped the doctor and hastened to their assistance. A second later he, too, was after them, knife in hand. David slashed wildly, dodging their raking claws and their attempts to entangle him in their wings. With the doctor’s arrival in a rear attack, the fight was soon over. The two men, panting, faced one another over the four grey bodies.

“We must hide them quickly,” said David. “Some more are bound to come along after all that row.”

Hastily they dragged the corpses into a small side passage and stood tensely listening. After a little while they relaxed. The grey creatures’ cries, whether of alarm, or for help, appeared to have passed unnoticed. The problem now before them was one of direction. The way behind was out of the question, for it was barred by gates, and they faced the alternative of creeping along dark, narrow side passages or risking the lighted area ahead. In the end they elected for the latter; both had had enough of the darkness, and their enemies seemed unhindered by lack of light. The doctor adjusted his glasses which he had miraculously retained intact. He was a small man, inclined to stoutness and showing, in normal conditions, a cheery, rubicund face.

“Yes, towards the light, by all means,” he said.

He was aware of some slight professional regret that they could not spare time to examine the bodies of their late enemies, but he appreciated the necessity of getting clear.

They cautiously turned the corner ahead and found themselves facing a long vista of deserted tunnel lit at intervals by small, glowing lamps in the ceiling. There appeared to be no reason for this transition from darkness to light. David was aware of misgivings. This was the way their captors had been taking them, and it was obviously, for that reason, the way they should not go. However, if they should be attacked, they would have at least the advantage of seeing their attackers.

They walked on, every sense alert and their knives tightly clutched. To keep to the center of the way seemed safest; one could not tell what might lurk in the small, unlighted side passages. Two hundred yards further they rounded a corner and abruptly debouched upon a still larger tunnel. Should they turn left or right? This new way, as dimly lit as the other, gave no clue. They were able to see perhaps fifty yards in each direction before turns cut off the view. David was about to speak when the doctor checked him. A faint sound had reached him from the left. Both peered in that direction, but its origin remained hidden by the corner. They drew back into the lesser tunnel to wait.

The approaching sound resolved into a steady trudge; the swish-swish of soft slipped feet upon the rock floor. David breathed more easily, for the monotonous walk could not be made by anyone seeking to investigate an alarm. The steps slowly continued to near the end of their passage. A figure which looked neither to left nor right, passed by. Both the watchers stared. They had expected one of the winged creatures, but—

“An Earthman,” gasped David.

The man caught his voice and turned towards them. He was elderly, and his head was but sparsely covered with grey hair. His face was pale and deeply graven with lines, but, for all its sorrow, it was kindly. Strapped upon his back he bore an enormous basket filled with broken ore. His expression changed to amazement as he saw them. He took an involuntary step in their direction and then stopped with doubt in his eyes. His attention seemed fastened more on their clothes than their faces.

“Who—who are you?” he asked in an unsteady voice.

David told him.

“You have come from ‘Outside’?” Something in his pronunciation of the last word seemed to imply inverted commas.

“We have,” admitted David, watching him closely, “and we want to know how to get back?”

The old man slowly shook his head. A strange, musing look seemed to come over his face.

“There really is an ‘Outside’? Sometimes I think it was just all a dream.” He paused, looking at them with unseeing eyes. “But no,” he added, “it was no dream. A man could not dream a sight so lovely as a tree with the wind in its leaves, or the glory of the sun, any more than he could dream the curve of a wave.”

David and the doctor glanced at one another. The old man had forgotten their presence. He went on:

“Twenty-five years, oh God. Twenty-five years since I have seen those things.” The last word was a sob, and the tears ran unashamed down his cheeks. David took hold of his arm. He spoke gently.

“You don’t understand. We want you to show us how to get out.”

The old man shook his head again.

“My boy, it is you who do not understand.—There is no getting out. Nobody has ever got out.”

“But—”

“Nobody, in twenty-five years.”

At the sight of their puzzled faces, he pulled himself together. The dreamy look vanished from his eyes and he spoke in a different voice.

“Come along with me. I’ll explain.”

David relieved him of the basket and fixed it to his own, more able, shoulders. He was surprised to find it much lighter than it appeared, until he remembered the small size of Asperus.

The three walked together along the tunnel, crossed a hall which showed signs of being a natural cavern enlarged, and entered another tunnel. His name, said the old man, was John Fordham, and he began to relate the disastrous history of the *Red Glory*. He had, it appeared, been among the first to be taken prisoner. He was still talking when they reached another rock hall. In it a number of men and women were seated at long tables. All conversation ceased as they entered, and Fordham introduced them to the company:

“Two men from ‘Outside.’”

The same look of suspicion that they had seen in Fordham’s eyes appeared now upon every face, but, like his, it began to fade at the sight of the newcomers’ clothing, as though their uniforms were assurances of identity. Both men and women present were clad in inadequate garments patched together from many pieces of coarse cloth. David estimated those present at one hundred and fifty, and subsequently that he was only seventeen short of the actual figure. Most of them were of middle, or later, middle age, with a sprinkling of the really elderly, and a very few younger members of approximately thirty or thirty-one. He noticed at a glance that women predominated.

With the lessening of suspicion they came crowding round, fingering the men’s clothing as if it were something rare and precious, and asking innumerable questions. David slipped the basket of ore from his shoulders and dropped it on the floor. At his request for something to eat, bowls of fruit were immediately produced. The two attempted to answer the incessant questions as best they could. They described their own capture, but of conditions aboard the *Red Glory* they knew nothing. They could only say that Angus had sighted a wreck which might, or might not, be the *Red Glory*. At last the spate of questioning ceased, and they had a chance to put their own perplexities forward. What were these creatures they called Batrachs? What was happening in this subterranean world? Was there really no possible means of escape?

Dr. Cleary was particularly exercised in the matter of the Batrachs. He had seen enough of them to form the opinion that they were mammals, but he was certain that no such forms had been found elsewhere in the system. He had a theory that similar systems produce similar forms, with, of course, adaptations to heat and gravitation, and he was fond of his theory. The presence of the Batrachs shook it severely.

Nobody was able to enlighten him. It was, it appeared, a subject never discussed with the Batrachs.

“You talk to them?” asked David incredulously.

“But, of course—or, rather, they talk to us for we can imitate only a very few of their sounds. To get anything out of us, some of them had to learn our speech.”

“They’re not savages then?”

“Depends what you mean by a ‘savage.’ The Batrachs are highly intelligent in their own way, if that’s what you want to know.”

“And your position is—?”

CHAPTER VII

“We’re Slaves—Nothing More, Nor Less”

David frowned in a puzzled fashion. He had just been told that the Batrachs numbered hundreds of thousands, if not millions. Surely it was not worth their while to enslave so few Earthmen. Several thousand slaves would have been understandable, but to maintain this handful of men and women couldn’t even be economic. Ever since capture they had been confined beyond the double gates and all their food must be brought down from the surface. Their work could scarcely pay for the labor of feeding them. He put the point to Fordham who attempted to explain.

“As we told you, the Batrachs are intelligent, but their intelligence is difficult for them to apply. Perhaps you will find it easier to understand if I compare them with ourselves. Now, the first stepping stone of man’s climb from savagery is really his opposed thumb. Don’t misunderstand me, I know that there were lesser factors, and I don’t forget that apes also have opposed thumbs, but the fact remains that without that useful tool, it is more than doubtful whether man could ever have risen as he has.

“Early man picked things up and played with them. He found in time, for instance, that if one stone were placed upon another, he could by standing on it, reach a fruit otherwise out of reach. He did not think the action out first; he did it by accident, and then took advantage of it. Once it had been done, his intelligence was stirred, and he could do it again. You see, this is the important point, his hands taught his mind in the beginning. The reasoning mind did not take real control until far later. If you doubt this, just consider how lazy people still try to make their hands teach their minds; they do it whenever they apply what we call a ‘hit and miss’ method. So much for contrast.

“The Batrachs’ intelligence, however, is fundamentally different. Their minds have not grown from actions. Somehow their mental evolution has progressed without the promptings of physical organs. The result is that they have reached a sticking point and they realize it. They can think, but they cannot *do*. They have no opposed thumb to help them. Control of their limbs is coarse compared with precision bequeathed to us by thousands of generations. Their talons have no more capability of fine accuracy than the claws of a tiger. They were—and are—in fact, in a very similar position to a paralyzed man. Their only method of getting things done is to cause others to do them. And we,” he ended bitterly, “have been those others.”

Clarey sat for some time in thought before he asked: “But this vast system of caves? They’re artificial. If your theory is right, they couldn’t have dug them.”

“They might. It requires no great accuracy, and if you look you will see that all the work is rough and unmathematical in finish. But I suspect that there have been other captives before us. There are the gates. They are very old. Then, too, they have a few metal instruments—crude, of course, but certainly not made by the Batrachs themselves.”

The doctor went on to ask more questions. The suggestion of the Batrachs’ curious development interested him considerably. David’s attention lapsed by degrees. He found his gaze wandering first over the rocky walls and bare utilities of this cave which, he understood, was the main living room of these lost Earthlings. From this he fell to examining the faces of those about him: tried to imagine what twenty-five years in such surroundings would mean,

and failed. A sudden thought struck him. All these men and women had lived together for a quarter of a century . . .

“Are there no children?” he asked.

Even as the words left the lips, he realized that they were an indiscretion. A cold silence greeted the question. No one attempted an answer, and the eyes of all refused to meet his own. He had committed a dire solecism—touched a subject under strict taboo. It was queer—the condition of at least three of the women . . . He turned a bewildered face to the doctor. The little man shrugged his shoulders ever so tightly. Tactfully, he asked another question of John Fordham, and the awkward moment passed, though not without leaving a vestige of constraint.

Conversation was terminated by the sudden ringing of a bell. All present turned to face one of the tunnel mouths expectantly. After a wait of a few seconds, a figure strode out of it into the hall. Both men from the *Argenta* stared in surprise. They had expected the grey form of a Batrach, but the newcomer was a tall, well-built, young Earth man. His face, though clean cut, was pale and there was a sense of familiarity about it which David was at a loss to understand.

The men and women respectfully drew back, leaving a clear space down which he marched without a sideways glance until he reached a small, desk-like table at the head of the cavern. At it he seated himself to face the gathering, and in a hard, emotionless voice began to recite the names of those present. They had leisure to examine him more closely.

His age was around twenty-three, and he had the air of a man who performed a distasteful duty conscientiously. His clothing consisted of a knee-length tunic below which appeared trousers. Both garments were embroidered with patterns of geometrical design, as were the soft sandals on his feet. The roll-call completed, he paused a moment, then:

“John Fordham,” he said curtly.

The old man stepped forward. In a flash David saw the reason for the elusive familiarity of the young man’s face. It was a youthful edition of the older man’s. His son, perhaps? But there was no filial feeling in the curt voice.

“John Fordham, you have been reported to me as being one basket of iron ore short today. Why is this?”

The basket still lay where David had dropped it. As he made a movement to pick it up, the young man noticed him for the first time.

“Who are you?” There was the slightest flicker of surprise in his eyes as he scrutinized the pair. David hesitated and then explained, carefully omitting reference to the deaths of their captors.

“From ‘Outside’?”

Curious, David thought, this manner of treating the simple word ‘outside’. The present emphasis on it was very different from the old man’s.

“Yes,” he said.

“There has been a mistake. You should not have been brought here. You will follow me.”

They hesitated, but David’s neighbor whispered:

“Go with him. He will take you through the gates and you will have a chance then. You’ve still got your knives.”

The young man took good care that his body should screen the combinations of the double gates as he worked them. The two with him noticed that they were leaving by a different route, for the tunnel was lighted and sloped steeply upwards.

In the walk of half a mile which followed, Cleary tried their guide with a number of questions which did not raise the success of even a monosyllabic reply. It was noticeable, also, that when they approached closely to him, the young man drew away with some ostentation. At length they began to meet or overtake others; men and women who had occasion to use one or other of the many side turnings. These, too, drew close to the walls as they passed, and more than once they saw noses wrinkled in distaste. The tunnel brought them at length to a hall.

The place was comparable in size with the cave in which the *Red Glory* survivors dwelt, but it was better lighted, and better furnished. It even showed attempts at decoration by strictly geometric forms. But the greatest difference was that it was filled with the cheerful sounds of laughter and young voices. David felt a lightening of the load of depression which had crept over him. The doctor continued to wear a frown on his round face.

To complete the contrast with that other cave was the fact that every man or woman in sight was young, and many small children ran or crawled upon the floor, romping as freely and happily as any child born on Earth.

A pale cherub of four was playing near the entrance. David smiled at him and extended a friendly hand. The child looked up at the sound of his voice. One glance was enough; he gave a frightened howl and ran to bury his face in the tunic of a young woman nearby. The look David received from her dark eyes was murderous and loathing. She hastened away, comforting the frightened child.

David turned to the doctor in amazement. He felt slightly resentful; children, as a rule, liked him.

“What is it? What’s wrong here?”

Cleary, still frowning, refused to commit himself.

“I don’t know yet, but I’ve got an idea—just the glimmer of an idea.”

Their guide led out across the hall. As they approached the people shrank back to either side, the children ran whimpering to the women. Not a face in all the place, but expressed disgust. Twice they had to pause before groups which had not noticed their coming. Each time the young man called: “Outside,” and the way cleared as though by magic. A queer fancy floated into David’s mind—were not lepers in the East compelled to call “Unclean” with much the same result?

They left the hall behind and still continued upward through the labyrinth. Now and then they had occasional sights of the grey forms of Batrachs going about their unknown business. Mostly they were on foot, but in the larger tunnels it was possible for them to fly, passing over the Earthmen with great swishes of their dry wings. The lighting grew dimmer as they proceeded and soon it became necessary for the guide to produce a lamp.

David began to toy with the idea of snatching the lamp and making a break for freedom. Surely, after all this climbing, they could not be far from the surface. He nudged Cleary and pointed suggestively to his knife. For some reason of his own the other shook his head. David let the matter drop and a few moments later, when the rays of the lamp fell upon another gate, was glad he had. It was opened like the others by a combination lock. The young man stood back for them to pass. The click of its fastening followed—but the man with the lamp was on the other side. Too late David realized what had happened. This was not another gate along the

way, it was the door of a prison—and they, like fools, had walked straight into it. He drew his knife and sprang back, but the young man was safely out of reach. He turned away, paying no attention to David's threats, and soon his lamp became no more than a receding glow in the distance.

Darkness, intense and almost palpable, closed in. David shook the barred gate in futile fury, but he stopped abruptly at the sound of a movement in the blackness behind him.

"Who's there?" Mentally he cursed his voice for its unsteadiness; this dark was bad for a man's nerves.

A voice replied with a familiar, lilting tone.

"Good God, the Martians!" he cried.

CHAPTER VIII

Angus Invades

Angus paused to muster his party at the cave-mouth.

"No talking!" he ordered, "and step as lightly as possible. The brutes are nocturnal, and it's odds on we'll catch them sleeping now. Come on!"

He switched on the lamp upon his chest and led the way into the mountain. The entrance cave was much like the one in which they had been attacked. The dry, dusty floor sloped down towards the beginning of a narrower tunnel in which they could not walk more than two abreast.

They wound for fully half a mile of its evenly descending length before they came to the first forking of the way. Joe guessed that already they were below the level of the valley outside. Angus stopped and turned an investigating beam up each of the facing tunnels. Both were similar in size and in the degree of use they showed. One of the men picked out a slight obstruction on the smooth floor of the right hand path. He jumped forward and returned, displaying his find.

"A Martian boot," said Angus, handling the soft leather. "Somebody in that gang knows his stuff. Let's hope he's managed some more clues."

The hope was fulfilled. They were subsequently assured that they were on the right track first by the discovery of the fellow boot, and, later, by the sight of a discarded cap. As yet they had had no sight of the Batrachs, and still the passages led down. Twice Joe, bringing up the rear, thought he heard a dry rustle behind him, but each time he swung his lamp, it revealed only the empty tunnel. They had now penetrated a long way into Asperus, and his suspicions were aroused.

"This is too easy to last," he told himself uneasily.

A few minutes later, his fears were borne out. An unmistakable, murmurous swishing came from behind him. And, this time, the lamp showed a solid phalanx of grey, winged forms sweeping down in a rear attack. Almost without thought he drew his pistol and sent half a dozen shots crashing among them. Not a bullet could miss. They hesitated as several of their number fell, and swayed indecisively for a second. They rallied and came on, but their advance now was slow and deliberate. They appeared to have abandoned the notion of coming to grips.

Angus continued to lead his men steadily forward. Retreat was, for the present, cut off, but that had been almost inevitable in such catacombs. There was more pressing business to be attended to before they had to worry about the way back. Joe reloaded his pistol and held it ready.

A turn of the passage brought them without warning into a large cave. The many black tunnel entrances dotting the walls on all sides suggested that it was a meeting place, a kind of public square of this subterranean world. By far its most disturbing feature was that in almost every entrance lurked grey, menacing figures. Angus grasped the danger at once. The Batrachs would have full room to use their wings and could attack from all sides simultaneously. Already not a few were taking to the air. The way behind was blocked. A swift glance showed that the tunnel directly opposite held no guard, and, at his command, the Earth men made for

it, crossing the wide floor in a series of leaps. To their surprise they reached it unattacked. The sense of uneasiness grew. The Batrachs followed at a distance.

“Don’t like this,” muttered Angus. “From what we’ve seen of them, they’re fighters. I’ll bet anything the blasted creatures have got something up their sleeves.”

Nevertheless, they continued unmolested for several hundred yards. Then, at a corner, Angus stopped dead. The way ahead was choked with Batrachs who stood blinking in the glare of the lights.

“Oho! So that’s it. Sandwiching us, are they?” He settled a pistol in one hand and a knife in the other. “Now for it!”

But still the Batrachs did not attack. There was a puzzled pause. Angus opened his mouth to speak, but before a word came, the floor gave way beneath him.

The next seconds were confusion. A writhing mass of men fell struggling sideways, swearing as they tried to disentangle themselves. Angus’ pistol was knocked from his hand by the fall, but he staggered to his feet, still clutching the knife. The light on his chest remained unbroken, but it was obscured by the struggling bodies. The man next to him suddenly grabbed his arm. Angus tottered and lost his balance. He tripped over a prostrate form, and slid, head first, down a polished stone slope at prodigious speed. After a few breathtaking moments he sped from a kind of chute into a room crammed with the grey Batrachs.

The trap had been well planned. Half a dozen of them flung themselves upon him before he could rise. His knife arm was pinned to his side and despite all the extra power which the low gravitation gave him, he could not break their tenacious holds. Struggling and shrouded beneath the great wings, he could see little, but he was aware that others of his band were suffering a similar fate as they shot into the room. He could hear their muffled curses and grunts as they fought.

With a colossal heave he achieved a sitting position and struggled thence to his feet. The Batrachs still clung about him, pinioning his arms. By jerky, intermittent beams he could see all over the floor a series of struggling heaps with wings threshing furiously above as the men were secured and weighted down by numbers. He tried with all the force of desperation to wrench his right arm free, and bellowed futilely at his assailants:

“You lot of lousy sons of Satan. Just you wait till I get this knife free—I’ll show you who’s boss here. I’ll carve your miserable, stringy carcasses into mincemeat, you—”

But the thin arms twined around him like ropes; not an inch did they give before all his violence. In the far corner he glimpsed Joe Seely rise for a moment, only to be dragged desperately down. The outlook was becoming ugly.

An interruption occurred. A grey curtain on the opposite wall—made, he suspected from wing membrane—was twitched aside. In the doorway behind stood the short figure of Sen-Su. The Martian’s clothes had been torn away, and the blood streamed down his brown skin from a dozen ragged cuts. In one hand he held a jagged-ended metal bar. His expression was one of dismay until he saw Angus, upright, though helpless. His bullet head went down. He crouched, whirling the bar before him like a lethal flail, and launched forward in a mighty leap at the group which held the engineer. His crude weapon tore through the great wings as though they had been rotten cloth.

The Batrachs’ thin bones snapped like sticks as his blows went home. The onslaught was more than they could stand; the hold on Angus loosened. They and others with them flung

themselves upon the threshing demon, smothering him in their wings, twisting their long arms about him to bring him, still fighting to the ground.

But Angus broke free. His long knife darted with a shimmer like lightning, slashing, thrusting, tearing about him. Those whom the blade touched sank to the floor; those whom it did not, backed from his neighborhood. Chaos broke loose. The Batrachs holding other prisoners were trodden under the feet of their own kind in flight before Angus. Their grips slipped and the prone men snatched for their knives. Within a few seconds there were five at Angus' side, driving the grey ranks headlong with a line of slicing steel. The din of piercing cries increased as more and more men rose until all were on their feet. The surviving Batrachs fought each other to escape through the narrow doorway. A bellow of rage came from Angus. One of the escaping horde had hooked his sharp wing talon into the flesh of Sen-Su's shoulder and was dragging him away. Angus leapt in and slashed; slashed once and the wing was severed; slashed again and the head rolled away. He picked up Sen-Su and carried him aside. The Martian smiled faintly at his rescuer, then, swiftly, his expression changed. He pointed through the doorway.

"The others," he cried. "Quickly, before they get them away."

Leaving a half dozen men to guard the few Batrach prisoners, Angus and the rest sped down the corridor. From somewhere ahead came the shrill sounds of Batrachs mingled with the confused babble of human voices. The next turn revealed winged figures fumbling frantically at the locks of barred gates set in side walls. They twisted around and emitted high cries as they saw the running men. One glance was enough to assure them that safety lay in flight. With mournful shrieks they disappeared into the blackness ahead.

A pistol made short work of the locks on the cell gates.

As the imprisoned Martians filed out, Angus caught sight of two familiar, lighter faces.

"David, Cleary," he called. He greeted them excitedly and at once dragged the doctor off to have a look at Sen-Su's wounds.

"He's game," he said. "If he hadn't managed to break out of his cell and take a bit of the bars with him, we'd all be in cells by now."

"Where are the rest?" he asked David as Cleary made his examination.

David looked puzzled.

"I mean the six men who were taken when you were."

It was the first David had heard of them, and he said as much. Angus frowned.

"Then we'll have to go on—we can't leave the poor devils here."

"There are more than those six," said David. He told briefly of the *Red Glory* survivors and the others they had seen on the lower levels. Angus' frown grew still deeper as he listened. It was not a pleasant thought that Earth men and women were existing here as slaves. He was at something of a loss to know how to proceed. Not only would it be difficult to find the way into these further tunnels, but there was no telling what further tricks the Batrachs might have in store.

"See if you can get anything out of the prisoners," David suggested at length. "They might be—er—persuaded to talk."

Angus stared.

"You mean that they *can* talk? Those things?"

"I was told that some of them can—it's worth trying."

One of the prisoners readily admitted to a knowledge of English. Was, in fact fluent from long association with the slaves. His extremely high-pitched voice had a fraying effect on the nerves and he met with difficulties in the forms of labials, nevertheless, he was intelligible.

His information caused Angus to make a complete reassortment of ideas. Hitherto, he had considered the Batrachs as he would a species of wild animal—intelligent animals up to a point, but undisciplined; governed by no other instinct than that of the herd. But the view he was now given of them as a race under central authority, pulling together towards an ideal, killed all his preconceptions stone dead. He began to see, for instance, that the piles of dead on the sight of the Martian camp represented not stupid ferocity, but determination and sacrifice. The Batrachs did not go into battle from sheer fighting instinct, but with a clear knowledge that many of their kind must fall for the eventual good of the race.

As one of his theories after another was tumbled down, it became clearer that he must take an entirely different course. He began to think of them as Bat-men, no longer as animals, a mental attitude which was the harder to adopt since hitherto no forms of life in the whole system had even competed intelligently with man. But there was one idea which underwent no readjustment—the Batrachs, whatever their status, must not be allowed to keep Earth men and women as slaves.

Angus considered deeply.

With the rescued Martians and David and the doctor they numbered now one hundred and eight. Not a nugatory party, but certainly not formidable. In addition there was some shortage of arms and several men had been badly mauled. In continued skirmishes with groups of Batrachs their resistance would soon be worn down. Clearly a policy of guerilla warfare was unsuitable. He turned back to the prisoner.

“You talked about government. What form of government is this?”

Apparently there was an official council. The Batrach began to explain with some pride how it was formed. Angus cut him short.

“Take us to this council,” he ordered.

The Batrach agreed with an alacrity which caused him secret misgivings. He did his best to shake them off. After all, as he pointed out to David, whatever happened, it could scarcely make their position any worse.

CHAPTER IX

Before the Council

The Council Chamber, to which their guide led them, proved to be a cave of medium size, but sufficiently large to contain all the party. Word of their coming evidently preceded them, for they found a row of the creatures waiting; fifteen grey Batrachs who watched their arrival with calm, interested eyes. They sat upon a kind of stone shelf, seven to each side of one who was raised a little higher. It worried Angus a little that they showed no trace of fear, nor even anxiety, but, without delay, he plunged into the heart of the matter, addressing the central figure.

"We understand that you are holding a number of men and women of Earth prisoners here?"

The other studied Angus unhurriedly. When he answered, it was in a voice of lower pitch than their prisoner's, but still unpleasantly shrill.

"We are," he said briefly.

"And we demand that you free them at once."

"You 'demand?'" The Batrach showed a tinge of surprise at the choice of words. David and Joe exchanged glances. Both would have favored a less outspoken policy. The party was scarcely in a position to "demand" anything. But Angus merely nodded.

The Batrach forbore to point out that they were virtually prisoners themselves. He asked:

"And why do you think we would surrender prisoners to you who are useful to us?"

"Because you would stand a very poor chance of success against a warship from Earth."

The Batrach considered.

"But if we imprison you, Earth may never know."

There was an uneasy stir among most of the Martians and Earthmen present, but Angus smiled.

"That," he said triumphantly, "is where you are mistaken. You have held the passengers from the *Red Glory* only because we did not know what had become of them. We thought that the ship had been destroyed. Had we even suspected the true state of affairs, you would have had a visit from a warship long ago.

"Now, however, the case is altered. The *Argenta* is undamaged. If we fail to return, someone will take her back to Earth and report. Should you manage to prevent this, the delay will only be slight for our destination was known to officials at home and they will shortly send out a searching party."

His words evidently went home to the council. They started to speak in their shrill, wailing tones. The central Batrach quieted them.

"It would mean the end for many of us," he admitted, "but I doubt even your people's power to conquer and hold all our passages and caves. It would, in fact, be better for them not to try. We could trap party after party so that they would starve. We know your weapons and we know their limitations."

Angus shook his head.

"You know only a few of our weapons." He went on to describe in some detail the effects of some poison gases, and to tell how the heavier types could be poured into the tunnel

mouths to percolate throughout the Batrach warrens and kill any who got so much as a sniff of them.

Dissension followed. A few of the Batrachs took his statement for a fairy tale, others who had heard of gases from the slaves, knew better.

“But the prisoners—your own people—they would die too,” one objected.

Angus drew himself up.

“It is better,” he bluffed, “for an Earth man to be dead than to be a slave. Our men would not wish to kill their own kind, but they would do it sooner than know that they lingered in servitude.”

He watched anxiously to see how this piece of heroics would be received. If it failed, he must change his tactics entirely. During the discussion which followed he kept his gaze level and steadfast. At length the spokesman addressed him again.

“We will agree to your demands. The survivors from the *Red Glory* shall go free.”

Angus allowed himself to relax slightly, but before he could reply, David was whispering in his ear.

“The others,” he was saying “the younger ones. Don’t forget them.”

At the suggestion that these also were included in his demand, a great screeching of objections arose from the council. Again the spokesman quieted the rest with a wave of his winged arm.

“They are the children and the grandchildren of the others,” he said. “We call them the New Generations. They have never been on the surface. They know only these caves which are their homes—it would not be kind to them to take them with you.”

Angus and his party stared. “Would not be kind?” The effrontery of it. Would not be kind to take them into the sunlight—out of this gloomy labyrinth. He grew angry and his demands became eloquent. The Batrach listened patiently with a look in his eyes almost as though he were secretly amused. Once he began to break in with an objection. Angus swept on, brushing it aside unheard. At last he stopped. The spokesman, still with the disconcerting light in his eyes, hesitated and then gave in.

“We will agree not to stand in the way of their going,” he allowed.

Angus had won, but he was not easy. In the middle of his victory he was aware of a twinge of that same misgiving he had experienced earlier in the passages. Again it seemed too simple, and there was a something in the Batrach’s tone . . .

The mixed party of Earthmen and Martians was conducted to a large cave to await the coming of the slaves. A few were jubilant and confident. Man, in their estimation had triumphed again, as man always would. But the majority was alert. Like Angus they felt that all was not so cut and dried as it appeared. There was a sense if not of treachery, at least of something very like it, in the air.

A group comprising Angus, David, Joe, Torrence, the doctor and Sen-Su—the latter bandaged, but not seriously hurt—stood apart from the rest, discussing the possibilities of the situation in undertones. Torrence was emphatically of the opinion that the Batrachs were not fetching the prisoners, but mustering for a mass attack with the intention of wiping out all in the cave.

Angus did not agree. For one thing he trusted the chief Batrach’s word, and, for another, his threats of invasion from Earth had made a deep impression. All speculation was cut short

by the arrival of a party of persons at the near end of the cave. One look showed David the people with whom he had recently talked.

"The *Red Glory* survivors," he said.

The pitiful procession came slowly toward them. John Fordham walked a little ahead of the rest. There was no joy in his bearing; his feelings seemed too deep for that. He approached them, shuffling and tired, his shoulders bent as though they still supported his basket of ore. He looked at them with eyes which seemed to doubt what they saw. His voice quivered and broke as he asked:

"Is it true, what they told us? Are we really going 'Outside'?"

"Yes," Angus told him gently. "It's quite true. We're taking you home."

"Home." The old man stood quite still. His arms hung slackly by his sides. His head went back as though he gazed beyond the rock about him, beyond the millions of miles of space, towards a swinging planet which was home. His breath caught in his throat. He buried his face in his hands and wept.

A woman came to David and plucked at his sleeve.

"And the children?" she asked in a low tone. "The New Generation?"

"They're coming too," he assured her.

She received the answer in silence. Drew a breath as though to speak. Shrugged her shoulders hopelessly and turned from him to join the others. There was no joy in her manner as she imparted the news. David almost followed her to ask questions, but remembered in time how his last question of the kind had been treated. He decided to wait for this puzzle to solve itself.

Up the far end of the cave another disturbance was occurring and he turned in company with the rest to discover that the New Generations were entering. Exclamations of surprise broke from both Earthmen and Martians as the stream of young men and women and children filed in. Nobody had thought to consider the probable number of the children and children's children.

Angus had guessed at a possible hundred or so. Suddenly confronted with more than five hundred, he stared with widening eyes. Even David and the doctor though somewhat prepared were taken aback. Cleary indulged in some hurried mental arithmetic.

The newcomers, accompanied by several Batrachs, remained crowded together at the end of the cave. Most kept their gazes averted, though a few examined Angus and his party with a kind of furtive interest. Their communal attitude was one of puzzled indecision. A short discussion resulted in one man detaching himself. As he approached, David recognized the firm step and fine carriage of their late guide. At a distance of two yards from the group he stopped short, scanning them with a look of distaste. He spoke in the tone of one accustomed to lead.

"You are from 'Outside'?"

Again that curious treatment of the final word.

"We are," Angus replied.

"What do you want here?"

Angus' eyebrows rose. This was scarcely the expected attitude of rescued towards rescuers.

"We have come to set you free."

"Free?" The young man was puzzled. "I don't understand you. We are free."

There was a puzzled silence. Angus supplemented:

“We have a ship on which to take you, and your parents, back to your native planet—Earth.”

The young man continued to look mystified for a while. Then a thought appeared to strike him. With a look of growing, indignant horror in his eyes he asked:

“You want us to go ‘Outside’?”

“Of course,” said Angus curtly. He did not care for the young man’s expression.

There was a muttering among the listening crowd of the New Generation. Partly nervous, but in greater part indignant. They shrank back towards the tunnel through which they had entered.

“Look,” whispered the doctor to David, pointing towards the group of original survivors. Most of the women were staring towards the New Generations with a complex expression. David analyzed it as mingled yearning and hopelessness. He became aware that the groups of emotions in all parts of that cave fitted with none of his expectations.

“What is it?” He whispered back. “I’m all at sea.”

Cleary shook his head.

“I think I’m getting it, but I’m not sure yet.”

Meanwhile, on the young man’s face, anger replaced consternation.

“How dare you make such a suggestion?” he demanded. “No doubt you think that by those —” he pointed at Angus’ weapons “—that you can force us. It may surprise you to know that you underrate us—we are not cowards. Get back to your filth. Get back to your ‘Outside’. I am ashamed that our women have been allowed here to hear such an infamous, indecent suggestion. Had I known that they were to be exposed to such ignominy as this I would—”

Angus stepped forward, eyes narrowed. The young man recoiled; not from fear, but as though he avoided contamination. He turned round and addressing the crowd of the New Generation, already moving to the tunnel.

“Go!” he shouted. “Go before the evil from outside can touch you.”

He wheeled back to face Angus. His countenance was a study in abhorrence, but he stood his ground, warding off the other from his people. Angus advanced slowly, bewildered. He put out his hand to press the other aside. The young man gave a cry of disgust, tore off the garment Angus had touched as though it were unclean, and hurled it from him. A loathsome reptile might have inspired the look which now dwelt in his eyes. A quick glance showed him that the last of his people were leaving. Without another word he turned and strode after them.

The silence of consternation held the cave. One voice rose at last to break it; John Fordham’s.

“My son,” he cried. “My son.”

But the retreating figure marched into the tunnel with never a backward glance.

CHAPTER X

The Power of the Batrachs

Angus broke his trance of astonishment. Several of the *Red Glory* women had begun to sob desolately, hopelessly. He called Sen-Su to his side. Looking into his eyes he said:

“Sen-Su, can we work together?”

The Martian smiled slightly.

“Because I asked that question, they condemned me to exile. My whole faith has been that men should work together instead of exploiting one another.”

“And so they shall, by the Lord. We Earthmen have been a pack of fools—you’ve convinced me of that, Sen-Su. Henceforth, I’m with you Martians. When we get back to Earth —”

“But now we are still on Asperus,” Sen-Su pointed out. “What do you wish me to do?”

“I want you to tell some of your men to take these *Red Glory* people to the surface, and to the ship. I’ll send some of mine along too, to explain to old Jamie that it’s on the level. Will they do that?”

Sen-Su nodded and turned to address his men in lilting Martian. A number of them crossed over and posted themselves beside the rescued.

“And the rest of us?” he inquired, turning back.

“The rest of us are going to get the New Generations out of this warren, whether they like it or not,” snapped Angus.

“You’ll never do it,” Cleary prophesied quietly.

Angus glared.

“Who says?”

“I do. You don’t know what you’re up against.”

“I know that these damned Batrachs are holding them somehow.”

“I doubt it: I don’t believe that the Batrachs could persuade them to go. They’ve been clever; they’ve hit mankind in his weakest spot. Damned clever.”

Angus shrugged his shoulders and went about directing the departure of the rest. The survivors at length trailed away, a weary, dejected lot. Some seemed half afraid to leave their prison. Twenty-five years is a long time, and their children had refused to go . . .

As the last of them disappeared a company of grey forms flew out of a large tunnel and up the cave. Angus’ hand flew to his knife and then dropped as he recognized the Batrachs of the Council. The creatures alighted a few yards away and closed their wings. The leader advanced.

“They would not go?” he asked Angus.

“You knew damn well they wouldn’t go. What I want to know is, why wouldn’t they go? How did you stop them?”

“We did not stop them. They could have gone had they wished.”

“You did not hypnotize them? They were free?”

This time the Batrach really smiled.

“Freedom. How often have I heard the slaves speak of it?—It is the obsession of your race. What is freedom?”

It occurred to Angus that this was not the simple question it sounded. He wrestled with it awkwardly:

“The power to do as you want.”

“Then the New Generations are indeed free.”

Angus gave it up.

“I don’t believe you,” he said bluntly.

“Nevertheless, it is true. If you took the New Generations away by force—as perhaps you might—you would take them from happiness to misery.”

“I don’t believe that, either. How can they be happy down here in these burrows?”

“You don’t appreciate your own point. ‘Freedom is the power to do as you want.’—Has it not occurred to you that the ‘want’ might be suggested?”

Angus frowned. Someone else had lately spoken of suggestion. Yes, Sen-Su had referred to it as one of the great forces. He looked at the Martian and saw comprehension dawning in his eyes.

“Come,” said the Batrach. “Words won’t convince you. I must show you why the New Generations will stay.”

He turned and led the way up an ascending passage. As he went he talked, giving them what was in effect an amplification of Fordham’s explanation to David. The Batrachs, he reiterated, were making a great bid for the future of their race. They had knowledge, but they could not make even so simple a thing as a book to store that knowledge for the benefit of future generations. The Batrach held up his clumsy wing claw. What, he asked them, could be accomplished with so crude an instrument as that? They had tried always to educate the claw, but it was little use compared with even an uneducated hand with the advantage of the power to grip. They had been forced to turn to other methods.

“Just so, I am told,” he said, “did your ancestors turn to the horse and to other animals to overcome some of their own limitations. Did you ever think of your horses as slaves?”

Doctor Cleary diverted the subject with a question.

“How did you Batrachs get here—there are no others that we know of in the system?”

“I can’t tell you that,” the other admitted. “There are legends, but they are vague. They tell of the Mother of all Batrachs, so great, so magnificent in her wings, that she could fly not merely as we fly, but out to the furthest stars in the sky. Now and again, however, even she tired and needed to rest, and on each world where she rested, she brought forth ten small Batrachs such as we. You can make what you like of that. It may be that the Mother was in reality, a space ship such as yours. I do not know. One thing is certain, and that is that we are admirably adapted to Asperus. We should be unable to fly on even the smallest of the major planets.”

“There is usually a basis of truth in such legends,” agreed the doctor. He was determined to protect as long as possible his theory of systematic species. He went on to question the other on his physical structure.

The rest of the men followed in silence as the two conversed. David and Joe felt little more than a curious interest in what the Batrach would reveal. Angus wore a puzzled frown. Torrence, as usual, was out of temper. He had abandoned the making of suggestions, but he knew what a man’s attitude should be towards an inferior race. This meeting on an equal footing was, to him, not only improper, but weak. Sen-Su was paying close attention to the leading Batrach’s talk, while the rest of the Council seemed to be content to bring up the rear.

At last came the glimmer of daylight far ahead. The Batrach led on without a pause. The Doctor, watching him closely, saw that his eyes filmed over with a protective membrane as the light grew more intense. The passage rapidly broadened out until it became a wide cave with an extensive view over valleys and crags. On the rocky floor twenty or more children were playing with simple toys. In careful attendance lurked the figures of tall, grey, female Batrachs. Evidently this was the nursery of the grandchildren of the *Red Glory* survivors. David, mindful of his earlier experience, hung back, but Angus continued. A child noticed his coming and fled with a yelp of terror in the direction of the nearest Batrach. There was an indignant murmur from Torrence that the children were being taught to hate their own kind. He was surprised when the leader calmly nodded:

“But only those from ‘Outside’,” the latter added.

“I don’t see—” Angus began.

The Batrach checked him. “Watch,” he said.

He indicated a small boy who was near the cave mouth. Outside, the sunlight was pouring down on a broad, smooth ledge. The contrasting world beyond seemed to intrigue the youngster. He was slowly edging towards the fascinating line of light. Once he looked back cautiously toward the other children and their attendants, but they gave no sign of noticing his maneuvers. He crawled on to within six inches of the line of shadow and hesitated again. Finally he made up his mind and boldly stepped over. There was a sudden, ear-splitting crash from a metal gong. A breath of nauseating stench seemed to invade the cave. A child jumped back howling with terror. One of the female Batrachs swept forward and picked him up in a fold of her wing. He hid his face with its streaming tears in the comforting darkness it afforded.

“Behaviorism,” cried the Doctor. “A pure Behaviorist method.”

Angus’ eyes were blazing with anger. He advanced upon the Batrach as though he would strike him.

“It’s cruelty,” he shouted. “Pure, wanton torture of these children. I see it all now. You’ve brought up the New Generations to be so scared of you that they daren’t do a thing you might resent. You had only to tell them what you wished them to say, and they cringingly obeyed.”

Cleary intervened. “Don’t be a fool man. Did the leader, old Fordham’s son, cringe? Of course he didn’t. He walked like a ruler. Besides, these children don’t hate the Batrachs. Look there.”

The female Batrach, in a motherly way had dispelled all the child’s terror. He was clinging to her and almost laughing again. Angus and the others stared in bewilderment. There was no cruelty in the soft eyes with which she looked at the child—only concern that it should be happy once more. Torrence, in the background, muttered vengeful threats.

“I’m damned if I get this,” Angus said. “First she allows the child to be terrified out of its wits—then she’s really worried when it is. What’s it all for?”

“It’s on the Behaviorist basis,” said the doctor, enthusiastically. “A matter of conditioned reflexes.”

“That’s all Greek to me.”

“You know what a reflex action is?”

“One that is instinctive.”

“Not quite that. One that takes place without conscious thought—not quite the same thing. An instinctive reaction is innate, but a reflex action is caused by subconscious memory.”

“That seems pretty much the same.”

“No, it’s not. Take our avoidance of fire. Very young children are attracted by the brightness of fire. They want to play with it—have no instinct to fear it. But you and I do not try to handle fire, in fact, we avoid coming into contact with it. But we don’t say to ourselves each time, ‘This is fire—I must avoid it.’ The warning is subconscious—we ‘automatically’ avoid it. In other words, sometime in the past we burned ourselves and stored up the subconscious memory that fire was painful.

“A conditioned reflex arose—it caused us to avoid anything in a condition of fire. It was the same with foods; some we ‘automatically’ leave alone because we know they will make us ill. The same with all kinds of things. As a result we dislike even the smell or taste of them. Once you cut yourself on a sharp knife—now you ‘automatically’ pick a knife up by the handle.”

“Then this?” asked Angus, indicating the children.

“All the children here will grow up hating the world outside, and that hatred, properly fostered will become an inhibition. They will not be able to leave these caves. The memory of that gong and the nauseating smell won’t remain conscious for long, but, if the treatment is continued (as, no doubt it is) the idea that ‘Outside’ must be avoided will persist. From the behavior of the adults it would appear most successful.”

“Do you mean to tell me that if I, as a child, had been treated in this way, I should hate the ‘Outside’?” demanded Angus.

“Certainly—why should you be different?”

“But—but I’m free. I can think for myself.”

“You think you can—but can you really? Every thought of yours is based on somebody’s teaching, or a scrap of information picked up from somebody else. One might even say that there is no ‘you’—you are no more than a conglomeration of bits of other people. It’s true,” he added as Angus shook his head, “think it over a bit. You are as much a product of conditions as these children will be.

“Given a completely uninstructed child, a blank canvas, so to speak, there is scarcely any code of belief, morals or behavior which cannot be induced by careful training. You’ve only got to look at the violently differing codes upon Earth to see that.

“That’s what the Batrach meant when he asked you what was freedom. We are always prompted or guided by others whether we like it, or not. Sen-Su said that suggestion was all powerful. He was right. This is its most subtle application.”

CHAPTER XI

The Altar

There was a pause while all the men regarded the children in silence. The idea was slowly sinking into Angus' reluctant mind. Was it possible, he was wondering, to warp minds so that they saw nothing but horror in the fresh greenness of trees; so that the sun ceased to be the life giver, but became something indecent and fearful, never to be looked upon? It seemed impossible, and yet . . .

David, too, was thinking. He remembered the decorations in the caves of the New Generations—not a natural form had been allowed to intrude. Every suggestion of the world “Outside” had been rigidly excluded. He remembered, too, the expressions he had faced—hate, fear and disgust . . .

Torrence was not thinking. This foolery was taxing both his patience and his control. It was no mean task to keep his tongue still.

Again a child was approaching the line of sunlight. They watched in silence an exact repetition of the earlier episode.

“But why the gong?” asked Joe. “Why not stop them each time?”

“That is simple,” the Batrach explained. “Were we to stop them, they would resent it and end by disliking us—as it is, we comfort them after their fright and they love us for it.”

Joe's mouth opened wide. He had never considered the possibility of anyone loving a Batrach.

“Come,” the tall, grey figure added. “I will show you one more piece of the life of the New Generations. I think it will convince you.”

He led the way back into the tunnel. The doctor hurried forward and walked abreast with him.

“Then you do not mind the *Red Glory* survivors leaving?” he asked.

“No. We could only get the coarsest of compulsory labor from them. It was their children we wanted. We had, at first,” he added, “some difficulty in persuading them to bear.”

He went on to explain. The survivors' children had been taken from their parents as soon as possible and started on an elaborate course of conditioning to environment. Success had been immediate and the New Generation had been brought up thinking, feeling, acting and reacting in the ways the Batrachs wished—yet unaware of any compulsion. When the second generation began to appear it could be safely left with its parents save for regular periods of training in a nursery such as they had seen. The change was really very slight, he pointed out, none of the basic instincts was touched and character remained unaltered—only certain taboos became desirables, and certain desirables, taboo.

The doctor nodded thoughtfully.

“And so,” he said. “Our strongest point is our weakest.”

The Batrach was puzzled.

“I mean, our adaptability. It is that power which takes us into dry climates and wet, tropics and polar regions, cold planets and hot planets, open spaces and confined quarters—has, in fact, taken us all over the system. You have succeeded in turning that same adaptability to your own advantage.

“The others do not understand how the New Generations can be really happy in here, but I do. There never was (in this system, at least) a race so adaptable as we.”

The Batrach checked at last at a small doorway. Making a sign for silence, he led the way within.

They emerged upon a shelf partway up the wall of a large cavern. In the arrangement of the place there was more than a suggestion of the interior of a church. Row upon row the New Generations sat below them all gazing intently towards the far end at a feature which caused the Earthmen to stiffen with surprise. A long table stretched right across the cave and was covered by a cloth decorated with metal thread. The ornaments which rested upon it gave it the appearance of a kind of altar. Behind, outspread so that they covered most of the end wall, was a pair of wings patterned after those of the Batrachs. They had been skilfully fashioned from grey, lustrous metal which gleamed under an ingenious arrangement of the dim lights. Below them a man dressed in a grey tunic was in the act of mounting a few steps which led to a kind of rostrum.

He reached the platform and stood for a moment with his back to the audience gazing up at the great wings above him. Then he turned and began to speak in a calm, clear voice. His pale face was serious and there was no doubting the sincerity and strength of the belief which backed his words. But what words they were . . . The men's eyes grew wide as they listened.

“—Our ancestors sinned. They doubted, and doubt is sin. For that sin they were punished. They were cast into the nethermost ‘Outside’—a place of evil and terrors without names. They forfeited all; they had betrayed their faith and, as a punishment, their wings”—he dropped his voice as though grieving—“were withered upon them. Shorter and shorter grew their arms, and less, generation by generation, the spread of their wings until, at last, the membrane was gone and they were left as we are with but stunted growths.”

In a gesture he held out a pair of magnificent arms and stared at them.

“These,” he stretched them out towards the audience, “these are the symbols of our fall; the badge of our shame.

“But,”—his voice rose triumphantly—“through faith we shall win back. Beyond hope—damned through all eternity—are those ‘Outside’. But our feet are already upon the road back. The Batrachs have taken us in and purified us. Here in the caverns of the chosen they have taken compassion upon us. We shall climb again to that high estate from which our ancestors fell.

“Slowly and surely we shall rise, scaling the firm rungs of faith. It will not come in our time, nor even in our children's time, for the return to grace is hard, but far, far in the future, men who have regained their lost wings—such wings as the Batrachs have—will look back upon us and praise us for our faith which paved the way. Therefore, I tell you, keep faith. Firm, steady and unfaltering faith so that a million yet to be born may one day look back and honor you. Imagine a man in the full glory of his restored wings who will whisper the name of one of you, saying: ‘She was my mother, and faith, my cradle.’ ”

As the last words died away he turned to face again the huge, symbolic wings upon the wall. He raised his arms imploringly and stood motionless. There was not a sound to be heard in the cave.

On the ledge the men stood speechless, astounded by the travesty. There had been no bluffing. They caught the spirit of the men and women below. Intense, faithful, trusting, and, above all, convinced. That the Batrachs had taught this religion and the worship of the Wing,

there could be no doubt—but that it had become a part of the worshippers’ lives, there was equally little doubt. So simple.

A slightly new twist to the old Earth legend of angels, and there was the ideal, with the Batrachs already in the position of demi-gods. David remembered John Fordham’s words —“The Batrachs can think, but they cannot *do*.” He had been right. They had thought a new race of mankind into being, and this race, regarding them as saviors, would work for them willingly and joyfully, secure in their faith. David’s last hope died; the New Generations could never be rescued against such odds.

Torrence broke the silence with a shout. He swung himself over the edge of the rock shelf and dropped to the floor below. Before any could stop him he was on his feet and racing toward the far end. He leapt upon the rostrum and felled the speaker with a blow.

“Fools!” he shouted, swinging round on the startled audience. “Fools! He lied to you. Nothing but lies. It’s a plot of the Batrachs. Men never had wings—they never will have wings. They—”

“Blasphemer,” roared a voice. An echoing pandemonium broke loose, drowning Torrence’s voice with its babel.

The audience rose to its feet. With murder in its eyes, it charged madly towards the rostrum.

Angus knew an infuriated mob when he saw one.

“My God, they’ll lynch him,” he cried.

The Batrach beside him swooped down from the ledge and spread his wings; another followed his lead. Together they sped towards the lone figure of Torrence, at bay beneath the monstrous metal wings. Their talons snatched him up and lifted his struggling figure clear of the crowd just in time. A moment later they brought him back, pale and not a little scared, to the ledge. The Batrach, after a glance at the outraged worshippers on the floor below, led the way into the corridor. There, he turned and looked at them with eyes which held the faintest tinge of mockery.

“You are convinced?”

Angus nodded unhappily.

“You’re devils, but you’re clever devils.”

“And you will leave us in peace?”

“What else can we do?” Angus shrugged.

“You might gas us,” observed the Batrach with an inflection which called the bluff.

“All right. You win,” admitted Angus miserably.

“Goodbye,” said the Batrach.

As they took an uphill tunnel, Angus turned to the doctor.

“And you really think they’re happy here?” he asked.

“Less unhappy than they’d be anywhere else,” was the reply, “and what more can you wish any man?”

Sen-Su’s lilting Martian voice joined in:

“And now?”

“And now,” responded Angus, “we go back to Earth to preach the brotherhood of man and the damnation of Batrachs.”

And so, though it is colonized, you will fail to find the word “Asperus” on Earth’s proud colonial lists.

THE END.

[End of *Exiles on Asperus* by John Wyndham]