

ADVENTURES OF FUTURE SCIENCE

May

Wonder Stories

HUGO GERNSBACK
Editor

"THE MOON MISTRESS"

by Raymond Gallun



Other Science Stories
In This Issue

"BROOD OF HELIOS"

By John Bertin

"VANISHING GOLD"

By Capt. S. P. Meek

"THE VENUS ADVENTURE"

By John Beynon Harris

25

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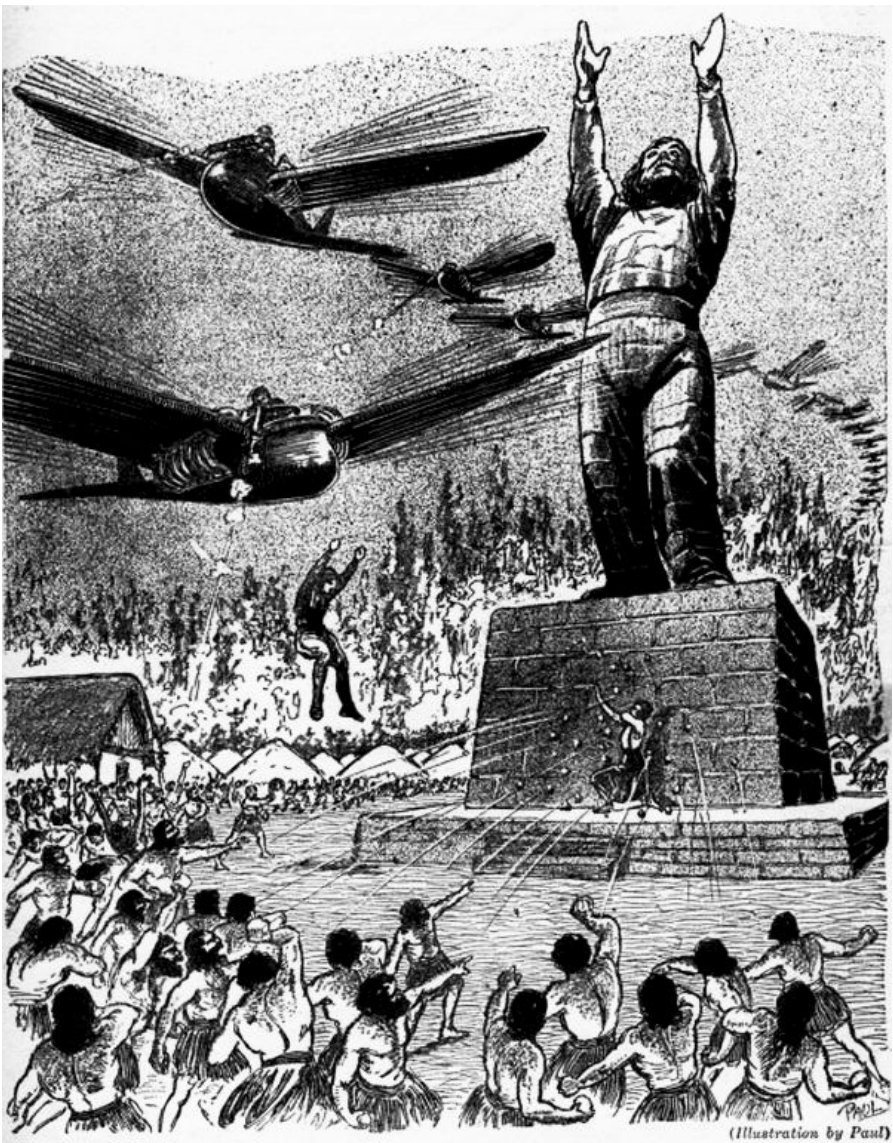
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(Illustration by Paul)

The Wots seemed to break the spell that held them. They flung back their arms and a volley of stone flew through the air toward the lonely figure.

THE VENUS ADVENTURE

By

John Wyndham

Writing under the pseudonym John Beynon Harris.

by the author of "Worlds to Barter"

Illustration by *Frank R. Paul*.

First published *Wonder Stories Quarterly*, May 1932.

Mr. Harris, whose "Worlds to Barter" provoked such a storm of controversy, gives us now what he calls "realism in interplanetary travel." This is no ordinary interplanetary story: it is a human and gripping adventure of explorations into a new world with a surprising series of developments.

What Mr. Harris shows so powerfully is the effect of environment upon two races: the rise of one and the steady degeneration of another to almost the level of the brute. As our author points out, when men from temperate climates have gone to the tropics one of two things has happened: they have either transformed the tropics and tamed it to civilization or else the tropics have conquered them and they have sunk slowly to the level of nature.

The same struggle must go on when men go to other worlds to live and colonize. Just as the human race on earth became divided into a number of races some of which forged ahead to great civilization, and others remained in a barbaric state, so there will be the division of the race on other worlds.

CHAPTER I.

You may have read in the history books of Joseph Watson or, as he later called himself, Noah Watson; but it is probable that you have not found more than a slanting reference to his exploit. History is like that. As we go on with a longer and longer written record behind us, either events must be foreshortened and incidents dropped out, or else the earlier centuries must be lopped from our knowledge.

It is too much for any but a specialist or a group of specialists to study all the strange phenomena of human history. We have, therefore, in this year, 2926 A.D., chosen tire former expedient of compressing our knowledge and whittling it down to the main facts and causes, with the inevitable result that many figures, once of world importance, are now remembered only in the museum libraries.

No one, save perhaps his own followers, could have ascribed world importance to Joseph Watson, but there can be no doubt that he was a remarkable figure in his day.

He was born in Scotland in May, 2104. It was a natural birth, for in the more rural northern districts the people still clung with a Puritan obstinacy to the superstitious belief that an incubated child was bound to be abnormal in some way. The Anti-Incubation Society's pamphlets with their spurious and harmful "proofs" that no incubated child could possibly be considered to have a soul, wore distributed in enormous numbers and with telling effect among the partly educated and the simple-minded. Such a prejudice dies hard and, even today, one sometimes hears of atavism to the extent of natural birth occurring in the obscurer corners of the earth.

Watson's mother paid the penalty for her crudity and credulity by dying at the birth of her son—a very frequent sequel to such a primitive mode of reproduction, as will be well understood—and the fact that she handed her life on to him seems to have had a profound effect on his character. He is reported all through his schooldays to have been an "erratic youth, given to introspection and not without flashes of misleading genius." The phrase "misleading genius" is puzzling, but there is little doubt that it refers to his strange, retrogressive mental outlook frequently shown by a firm adherence to principles long exploded.

It was during his university career that he entered upon a form of enthusiasm which will be understandable to few persons today, and therefore requires some explanation.

In 2123, the belief which all the world holds today, that of the Fundamental Order or Prime Origins, was known only to a small group. The rest of humanity grasped only a fragment of this whole and each section of people interwove its particular fragment with a different set of customs and superstitions to produce what it called a "religion." These "religions", it must be understood, had all of them the same basis but differed in form according to the climate and the ancestry of the different races. Thus there would be found in the colder countries a hardy and stern "religion", and in the warmer zones, a more colorful, less practical belief.

Joseph Watson, a Puritan at heart, gathered around himself a similarly-minded group and left his university with the firm determination to start a "Revival."

He began his campaign with the powerful backing of the Anti-Incubation Society. Quite what mental twist led him to ally himself with the very body whose pamphlets were

responsible for his mother's death, it is difficult to understand, but there can be no doubt that its views gave him his later war-cry of "What's natural's right."

From the very beginning his meetings were a success. An eye-witness of one of the earliest wrote: "The great, gaunt figure of Joseph Watson as he appeared on the platform would have impressed any man. He started to speak with a deceptive quietness of voice and mildness of manner, but as he continued this wore away.

"His mane of fair hair tossed and shook with the emphasis of his gestures and his deep, Scottish voice boomed sonorously through the hall. His eyes took on a fire as his enthusiasm rose and it was hard to believe that they did not look out beyond the audience at some mystic vision. I can safely assert that there was not a man nor a woman in all the great gathering who was not at least temporarily held under his sway."

Watson climbed from triumph to triumph. His meetings became occasions for turning out special police to control the crowds. Even the overflow halls were besieged by throngs who struggled to hear him, if only through a loudspeaker. The Anti-Incubation Society began to develop an active following in Scotland numerically surpassing its wildest dream. Money poured into its war chests until it became a power to be reckoned with. Nor was it alone in reaping the golden harvest which Watson's voice fostered.

"What's natural's right," Watson would roar and then proceed to trounce the vivisectionists, the vaccinationists, the birth-controllers, the alcohol drinkers, the smokers, the gamblers, before winding up the exhibition with another blow at his old enemies, the incubationists.

At the end of each meeting he would drop his ferocity with a suddenness which took his audience by surprise, and kneel in prayer.

In three years his own supporters were raised to such peaks of enthusiasm that they made Scotland too hot to hold him.

A mob in Glasgow went straight from one of his meetings to the local Incubation Home and wrecked the place from cellar to roof. Not only was the damage to property considerable, but the outrage started a controversy which was debated hotly all over the civilized world. Briefly, the problem raised was: "Is it, or is it not, murder, to destroy a foetus which is developing in its incubating tank?"

A similar attack was made on the Edinburgh Home. The crowd was beaten off with casualties, but a number of police were killed outright.

In Dundee, Watson's too enthusiastic followers attempted to enforce prohibition by the simple expedient of wrecking all licensed premises. Whole streets were wet with spilled drink and a policeman's head seemed as good a place to smash a bottle as any other.

The Government decided to take action and warrants were issued for the arrest of Joseph Watson as the instigator of unrest in most of the towns and cities of Scotland. But the warrants were never executed for Watson chose to disappear. The Government was saved a great deal of trouble by his action.

He is next heard of in America, some seven years later. The date of his arrival and the manner in which he filled the intervening time must remain forever a mystery. Furthermore, he was no longer Joseph Watson, but had become Noah Watson, though whether by his own design, or by gradually acclimating to a nickname, is doubtful. It remains, however, quite

certain that Joseph and Noah were one and the same: no one who had once seen him could mistake the man.

He was still reforming and still trouncing those sections of the community who attempted to improve on nature, but now he was even more general in his accusations of wickedness and more fiery in his breathings of warnings about the “wrath to come.” Somewhere during the last few years he had picked up a seed of thought which grew in his fertile mind to the conviction that the world was due to end very soon, or if not to end, at least to be punished for its wickedness in some catastrophic and highly unpleasant manner.

It seems odd to us now that a man should be able to believe such a thing—not only believe it himself, but persuade others of its truth. Nevertheless, it must be remembered that in the twenty-second century knowledge of our world was, like many other forms of knowledge, in an extremely rudimentary state. It was even easy for anyone to predict the end of the world and find educated persons to accept the prophecy without the slenderest data.

Watson would never reveal whence he obtained his information of the imminence of a “judgment day” by earthquake. He said merely that it was coming and soon. He called upon everyone to repent, claiming that each was a sinner though he might not know it.

“Noah,” said this new Noah, “was sent to warn the world before the Flood. You have read what happened to those who did not heed him. Now I have a warning for you. Do you forget the way in which they mocked Noah? Do you mean to mock my warning too?”

But his second campaign did not repeat the success of his Scottish days. Perhaps it lacked the sentimental appeal. Perhaps his moment was not well-chosen. His meetings, though vast, lacked the worshiping silence of those former gatherings where the audience hung upon each word. Now, some even came to scoff; it was one of these who cut in on him with the question: “Where’s your Ark, Noah?”

A number of persons laughed. Watson faltered in his speech and lost the thread of his whole discourse as he was greeted with cries from all parts of the building: “Yes, where’s your Ark? Show us your Ark, Noah.” Someone at the back started to sing “The Animals went in Two by Two,” and for a while, the meeting was in an uproar.

Watson, for one of the few times on record, lost his temper.

“I’ve got an Ark,” he roared. “I’ve got an Ark and when it saves me you’ll be sorry you didn’t believe. You won’t be inside it—you’ll be burning, all of you.”

Watson was telling the truth. He had an Ark.

In 2133, at the beginning of his “end of the world” campaign, he had contrived somehow to meet Henry Headington and right from the start he had managed to impress that gentleman. Headington was among the richest men in the world. His aircraft factory in Chicago had netted him such a fortune that his wealth could never be accurately estimated. Or rather it should be said that by the time the computation was complete, the value of the holdings had altered to a degree which rendered the estimate useless. He was hedged around, as were all wealthy men of his time, with secretaries and guards, but Watson had not only approached him but enlisted him as a supporter.

CHAPTER II.

Into the Unknown

Henry Headington was not a great deal interested about the future of his soul, about which Watson appeared to worry a great deal, but he was concerned at the possible results to his comfortable existence should the earth indeed blow up. In the course of the many serious consultations which took place between the two, Headington became more and more convinced until his belief in the imminent catastrophe grew firm as Watson's own. But Henry was a man of different mettle. At the end of one sitting, he slowly removed his cigar (of which Watson disapproved) and regarded the other impressively.

"You talk a lot," he said. "You get around telling people to repent. Maybe they will, maybe they won't, either way it's not going to help them a lot when it comes to a flare-up. Of course, talking's your line and I don't blame a man for following his line, but it's not mine. I don't talk things; I do 'em."

That was Headington's way. His experts were all assembled and instructed, and within a few weeks the first fruits of their labor began to appear in the shape of a gigantic shed raising itself in a corner of the Headington Experimental Rocket-Drome. Throughout the Headington concerns there was more than a little speculation as to its purpose. Obviously the hangar was intended for a craft of a size hitherto unattempted. Rumors crept out and flew around, as rumors always will.

It was reported as an intention to build the biggest stratosphere plane in the world. Others gave it as their opinion that old man Headington had gone mad and wanted to get to the moon. The opinion of all outside the knowledgeable few was that the machine would be a colossal failure. Probably such a huge bulk would never lift from the earth, and even if it did the payload would be infinitesimal.

But the work went steadily ahead. The designers sweated in their offices, bending over intricate plans and drawing till their backs and eyes ached. They may have been skeptical of their power to fulfill the boss' demands to the letter, but they did not show it. The pay was good, but even more important to men who had spent all their lives complying with government aircraft regulations, was the allowance of a free hand. No longer were they bound by the Governmental restrictions regarding noise, power to bulk ratio, size and position of crew's quarters, multiplicity of safety devices where one efficient instrument would serve, and all the other hundred and one trials of their profession.

The object this time was perfection and no worry about working to cost limits. All Headington's fortune was behind them if they wanted it. And so they feverishly drew line after line with the delirious intoxication of the power to make their dreams come true.

The pattern-makers at the foundries were presented with problems which caused them to swear and scratch their heads, but then they too caught the enthusiasm of the designers and solved each difficulty as it came. The instrument builders were asked to produce such gauges and measures that their heads ached with inventive effort. The metallurgists gleefully produced the formulæ of alloys previously considered too expensive to be of any practical use, and gradually a huge bulk began to grow inside its huger shed.

Headington had developed a simple faith in Watson which raised the latter to a combination position of a minor prophet and a good-luck mascot. He was insistent that the

reformer should attend the keel-laying ceremony of the great ship and make frequent visits to observe the progress of the work.

"She's going to be a marvel. Nothing like her has been tried in the history of the world," the millionaire said proudly.

"The *Ark*," murmured Watson. There was a far-away look in his eyes as though he stared back through history at that other *Ark* waiting on its mountain to save the faithful.

The *Ark*, when finished, was condemned by every government inspector, without exception. It was not even permitted a trial flight and some went as far as to recommend its destruction lest someone were tempted to create a public danger by taking it up. Headington's money and influence served to dispel the danger of the latter threat being carried into execution, but even his backing failed to accomplish the granting of a license for the craft.

So the *Ark* stood untested in its shed for many months. It was kept fully-provisioned and loaded to its limit with fuel and supplies of all kinds. The owner's faith in Watson never wavered, even many of the mechanics and engineers were converted from their former scoffing, but the *Ark* itself gradually became a laughing-stock for the world. Photographs of its stupendous shed occurred in newspapers everywhere. Misinformed articles on its builder's hopes, fears and intentions were sure of a ready sale. Watson encountered increasing jeers at his meetings once his association with Headington was known, and the two of them figured frequently in popular cartoons. The world, in fact, treated the new *Ark* much in the same way as it had treated the old.

Then Watson's wife, a woman as inflammatory as her husband, publicly announced that she had been granted a vision.

"And in my vision," she cried, "I saw the world spew forth flames. It was split asunder on account of its wickedness and from the great clefts its fiery life surged out, turning the oceans to clouds of steam, rolling over the land in a wave of fire which melted the very mountains in its path. And as I stood in awe of the great punishment visited upon evil-doers, a voice seemed to whisper in my ear, 'November,' it said, 'November the twenty-second.'"

It is impossible in these well-ordered days for us to appreciate the weight carried by such an unsupported assertion. Some were wise enough to take no notice of the woman's raving, but the names of Headington and Watson were so much in the public ear that the report was circulated all over the world to become in many a distant land the subject of apprehensive speculation or the cause of skeptical laughter.

But there was one group which took it seriously, neither arguing nor debating, but accepting it as a fact. Headington forced on what final preparations were necessary with a growing agitation since it was already late September. Watson grew more impassioned and his meetings became wilder until it was rare for them to end without the intervention of the police. There is a description of him in those last days throwing out his arms in gestures of the most violent oratory while his wife knelt before him on the platform, facing the audience and praying it to repentance.

A month before the catastrophe was due, the police forbade the holding of any more meetings, and Watson and his wife passed from the public sight.

The night of the twenty-first of November, 2134, was long remembered. All over the world groups of nervous persons remained watching and praying with an irrational sense that death was better met fully clad than in night clothes, even if it be instantaneous destruction.

An observer of the final scenes in the great shed of the *Ark* luckily remained alive to tell of the events he saw there.

“Headington had gathered together all his family, most of his engineers and designers and their families and even many of the workmen in addition to the crew and its relatives. All were aboard and ready save for a small knot of watchers to one side of the colossal flier.

“Once midnight had struck, the whole shed was heavy with an apprehensive silence. The group comprising Headington, Watson, Mrs. Watson and one or two more hung breathlessly over a solid stone table. Their eyes never for a moment left the needle of a seismograph for which it served for a mounting base.

“At the end of an hour the silence was so ominous that one would have given a mint of money for the relief of breaking it, but still nobody spoke. Occasionally the sound of someone moving uneasily inside the vessel’s entrance port rustled out into the shed to disturb the tomb-like stillness.

“There was a sudden intake of breath. Had the needle kicked? The group bent still closer. The needle kicked once more, definitely and decisively. The end had come. There was a wild stampede into the shining safety of the *Ark*.”

There is little need to tell most people how the *Ark* left. How the passengers were in such terror that they even neglected to open the doors of the shed. How the shed itself was so shattered by the impact that it collapsed killing most of those left within. But there can seldom have been a more gorgeous and awe-inspiring sight than that monstrous rocket as it took off. A curving tail of fire spread golden behind it lighting the countryside with the glare of a man-made comet. Scorching the earth beneath it, it passed in glory: head-on for the stars.

The rocket did far more harm as it went than had been caused by the small subsea earthquake in the Pacific a few minutes before. Many imaginations played with its probable fate, but no evidence came to support them, and gradually, like a million other incidents of history, it slipped into the all but forgotten past.

Some maintained that it had managed to leave the sphere of Earth’s attraction and that such a feat, once accomplished, could be performed again, but no one knew how. The chemists, the designers, the engineers had gone with their ship and their knowledge had gone with them.

It was not until Hal Newton made his famous expedition that any knew for certain the fate of the *Ark*.

CHAPTER III

The First Plans

The story of Hal Newton's exploit properly begins more than a year after he married Davida Jonson or, as she is now known the world over, Vida. The two had left their incubators within a month of one another. They had played together as children and grown up with their brilliant minds racing until in the spring of the year 1920 they had decided to pull together.

Hal passed out of his college the youngest rocket-pilot ever created. The thunder of the rockets was the throb of life to him and he handled his planes as though there existed an understanding between himself and the machinery. Man and craft worked together with the smoothness of perfect accord.

Vida was little less outstanding in her chosen calling of chemist. She slid through her classes collecting the envy and amazement of her professors, for she seemed to learn in months what others painfully acquired in years. Already, at twenty-four, she had interesting discoveries behind her and a future of brilliant promise. It was given to her to leap where others plodded.

The marriage was scarcely popular in their set; there were too many broken hearts at Vida's feet and too many sighs behind Hal's back, but none could doubt that the match would be a success.

For a year the two pursued their occupations as before. Hal hurtling through the sky, his body still no higher than the stratosphere while his imagination, as ever, reached out to the stars. Vida coercing her chemicals and dreaming of a future far different from that which fate held in store.

Then the great Gordon Jonson, Vida's father died, and all his millions came to her.

On July the fifth, 1922, the great Newton venture received the first gentle push which was to launch it into space.

The Newtons and their guests finished an excellent dinner and adjourned for coffee and cigarettes to their comfortable lounge. Hal had shown himself somewhat preoccupied during the meal and now he plunged into talk in the manner of one determined to get the matter off his chest.

"Vida and I have a proposition to lay before you people," he said. "It's not going to be a simple little jaunt so I don't ask any of you to give me your final answers at once—it is the kind of thing which will be the better for thinking over."

He surveyed his guests for a moment. There was Temberly, the biologist, barely thirty, but already going a little bald on the crown, short-sighted and sharply bird-like in his movements. Next to him sat the bulky Bill Crawshaw. Bill's father had been the last of the famous explorers and his son would no doubt have followed in his footsteps had there been a single corner of the world left unexplored.

As things stood, he was forced to the substitute of roaming the earth, looking for trouble, an occupation at which he was said to excel both in finding and settling. Lastly there was Lucy Kramer with the face of a Madonna hiding under its placidity a genius for chemistry nearly equal to that of her co-worker, Vida.

"The proposal is this," Hal continued. "Vida has discovered a truly remarkable explosive which has, we think, solved the problem of opposing the earth's gravity. Ever since I was a

kid, it has been my ambition to get out into space. With Vida's discovery and a special ship which I have almost finished designing, I think it can now be done.

"Now, the suggestion is this: are you willing to come with us?"

There was a moment's pause during which no one spoke: Hal went on:

"Of course it is impossible to tell you what the odds are against our ever returning. There are plenty of known dangers as well as the thousands of unknown, but Vida and I have enough faith in ourselves to risk them and we want to know if you have."

The biologist looked at his host with an expression of doubt.

"Er—I don't quite see what I could usefully do in space. After all, I don't think it is likely that you will find any forms of life there—though, of course, you might," he amended hastily.

Vida looked at him and smiled encouragingly.

"We don't expect to, but you see we don't intend to stay in space for long. We shall land."

"Where?" demanded Temberly and Crawshaw simultaneously.

"On Venus," Vida said as she cast a glance in her husband's direction.

"I had thought of Mars," Hal admitted, "but Vida's converted me. I think she's right when she says that it would be unwise on a first trip to land on a dead or dying world where there may be insufficient air. It is quite possible that some readjustments may have to be made before the return journey and that would prove awkward."

"There's a chance of good sport there?" inquired Crawshaw.

"My dear Bill, how can I possibly tell you? At a rough guess I should say that you will probably be granted more than you expect. Venus is considered to be in a very primitive condition—it may be in a reptilian age. Trying to hit a brain the size of a walnut in an animal as big as a house ought to be a good test of marksmanship even with a rocket-shell rifle."

Bill beamed.

"I'm your man, Hal."

"Good. But don't hesitate if you want to reconsider it."

"That's all right—I shan't want to."

"What do you think about it, Tem?" Hal asked.

Temberly's eyes wandered uncertainly round the room; he appeared to be seeking inspiration.

"Well—er—" he began.

Vida broke in. After favoring her husband with a glance of irritation, she turned to the girl beside her.

"Lucy?"

"Of course." Lucy spoke in a soft, deep voice which matched the calmness of her face.

Temberly was understood to mumble that he, too, would join the party.

The rest of the evening was spent in arranging responsibilities. Hal, of course, was to be chief pilot and he had his eye on a likely man called Heerdahl for a relief. The air conditioning plant, atmosphere testers, concentrated foods, etc., fell naturally into the province of Vida's and Lucy's interests. Crawshaw was to have charge of munitions and armaments and was with difficulty restrained from there and then delivering a lecture on the science of gunnery. Temberly went off into a brown study of contemplation as he made mental lists of his biological necessities.

"There must be someone whose job it is to keep a full account of the expedition," Vida declared.

Crawshaw who had grown abstracted suddenly brightened.

"I know the very person for that job. Lots of experience and a good all-round general knowledge. Nobody better—if she'll come," he ended doubtfully.

"She?" said Hal. "What's all this, Bill? Who is she?"

"You must have heard of her—Freda Linden."

Vida looked relieved. Bill Crawshaw had a reputation for being a little erratic in his friendships.

"I've met her," she said. "She'll probably come."

"That leaves only three vacancies," Hal observed. "They must be filled by technical men—say two engineers and an electrician."

The party broke up late. Each had been allotted his or her part and accepted with a steadiness which warmed Hal's heart. As he watched the visitors drive off, he was full of an affection for these people who were going to help his dream towards realization.

"You were right, darling. I ought to have known better than to ask Temberly before he knew what Lucy intended. When do you suppose those two idiots are going to do something about it?"

But Vida was not listening. There was a far-away look in her eyes.

"You know, dear, there is one thing we must do before we go off on this adventure."

"Lots of things, darling. What's this particular one?"

"We must pay a visit to the home and see about renting an incubator."

CHAPTER IV

On Venus

Setbacks and worries crowded thick and fast upon the Newtons during the next few months. Parts arrived below specification and had to be returned. The alloy for the exhaust tubes proved unequal to the strains it would have to bear. *Jonite*, Vida's new explosive had to be rendered more stable. But gradually, as the year wore on, the *Nazia* began to take shape.

Hal conducted the others over the ship and asked for their advice on points of interior fitments. In about one hundred feet of overall length they found several cabins; one main living room with windows of fused quartz; a cooking galley and pantry and a small laboratory which would have to serve for the chemists, the biologist and the photographer as occasion demanded. Vida and Lucy criticized the cooking arrangements and demanded alterations, while Crawshaw stipulated for weapon racks to be fixed to certain walls "just in case."

Apart from such details, very little appeared to have escaped Hal's attention. They marveled at the ingenious disposal of fuel tanks and the compactness of the machinery which was to undertake the stupendous task of shooting them through space. Crawshaw regarded the simple control-board and its attendant array of pressure dials for the different rocket exhausts, almost with misgiving. It looked, he thought, more like a typewriter and a collection of clocks than the nervous system control upon which they would all depend. But he shrugged his shoulders and moved on; engineering, electrical or otherwise was not in Crawshaw's line. He inspected the ammunition lockers and small-arm store with approval.

When they left the ship, it was to gaze up at the shining hull with a still greater respect for its marvels of compactness and comfort. The ship's name in large letters on the bow caught Crawshaw's eye.

"Why the *Nazia*?" he asked.

"It means 'fiery' and this craft is going to have more fire in her than ever was gathered together before," Hal explained.

At the end of June, 1923, she was declared ready for a trial flight—an unfortunate necessity. So far the work had progressed, if not in secret, at least without publicity, but the *Nazia*'s trials brought the Newtons on to the front page. Reporters saw the chance of a scoop in this new, winged ship which thundered through the skies at incredible speed. They saw it pass over as a gleam of silver with roaring red ports and, with hastily gathered information, they rushed to their desks.

"A new day has dawned in the history of aviation—"

"Epoch making discovery by young pilot—"

"Hitherto undreamed of speeds in the lower atmosphere have been attained by—" they scribbled.

Hal refused to give any information to the newspapers. He was, he said, merely carrying out experiments and had no intention yet of publishing any results. Nevertheless, from an obscure source the truth leaked out. Hal Newton was to challenge space. Even the date of his intended departure was coaxed into print so that the world might gaze at the adventurers.

"On August the twentieth Hal Newton will set out on his attempt to reach the moon," said one paper with a magnificent disregard for accuracy.

People were no longer so skeptical as they had been, of man's ability to conquer space. They had become, in fact, so used to the idea that they were beginning to grow irritated over the many unsuccessful attempts which had been made. The papers gave lists of Hal's predecessors. There was Jornsens who had fallen into the Pacific. Craig Who, like Headington, had never been heard of again. Drivers who had succeeded only to the extent of making his machine forever a satellite of Earth. Simpson who had fallen in Chicago and wrecked a fifth of the city in the resulting explosion: and the rest of the gallant army of would be explorers who had laid down their lives. Thanks to the efforts of the press, coupled with its own morbid desires to stare at doomed persons for the last time, an enormous mass of people surrounded Newton's flying ground on August the twentieth.

The crowd was more than annoyed when told that the *Nazia* had taken off the day before.

Hal had spread orders to his complement to be ready to start on the evening of the nineteenth, and to keep the date secret.

He and Vida were awaiting them aboard the ship. The first to come were the two excellent engineers, Mackay and Freeman. Then Heerdahl, the second pilot, arrived with a clatter in a single-seater sports rocket, a speedy and essentially unsafe machine of his own design. Bill Crawshaw loomed out of the night accompanying little Freda Linden who possessed half her escort's height and twice his assurance. Smith, the electrician, stumbled frantically on to the steps of the *Nazia* apologizing breathlessly for his lateness, only to discover that he had mistaken the time. Lucy Kramer explained that Temberly had suddenly remembered some essential at the last moment, and dashed back for it. He turned up some ten minutes later in a depressed condition, having failed to find this important article.

"And that's the lot," Hal said as he ran his eyes round the group. "All ten of us. There's no point in delaying longer."

He leaned out to wave farewell to the little bunch of pilots and engineers which stood enviously by, then withdrew and watched the door settle into its sealing gaskets.

"Couches everyone—and don't forget your safely straps."

Vida pressed her husband's hand as he passed her on the way to his own slung couch. He gave her an encouraging smile.

"We'll make it, darling."

He gave a final glance round the room to see that nothing swung loose.

"Ready?" he called.

All settled themselves as well as possible to resist the effects of acceleration. He fastened the safety strap around him and laid a hand on the control desk at his side.

"Here we go."

He pressed a group of keys. Again a rocket of Earth's venturers shot out; head-on for the stars.

It is kinder to say little about the actual flight. No doubt means will one day be evolved to make such a journey more of a pleasure and less a test of endurance than it is at present. The human constitution is ill-adapted to withstand the effects of rapid acceleration or deceleration, and lack of gravity, while not so serious in its results produces extremely distressing reactions at first. Not until the *Nazia* was several days out could her occupants be certain that the eating of a meal would prove worth the trouble.

The effect of the start was little more than negligible on the two pilots and engineers. In their years of training and practice they had learned how best to resist and how to recover. Of

the rest it may be said that there were torturing moments when they one and all wished that they had been left at home to die comfortably in bed. But, even with its failings, the human machine is the most adaptable form that we know. Not only that, but it has a special facility for unpleasantness of minimizing it in retrospect.

Five days out, each was wondering why he had been so fussed about little discomforts and making mental vows that he never would be again. Vows to be as easily broken as made.

At first there was novelty to occupy the travelers. The great empty blackness of space with its myriad sparks of stars, the sun itself flaming and flaring undiffused, seeming away to one side as they traveled in a great curve to intersect with Venus' orbit. But the unchanging soon grows dull, and soon they left the fused windows to seek occupation.

Without exception they admit that the first fortnight aboard the *Nazia* was the cruelest test of nerves they had ever undergone. None felt well and all were insufficiently used to the surroundings to be able to settle down and forget the vast nothingness outside. Their restless minds were forever urging and willing the ship to greater speed in the anxiety to have done with the journey and to know what lay before them. Hal has written in his log of his admiration for the restraint they exercised to keep from breaking into open quarrels.

The worst period must drag to its end. Hal had calculated a month for the duration of the flight. When he was able to announce that the ship was up to time and that the fortnight had seen them past the halfway mark, it seemed as though that invisible milestone out in space had lifted a spell from the whole company. It was almost as if, until that moment, they had not believed in the reality of what they were doing nor in the fact that ahead, Venus indeed waited with tasks to be performed and problems to be solved. With one accord they woke from their dejection, threw off the lethargy and went to work.

Crawshaw overhauled his armory. Temberly looked to his slides and specimen boxes. All began to accept weightlessness, with its attendant inconveniences, as a mere discomfort instead of a cause for permanent grumbling. Hal watched with satisfaction the morale of his ship improve. He had known that they were a good lot at heart for he had chosen them with care, but there were moments in the early part of the journey when he suffered from misgiving—perhaps he himself was not so unaffected by the monotony and cramped quarters as he thought.

Venus, at long last, hung like a great frosted globe close by. It had the appearance of a huge, fleecy ball for none of its surface was visible through the swathing of clouds. Eager eyes watched the planet incessantly for some revealing rift, but Venus was keeping her secrets till the last.

The *Nazia* had been gently decelerating for some days. After the strain caused by the start, Hal considered it wiser to treat his company to an easier stop. Not until they were comparatively close was it necessary to order:

“Couches everyone.”

With rockets blasting fiercely from her bow ports the *Nazia* began to nose down. Soon she was roaring through Venusian skies like a fiery dragon seeking a resting place on this alien planet.

The ship landed with only a slight concussion. She slithered for a few yards on her shining belly, lurched a trifle to one side and then settled to rest. The eagerness of the travelers caused them to forget the lingering discomforts of deceleration. There was a hasty unbuckling of

safety straps followed by a rush across the sloping floor to the windows. A surprised silence was their first reaction to the strange world.

A soft white light filtered through the thick layer of clouds to reveal a queerly unfamiliar scene. They were resting almost in the center of an oval space which appeared to be a natural clearing. It was dotted here and there only with low shrubs; further back the edge of a forest was visible. The trees were of moderate height and smooth-stemmed until they broke into a flourish of small, broad shoots at the top. The shoots appeared to be more fragile than branches, yet stronger than leaves.

Creepers were slung in great loops from each shock-headed tree to its neighbors and below grew a thickness of shrubbery, some ten to twelve feet high. Every one of the plants visible was different from anything they had known. Instead of the familiar soothing green of Earthly landscapes, they faced a vista where all was of the same white-grey color. The trees, with their vague likeness to palms, the lesser bushes and even the bed of thick, twisted stalks which covered the whole clearing, all had that same look of being bleached and rendered lifeless by some all-pervading blight. The first inspection damped all spirits.

“Venusian grass is a pretty poor imitation of the real thing,” said Heerdahl peering at the foreground. “Looks like a million fat, white worms frozen stiff.”

Vida shuddered slightly.

“It’s not very welcoming,” she agreed. “I can imagine all sorts of queer things creeping silently in that tangle of forest.”

Lucy’s deep voice expressed the sensations which lurked in them all.

“It’s a ghostly world, full of pale horrors. Nothing moves but a few curls of mist in the distance. You see, the leaves just hang tiredly, there’s not a living breath to stir them. Perhaps any moment they will be parted by some grey ghost.”

Smith, the electrician, moved uneasily.

“Do you want to give us all the horrors?” he inquired. “It looks bad enough without all the spook stuff.”

Temberly who had been goggling wordlessly out of the window, suddenly turned and ran down the room.

“Hi. Where are you off to?” Hal called.

“Outside,” the little man replied, choking with excitement.

Hal dashed after him and caught him as his hand was on the opening lever of the main port.

“Steady on, man. You might kill us all. We’ve not tested the air yet. Vida,” he added, “get your sample and tell us if it’s safe.”

While they waited impatiently for the result of the analysis, Freda, with the help of Crawshaw, set up her large camera and started it clicking at the view.

“Might as well take a still and have done with it—it’s a waste of movie film,” Crawshaw muttered disgustedly. He glowered out at the silence scene and added dejectedly to Hal: “Where are all these monsters you talked about? I can’t see anything more dangerous than a few washed-out cabbages.”

Hal smiled.

“I never knew a pair of people in such a hurry as you and Tem. He wants to dash out and pick plants without caring if he dies in the attempt, and your first thought on reaching a strange world is to start a massacre. You wait a bit—it looks as though there ought to be

plenty for you to do in there.” He waved a hand to indicate the thicker, misty forest in the background.

“Oxygen content a little higher than normal, otherwise much the same as our own atmosphere,” came Vida’s voice from the little laboratory. “Quite safe, though rather dense. You’d better equalize the pressure in here slowly.”

Hal busied himself for a moment with gauges and then turned to address the rest.

“Now we’ve got to settle who is to go out on the first expedition and who stays with the ship. Temberly must come, of course, forcible restraint is the only alternative in his case. And we’ll need Crawshaw with his weapons. Three people, at least, must stay on the *Nazia*. What about you, Smith?”

Smith nodded and cast a contemptuous glance at as much of Venus as was visible through the window.

“I’m quite willing to keep out of that stuff,” he said.

“I’ll stay, too,” Lucy volunteered. “Its more—more human in here.”

“That’s two then. What about you, Freeman?”

Freeman glanced questioningly at Mackay.

“I guess we’ll both stay if you don’t mind,” said the latter.

“I might have known it,” Hal laughed. “Has anyone ever succeeded in separating you two?”

“Not for long,” Mackay said with a grin.

“Right, then that’s settled. You four stay and the rest of us make a short exploration tour. Bill, I think some machetes would be useful in that stuff.”

CHAPTER V

Exploring

It was a subdued party of six which tramped away towards the trees. The queer silence and lack of motion in their surroundings seemed to quell even the cheerful Heerdahl as they emerged from the *Nazia*.

Each was lightly-clad as a result of Hal's warning.

"The temperature isn't as high as we feared it might be. The air's so dense that it probably eases it off a bit. But we've got to remember that we're twenty-five million miles or so nearer the sun, so wear only essentials."

Though shirts and shorts weighed little, they were encumbered with other necessarily heavy paraphernalia. All carried pistols in belt holsters and the men, save for Temberly, slung rocket-shell rifles across their backs. The little biologist was already so laden with two large, black specimen boxes that he could not be further impeded with the weight of a rifle. Hal carried several instruments including a short-range radio transmitter for communication with the *Nazia*. Freda was panniered on one side by film box and on the other by camera and firmly refused Crawshaw's offers to relieve her of their weight. Crawshaw, himself, and Heerdahl bore rucksacks containing a small quantity of food, while at their belts, as at Hal's, dangled heavy machetes.

The only sounds to break the stillness were those they made themselves; the rattle of accoutrements and the soggy, squashing noise as the fat tendrils covering the ground were crushed by their progress.

Temberly, after a rapid inspection of the growths underfoot, forged ahead with swinging specimen boxes in the direction of the forest.

"We'll have to keep an eye on him," Vida said loudly.

Hal looked at her in surprise, wondering why she found it necessary to raise her voice.

"Yes. It'll be easy to get lost in that stuff," he found himself shouting in reply.

Vida laughed at the startled expression with which he heard his own voice.

"It's this thick atmosphere. Makes things sound much louder," she said.

"Well, this beats tombs for silence. I haven't heard a sound yet except the row we're making ourselves," Heerdahl observed.

They reached the fringe of the forest, to catch up with Temberly who was staring in a puzzled manner at a curious plant.

"Look at this thing!" he cried excitedly.

"Ghastly looking object," commented Crawshaw unimpressed. "What's up with it? Looks the same beastly color as all the rest, to me."

"Well, it is a flower."

"Humph. Try again," Crawshaw advised.

"It is. It's just got two main petals—those upper and lower things looking like jaws."

They all gazed at the growth. It measured some three feet across and its petals were indeed like jaws, giving an impression that an enormous head was gaping at them.

"You see," said Temberly pointing eagerly inside, "it has stamens with pollen on them."

"Well, why not?" asked Crawshaw in bored tones.

"Even I can see that. It hasn't any color to attract insects and cause pollination," Freda said.

"But suppose the Venus insects hate color—they might, you know?"

"Don't be a fool. Bill. Of course—"

"Incidentally, has anyone seen any insects?" Vida interrupted.

Nobody had.

"It's very queer," Temberly puzzled. "I suppose there are no insects here, but in that case how does the thing manage to get fertilized?"

He peered more closely at the great, pallid flower and leaned over to gaze short-sightedly inside. He put one hand against the lower petal.

With a sudden swish the upper half swept down upon the lower, blowing a cloud of pollen into his face. The rest of the party laughed heartlessly at the sight of the little man choking and spluttering over the flower dust he had swallowed.

"Well, there's your answer, Tem," said Vida. "The plant is very sensitive when it is touched. It blows out the pollen and hopes for the best."

Temberly, recovered, regarded the plant with admiration, as though it had accomplished something very clever.

"Ingenious—most ingenious," he said with the air of one paying a compliment. "A sort of natural bellows."

They paused while Freda took her photograph of the great flower, and then decided to work into the forest.

"We must keep close together. No dashing off to one side (particular application to Temberly). Remember, we don't yet know the period of Venus' rotation. There might be serious consequences if it were to grow dark suddenly and we were separated. You had better lead, Bill. You've got a machete in case of heavy going? Good. Now Temberly second, and for heaven's sake don't hold up the procession too much, you're going to have weeks to examine all this stuff. Everybody ready? Let's go."

They forged ahead with but little conversation. Occasionally there was a pause while Crawshaw cleared a way through the soft growths and Freda seized another opportunity for a camera shot. Otherwise they plodded steadily. After two hours the conviction was rapidly growing in the mind of everyone, save Temberly, that Venus was a remarkably dull place.

"Just a damned great forest of celery," observed Heerdahl. "I say, Tem," he shouted up the line, "why is all this stuff so corpse-like?"

"I don't know—been wondering about it. Obviously these plants have no chlorophyll; they must use something else instead. It may be that they don't break down carbon dioxide the same way, or perhaps they don't use it at all. I can't tell you anything about them until I've had a chance to do a few experiments."

The party continued its advance in silence. There was a sudden shout and an explosion ahead.

"What is it?"

"Missed it," said Bill's voice disgustedly. "Little thing a bit bigger than a rabbit—same color as everything else in this rotten world."

"A mammal?" inquired Temberly excitedly.

"How the devil should I know—I only caught a glimpse of it running. Anyhow, it shows that there is something besides plants in the miserable place."

He called back down the line a few minutes later.

"I say, it seems to be getting clearer out there on the right. What about making that way?"

"You're leading."

They came out at the head of a shallow dip of land leading down to the shore of a large stretch of water. Whether sea or lake, it was difficult to tell. The limit of visibility being always low on Venus, the water appeared to stretch away until it indefinitely mixed with the ever-hanging mist. Hal tasted the water and was just opening his mouth to pronounce it fresh, when away on the left came the sound of a long, rumbling bellow, followed by that of a colossal splash.

Quick as a flash, Crawshaw had unslung his rifle and torn off over the adjoining rise in the direction of the noise, leaving the rest unrecovered from their alarm of the unearthly roar.

"Damn the man," said Hal. "I'll go and fetch him back. You look after the others, Heerdahl."

"What do you think that can have been?" Vida asked, watching her husband disappear in the wake of Crawshaw.

"God only knows," Heerdahl said. "There's no reasoning to go on in this place—might have been anything from one of those obsolete reptiles he talked about, to a factory hooter. Beastly mournful whatever it was."

"Don't you think we ought to go too?"

"No, we might easily miss them. Besides, orders are orders. I think we might have a cigarette and pollute the air of Venus for the first time with tobacco smoke."

The two sat down and leaned back against a rock. Heerdahl put his rifle across his knees, lit Vida's cigarette and then his own. He inhaled deeply and with satisfaction.

"That's good."

Temberly had wandered down to the water's edge and was busily filling little vials and packing them in his specimen case for future examination. He then bent down to examine some subwater growths with a deep attention which rendered it possible to consider him safe for the moment. Freda was indefatigably brandishing her camera at a variety of likely and unlikely objects.

"You know," Heerdahl reflected, "this might be quite a pleasant world if only it didn't look so drearily monotonous. I don't think I ever realised before what a difference color can make."

Vida nodded.

"It's rather like living in a photograph—nothing but whites and greys and darker greys. With this diffused light there aren't even any clear-cut shadows."

"Not much use for sundials in this place—I wonder if the sun does ever truly shine? By the way, how long is it since we left the *Nazia*?"

"About three hours."

"Then I should think we'll have a fair spell of daylight yet. We'd only just left the shadow when we landed, so it was not very long after dawn. Hullo, what's Tem up to?"

Temberly was knee-deep in the water looking agitatedly down and pouncing from time to time, apparently without making any catch.

"What is it?" Heerdahl called.

"Fish—come and look at them."

"Oh, hang fish. I prefer to be comfortable."

He and Vida continued a desultory conversation during the following half hour. No further bellow broke the silence, though once or twice big ripples on the surface of the water gave an indication of unknown creatures stirring in the depths.

"I hope they're both all right," Vida said nervously.

"Oh, they know how to look after themselves, besides we'd have heard shots if there had been any trouble."

Even as Heerdahl finished speaking, a hail reached them as they saw two figures striding over the skyline.

"Nothing," said Crawshaw with deep disgust, in answer to their inquiries. "We poked around a bit and found footprints the size of dining tables leading down to the water, but we never got a smell of the creature itself."

"No need to be so gloomy. You could scarcely have carried the thing home if you had shot it," Heerdahl pointed out.

Temberly left his dabbling and walked up to the party.

"Most interesting," he announced. "A three-eyed fish. One eye set in the top of its head. Of course there were such things on Earth, but I never hoped to see more than a vestigial third eye, at best. This is a very interesting place, you know."

"Glad you think so," grunted Crawshaw. He turned to Heerdahl.

"Where's Freda got to?"

They all looked around. There was no sign of Freda.

Crawshaw turned glaring upon Heerdahl.

"You were left in charge here—why did you let her go? It was your business to look after her."

Heerdahl colored angrily.

"Protection was my job and I'd have done it if it had been necessary. I wasn't told to be a nursemaid. I couldn't keep the girl here by force."

"You ought to have forbidden her to go out of sight."

"A lot of notice she'd have taken of orders from me—or from anyone else."

"Shut up, you two," said Hal. "You won't get anywhere by reviling one another. Bill, you've got a voice like a foghorn. Let it go."

Bill obeyed with a stentorian bellow which, in the thick air, sounded very little inferior to a foghorn. They listened tensely for a reply and Vida thought she heard a faint answering hail on the right. Heerdahl agreed.

"Anyhow, she must have gone in that direction. If she went back into the forest the way we came, Vida and I would have seen her, and if she'd gone along the shore to the left you two would have met her."

Hal nodded.

"We'd better get along. We can leave signs marking our way so that she can follow on if we miss her. Now, for God's sake, everybody keep together this time."

Their way along the waterside was easy. The main forest did not begin within some hundred yards of the brink and left a walking surface covered only with the usual matted tendrils. Visibility, however, was rendered poorer than ever by the constant undulations of the land. Hal Newton has recorded that for the atmosphere to be so dry and clear as to allow sight of even a large object more than a mile away, is a rare occurrence indeed on Venus.

At intervals Crawshaw emitted another powerful shout and the party paused to listen vainly.

“Heaven knows what she wanted to come along here for,” he grumbled, “it’s all just the same as the place we stopped at.”

“FREDA!” he bawled again.

This time there came an unmistakable answering shout from somewhere ahead. The whole party took to its heels.

“Just over the next rise, I should think,” Hal said jerkily as they pelted down the side of a shallow gully.

They reached the next vantage point and paused, breathing heavily, to look about.

Some three or four hundred yards ahead they could make out the figure of Freda. Her head was bent over her inevitable camera, while around her clustered a group of some eight or nine pigmy creatures.

“Put that up you fool,” snapped Crawshaw to Heerdahl. “You can’t use a rocket-shell rifle at this range—you’d blow the whole lot of them to bits. Besides we’d have heard her pistol if they had attacked her.”

“The best thing we can do is to get in close quietly, we don’t want to scare the things and spoil her chances of a good photograph,” advised Hal.

“I say, did you see that,” Vida asked.

“What?”

“I did—she spoke to them,” Heerdahl said.

“Don’t be a fool,” Crawshaw began. “How the blazes—?”

“Hands up,” called a high-pitched voice behind them.

CHAPTER VI

Dingtons and Wots

The five swung round.

“What the—?”

“Hands *up*,” demanded the voice.

At the sight of six leveled barrels they obeyed swiftly. Then followed a silence as the explorers gazed amazedly at their captors. The holders of the insistent weapons returned the stares unblinkingly.

They bore more resemblance, perhaps, to monkeys than to any other earthly form of animal, yet the likeness was remote. For one thing, they stood upright with the straightness of man though their legs were very short in proportion to the rest of the body. For another, the close, silvery grey hair which covered them, grew even on their faces. The average height must have been somewhere between four feet four inches and four feet six, and their heads showed evidence of no mean mental development.

The faces of the creatures were given an oddly half-human look by reason of their high-bridged noses. And the hands, with thumbs set in opposition, differed from the human hand only in possessing a curved claw at the end of each finger.

Six of these claws were hooked menacingly round the triggers of six weapons.

Crawshaw broke the silence, and with it, the spell of indecision which seemed to hold both parties.

“Did—did they speak in English?” he asked incredulously.

Hal wore a puzzled frown.

“It certainly seemed that way,” he admitted, “but—hang it, it must be a form of mental suggestion. We only thought we heard the actual words when they transmitted the thought. They couldn’t—”

As though to contradict Hal’s theory, one of the creatures spoke and they could see its lips form the words.

“Take their guns,” it said.

A companion laid his rifle carefully on the ground and approached. Crawshaw lowered one hand threateningly.

“Stop it, Bill. Do you want to get us all killed? We better submit gracefully for the moment—they’ve got the drop on us now.”

The creature relieved them of all their pistols and rocket-shell rifles, looked doubtfully for a moment at Hal’s radio transmitter and, intent on taking no chances, removed that as well with the air of one who is going to be on the safe side. He handed the haul to his companions who regarded them curiously before slinging them to their own trappings.

“Look out,” Heerdahl called involuntarily as the leader fingered a rocket-rifle trigger in a meditative fashion.

The creature looked up at him solemnly for a moment, then nodded and resumed his examination of the mechanism. He appeared puzzled by the rocket-shell cartridges, though he accorded the bullet cartridges of the pistols a barely interested glance; evidently the former were new to him. At length he too slung the rifle on his back and advanced to peer closely into the faces of the captives. Again he seemed puzzled, but whatever his problem was he decided

it could wait until later and turned to give an order to his followers. The whole party moved off from the rise towards the spot where Freda was still to be seen plying her camera.

“Well, I’ll say that girl’s got the reporter’s mind right enough—that’s the spirit which made the front page what it is today,” Heerdahl said admiringly.

As they approached, Freda broke off an animated conversation to greet them.

“Hullo,” she said. “I hoped you’d be along soon.”

“Well of all the—” Crawshaw began.

“Very kind of you,” Hal remarked coldly. “May I ask what the devil you think we’re going to do now?”

Freda shook her head.

“The question more properly is—what is going to be done with us? And there seems to be rather a difference of opinion about that. It all depends apparently whether we are Dingtons or Wots.”

“Whether we’re what or what?”

“No. Whether we’re Dingtons or Wots.”

“Or—?”

“Don’t you understand? They want to know whether you are a Dington, or whether you are a Wot.”

“Oh, I see. Well, what are they, anyway?”

“That’s just what I’m trying to find out.”

Freda turned back to her group of the creatures and resumed conversation. Hal rumbled his hair and scratched his head thoughtfully. As far as could be judged, the grey animals intended no harm. They seemed a placid and unexcitable breed, but on the other hand they carried weapons, and their first act had been to disarm himself and his party. At the moment there seemed to be no desire to make a move of any kind, all attention was concentrated on Freda and her conversation. Her conversation, that was the wildest improbability since they had landed.

“Hang it all,” Hal murmured, “it’s a bit steep. We come across twenty-five million miles of space—more than that—and what happens? The first inhabitants we meet on a strange planet address us in English. Damn it all, something’s wrong somewhere.”

He turned to the leader of the guards in an attempt to clear up the anomaly and listened closely as the creature tried to reply to his question. Despite the unusual pitch and hardness of tone in the voice, he was able to detect tin: presence of an unfamiliar accent and of other slight differences. His inquiry was misunderstood. Apparently the word “English” conveyed no meaning to the other though he spoke the language itself. Hal reshuffled his thoughts and tried another start. He indicated the members of his party.

“We are men—what are you?”

“Gorlaks,” replied the creature promptly and then added: “Are you Dingtons or Wots?”

“Oh, damn,” said Hal.

Temberly from the first had been observing the Gorlaks with the closest attention.

“Look,” he said, pointing to the furry grey figure to which Freda was talking. They followed the line of his finger.

From a kind of pocket in the creature’s front protruded the doll-like head of a miniature Gorlak whose bright little eyes were following their movements with solemn interest.

“Oh, isn’t it sweet?” said Vida advancing to the mother and her furry baby.

"Marsupials," Temberly remarked half to himself.

The Gorlak leader's sharp ears overheard him. He shook his head.

"Monotremes," he corrected proudly.

Temberly looked surprised and nodded thoughtfully.

"I know what a marsupial is, but I'm hanged if I've ever knowingly met a monotreme before. What is it?" Heerdahl asked.

"A step beyond reptiles. That is, it has warm blood and grows hair, but it still lays eggs and carries them in a pouch to hatch them out."

"That sounds a pretty efficient sort of system."

"So one would think, but for some reason or other monotremes never made great headway on Earth. We went on to the mammal stage and there are very few of this intermediate stage left. They seem to have taken well here and developed a high intelligence."

He turned back to the Gorlak.

"Are there many kinds of monotremes?"

"Five."

"And mammals, have you any of them?"

"Only Dingtons and Wots."

"Oh, hang it all, can't somebody clear up this business?" groaned Heerdahl.

"Now, listen to me—" he began but he got no further.

A plaintive sound on a high, carrying note came floating from the direction of the forest. Every Gorlak became suddenly alert.

"Dington," said the Gorlak leader. He produced a curiously shaped whistle and blew on it to cause the same mournful note. In a few seconds came an answer, whereat the Gorlak blew again.

"Well, we look like finding out what a Dington is at last," said Hal as they watched the forest expectantly.

Again the note sounded. It was evident that the creature, whatever it was, was approaching, for the sound was much louder. The Gorlaks burst for a moment into high-pitched conversation which was impossible to follow.

"Good heavens, it's a bird—Look there, just over the trees!" cried Crawshaw.

Something with slowly flapping wings of tremendous span was looming out of the mist.

"It's pretty low—only just clearing— Good Lord, that's no bird, it's a machine," Hal gasped. "An ornithopter, sure as I'm alive."

They all stared at the leisurely-approaching craft.

"It's sinking too fast. It'll hit those trees as sure as—there, that bent it some."

The plane had just failed to clear the last outpost of the forest. Its wing tips, at the bottom of their stroke, fouled the bushy heads of the white trees and the whole contraption was knocked into a forward somersault. For a moment it threshed furiously before coming to rest inverted and asprawl, among the lower bushes. Shrill cries of alarm arose from the Gorlaks; with one accord they rushed off in the direction of the capsized flier, leaving their prisoners to shift for themselves.

"Well, we'd better go, too, seeing that they've got all the weapons," said Hal.

With the advantage of their longer legs they easily overtook the Gorlaks, and arrived well in the van at the wreckage. Somewhere in the jumble of broken wings and tangled bushes something was struggling. It evidently heard their approach.

“Hullo. Help me out of this damned thing, will you?” called an unmistakably human voice.

The aviator, when extracted, proved to be a tall, well-built man. A mop of fair hair surmounted a face which would have seemed remarkably pallid on Earth, but all were now growing so used to the grey-whites of Venus that they were able to make allowances for it. There was a twinkle of amusement in his eyes as he looked from one to another of their astounded faces and his mouth twisted with a smile as he spoke.

“You’ve been a long time,” he said, “but you are very welcome.”

There seemed no possible reply to this remark, and they remained silently surprised. The man seemed more amused than before. He turned to the leader of the Gorlaks.

“*Arrul*. Get us some food.”

Several of the Gorlaks scurried around and began to pull up neighboring plants. As they laid the bulbous roots before the party, the flying man picked one up and offered it to Vida, indicating that the rest should help themselves.

“You will find these quite good, though perhaps not very tasty,” he suggested. “Explanations are so much easier when one is reinforced with a meal, and I haven’t had anything to eat since before dawn.”

The rest picked up the vegetables. The flavor was weak, but they were not unpleasant, and a good cure for growing hunger.

CHAPTER VII

Attack!

The guard of four aboard the *Nazia* was finding time hanging heavy on its hands. They had all watched the rest of the crew disappear into the forest, with mixed feelings. In Lucy a definite sense of misgiving arose. She had been startled to see Temberly's misadventure with the strange Venusian flower and, though it had luckily turned out to be nothing more than a cause for laughter at his expense, it seemed to her to hint of mysterious dangers.

It was with uncomfortable apprehension, therefore, that she saw the forest swallow them up. Whether this had its root cause in a fear for them, and Temberly with them, or in a feeling that the four in the *Nazia* were now marooned in this strange place, she could not tell. She turned to Smith, at her side.

"It would have been better if they had left Heerdahl with us. Suppose they are gone a long time or get into some kind of difficulties, we can't take the ship to look for them."

Smith nodded agreement. He, too, was feeling depressed.

"Yes, we ought to have had a spare pilot—though Mackay might be able to move the ship if it should come to a pinch."

For the next two hours or so they occupied themselves about the *Nazia* in cleaning up the cabins and making ship-shape after the inevitable disorders of the run. Lucy, with her characteristic appearance of having allowed her thoughts to wander far away from her surroundings, was straightening out the chaotic condition of the pantry when Smith's voice recalled her to the window.

"I say," he shouted excitedly, "come and look here."

Mackay and Freeman also crowded close to the fused panes.

"What is it?"

For answer, Smith pointed silently at the edge of the forest. The spot he indicated was further away than that at which the others had disappeared and, consequently less distinct. Through the misty air they could dimly make out a white figure moving slowly towards them—without doubt a biped.

They offered no comment as they watched it approach. At last it came to a range at which it was clearly visible as a man. He paused for a while in interested contemplation of the ship. It was obvious that he had not yet seen the watchers in the windows and they were granted a good chance of observing him.

He stood a little less than six feet, as nearly as could be judged. His head was covered with thick, black hair which fell in a tangled mass about his shoulders. A beard, no less unkempt, straggled down across his chest. The only attempt at clothing was a short kilt of woven, whitish cloth and a broad belt to secure it. To the belt were attached a number of small pouches and a few hooks from which implements dangled. In the crook of one arm rested unmistakably a rifle.

The four looked at one another in surprise. Of the many things they had been prepared to meet, man had been one of the least expected.

The figure moved out of their field of vision, still regarding the ship intently.

"Gone around to starboard," announced Mackay.

"Is the entrance port closed?" Smith inquired nervously.

Freeman set off to meet the visitor, or to close the port should it seem necessary, while the rest moved over to the starboard windows for a view of the encounter. The result was disappointing. The prowler's jaw dropped for a second, then he turned and scuttled for cover like a rabbit.

"Queer," remarked Lucy. "Did you notice that he was white all over, like everything else here?"

Freeman returned.

"Guess he didn't like my face. Wasn't long in making up his mind, either. What happened to him?"

"Went back round the bow and streaked for the forest," Mackay replied.

"I suppose you've closed the port?" asked Smith.

Freeman looked at him.

"Sure, I closed it. Though it hardly seems necessary when the natives are as frightened as mice. What are you scared about, anyway?"

Smith shifted uncomfortably.

"I—I don't know. I reckon the whole damned place looks pretty nasty to me. I wouldn't care so much if something would happen; it's all this hanging fire feeling that I don't like."

He looked ashamed of himself, but brightened as Lucy backed him up.

"I know just how you feel. This place affects me the same way," she said.

The two engineers returned to their interrupted work and Lucy to her pantry while Smith kept watch at the window for a possible reappearance of the native. It was almost an hour later when he called to the other again.

"He's come back. Seems to be beckoning or something of the sort."

"Yes, he's beckoning," Mackay agreed. "I wonder why this sudden change of front—he wasn't too keen on us before?"

"After all, one would expect a savage to be scared at first," Lucy pointed out.

"Not too much of the savage about him. That looked like a fairly useful gun to me."

Mackay turned an inquiring look on Freeman.

"Well, what about it?"

"Sure, I'm game," Freeman agreed. "We'll just take pistols—you two cover us with rocket-rifles," he instructed Lucy and Smith.

The two men set out side by side across the squashing growths, towards the beckoner. They signed to him to advance and meet them, but he appeared to prefer his own choice of ground. Half the distance from the ship had been covered when the man slid back into the foliage.

"What the—?" Mackay began, but his question was answered before it was expressed.

The sharp crack of an explosion reached them. Simultaneously Freeman dropped.

Mackay hit the ground a split-second later. The rapidity of his taking cover tokened an adventurous life.

"Blast him," he muttered, but his words were drowned as the two on the *Nazia* sent replies crashing into the forest. The two rocket-shells exploded in the same flash among the trees.

"And that's settled him," thought Mackay, but he was canny. He unbuckled the holster of his pistol and raised it above cover. A shot drilled it promptly. Again there came the crash of rocket-shells as the ship answered.

Mackay crawled over to Freeman and inspected the wound with some relief. The bullet had just flicked him lightly, enough to stun and to draw a trickle of blood, but the most serious result would probably be a bad headache for a while. He grasped the other by one leg and started to crawl back, towing him towards the ship. Bullets still whistled over his head from the forest, and crashes behind him told that Lucy and Smith were returning the fire with interest. Gradually the attackers slackened and ceased, but Mackay was taking no risks. He crawled until he was near the spot where he must rise to climb aboard the *Nazia*.

“Give them hell while I make a bolt for it,” he called up to the pair.

Under cover of a furious burst of rocket-shells, he stood up with Freeman across his shoulders, tipped the other into the entrance port and climbed in himself. The door closed with a thud as Smith pulled over the control.

Lucy put up her rifle and went in search of water and bandages while Mackay, over the insensible form of his friend, made unprintable remarks about the Venusian natives and their ancestors.

“Well, thank God the — fools hadn’t got the sense to wait until we were closer,” he ended.

Under Lucy’s ministrations, Freeman soon came to. He lifted one hand to his head, simultaneously producing a flood of language which rivaled Mackay’s outburst, then:

“Did you get him?” he asked.

“Him?” said Smith. “There must have been dozens of the devils. We blew the part where the one man vanished into little bits and then churned up the stuff for a good few yards on either side. But they’re at it again. Listen.”

Through the thick armor of the *Nazia* an intermittent tapping was audible.

“Bullets.”

Mackay smiled slightly.

“Let ’em waste the stuff. A peashooter would be as useful to them—and just as effective against this bus. Let ’em try rocket-shells if they like.”

Smith crossed to one of the windows and called back:

“They’re advancing. A whole big ring of them closing in. Several hundred of them, I’d guess.”

“I suppose they think that they’re safe now that we’ve shut the entrance,” Mackay growled. “The aggravating thing is that they’re damn well right—our windows aren’t made to open, and we can’t do a thing but sit here like sardines in a can.”

Freeman, almost recovered by now, looked up with a grin.

“We can give them a nasty jolt when they come closer.”

He stood up and swayed a little uncertainly before staggering off forward in the direction of the controls.

“What’s his little game?” Smith asked.

Mackay gave a broad smile.

“Come and see,” he replied, motioning them to the window.

At their appearance a spatter of lead rained against the fused glass. Lucy started back in alarm.

“It’s all right,” Mackay advised. “This stuff beats six-inch steel.”

The crowd was now clustered closely round the ship. They could see the pale men’s mouths opening and shutting and knew that they were shouting as they brandished their

weapons. Some were even battering on the hull with rifle butts, though not a sound was audible inside, save the occasional flick of a bullet.

“Watch,” said Mackay.

The ship trembled slightly as there came a growling rumble. From fore and aft sprang sudden belches of flame, while a line of fire ran spurting swiftly down each side. The enemy broke and ran to a respectful distance.

“He turned the rockets on them. First the main driving and braking bunches, then a flip on the side steering tubes,” explained Mackay. “I guess he was feeling sore about that bullet he turned.”

“And now?” asked Lucy.

Mackay shrugged his shoulders.

“Checkmate. We just wait for something to happen.”

The enemy’s reaction to the situation was similar. A number detached themselves to fetch food from the forest and then all settled down comfortably—though well out of range of the rocket tube flames.

Freeman came back looking worried.

“We don’t want the others to run into this gang when they come back. Can’t you get them a warning on the radio. Smith?”

“I’ve tried. Couldn’t raise a chirp from them. I guess Hal’s set must have packed up or something.”

A few minutes later, an unusual glitter caught Lucy’s eye. She pointed:

“Look. There’s something flashing among the trees.”

CHAPTER VIII

Explanation

The fair-haired young man looked around the group. "Permit me," he said, "to introduce myself—Knight Dington."

Hal briefly introduced his party and himself.

"Now would you be so kind as to explain a few of these anomalies?" he suggested.

"Such as—?"

"Well, how you come to be speaking English, for instance, and the nature of all this Dington and Wot business."

"Then you didn't know?"

"Didn't know what?"

"Why, that we were here."

"Look here, suppose we start this thing at the beginning," Crawshaw interrupted. "Now, how is it that you and these—er—Gorlaks, speak English?"

"Because, apart from the Gorlaks' own peculiar language, it is the only one known on Venus," Knight replied with a mischievous twinkle. "But I'll try to explain. I suppose you have heard of Noah Watson's *Ark*?"

"You mean to say that the *Ark* really—?"

"Yes. In spite of the jeers it caused, it achieved its purpose. It left the Earth and landed on Venus."

"Then you are—?"

"I'll try to make it short. In the *Ark*, as you probably know, there were roughly one hundred and twenty persons—it was a large machine. Now, Noah Watson and Henry Headington were two men whose principles were vitally opposed. They agreed, in fact, about only one thing, and that was the imminent destruction of the Earth—a matter in which they were both entirely wrong.

"Headington soon found out that he had been misguided, but Watson to the end would never admit that he had been wrong. Headington looked back from space at the world from which he had exiled himself, and cursed because there was no turning back. From that moment he began to hate Watson. And Watson, still convinced that the Earth was now barren, unveiled the dislike he had hitherto concealed for Headington's way of life.

"By the time they reached Venus, it was quite clear that they would never cooperate to build up a new civilization. They separated the moment they could leave the ship and never saw one another again.

"The *Ark* made a very rough landing. Only some seventy-two of the passengers survived it. Of these, thirty followed Headington, while the other forty attached themselves to Watson. The two parties, with enmity in their hearts, set off in opposite directions and founded communities according to their different lights.

"All this, as you know, took place nearly 800 Earth years ago—about 1298 Venusian years—plenty of time to build nations were food grows readily to hand.

"Our records tell us that in the course of time various modifications have occurred. Our skins have lost their pigmentation and our chests are a little smaller since lung capacity does

not need to be as great. Our muscular strength, on the other hand, has remained at an approximately constant average since the pull of gravity is only a trifle less.

"The language has undergone merely a few, very slight changes in colloquialisms and metaphors, mostly derived from the names we were forced to coin to describe phenomena peculiar to Venus. Otherwise we believe we have changed very little."

"Then your nations are—?" Hal began.

"They are named after their leaders. Headington gradually became contracted to Dington in popular speech, just as Watson became Wot. I, myself, claim direct descent from the original Henry Headington, but the surname, too, has become Dington.

"The things which most puzzled Arrul and the other Gorlaks, when they found you, was really your complexions. Although the fact that you are fully-clad pointed to your being Dingtons, yet you were not normal Dingtons, but neither did you look like Wots. They can never have really thought you were Wots, or you would not be alive now."

Knight looked at their faces again and smiled.

"You will excuse me," he said, "but no wonder the poor Gorlaks were worried. You see, except when fashion decrees it to some of our women, colored faces are unknown here."

Vida looked curiously at the young man.

"You didn't seem very surprised at seeing us," she remarked.

"I was searching for you."

"But how did you know—?"

"An Earth ship was bound to come sooner or later. Once the secret of space travel had been solved, it was certain to be rediscovered. The thing which most surprises us is that you have been so long in coming. From the first, old Henry Headington used to gaze up at the clouds which hid the stars and the Earth he loved so well, saying that soon you would come and rescue him. But the months drew into years and the years into centuries, and so, for eight hundred years we have watched and waited, though no longer from any desire to be rescued."

Vida felt a surge of pity for the poor old man, far back in the past, watching the rolling clouds for the help which never came. Knight's voice was continuing:

"Last night we heard the roar of rockets and saw the red glow in the sky. There was an uproar and shouting; all the cities went wild. Everyone knew that the old man's faith was upheld at last. But you passed over us, heading into the Wot country. As soon as it became light—it was almost dawn when you passed—we sent out a fleet of scouts to find you."

They had risen to their feet during the last few sentences, and were preparing to depart.

"Can we go straight to your ship?" Knight inquired eagerly.

Hal nodded and produced from his pocket a small instrument in which a needle swung. The Dington looked at it curiously.

"I've heard of that. A compass, isn't it? I'm afraid it's no good here."

"No," said Hal, "I tried a compass before we set out and found that it just idled. This little thing is specially built so that it is always attracted to the ship."

He steadied it for a moment. Then they turned their backs on the lake and plunged into the forest in the direction indicated by the needle. Knight hung back a moment and applied a light to the crumpled remains of his ornithopter. As the machine went up in a sheet of flame he came running after the rest.

"Doesn't do to let Wots get hold of them," he explained.

Less than two miles had been covered when distant crashes became audible ahead.

"Rocket shells," said Crawshaw. "Rifle size. I'd judge."

"What are they?" asked Knight.

Hal briefly explained the principle of the self-propelling, explosive bullet.

"Never heard of them," Knight assured him.

"Then it must be our folks. Let's get a move on."

A while later there came a short, thunderous blast from the *Nazia's* driving rockets.

"What on earth—? Anyway, they can't have moved her," Hal added, after waiting in vain for a repetition of the sound. Half an hour later they came suddenly to the edge of the clearing. An exclamation broke from Knight, and he motioned the party back with one hand.

"Look there," he said.

They gazed in consternation at the shaggy headed, half-nude crowd surrounding the *Nazia*.

"Wots," said Knight in answer to their unspoken question. "This is going to be difficult."

"There must be hundreds of them. We can't attack that lot. How are they armed?"

"Rifles—they always carry them. Although their motto is 'What's natural's right', they unfortunately make an exception in the matter of rifles—they're pretty fine shots, too. Though, even unarmed, they'd tear you to bits."

"But we don't want to hurt them," Vida objected.

"Doubtless, but you don't understand these people; they are fanatics—dangerous fanatics. If they got hold of you—"

Bill Crawshaw interrupted rudely. His trigger finger was itching.

"This isn't any time for lectures. What are we going to do?"

"You better tell your people to sit tight where they are if you've got any means of getting a message through," Knight suggested.

Hal took his radio transmitter from the Gorlak who still carried it. Everyone watched as he tried for connection.

"No good. Can't raise them although there's a wire out."

He thought for a moment

"I suppose nobody's got a lamp?"

"I have," said Heerdahl unexpectedly.

"Good man, that's lucky. A heliograph's no good in this diffused light. Smith knows Morse, he used to be on telegraphs." He slipped the torch into a pocket and turned to one of the white trees.

"Don't go higher than about ten feet. These don't stand much weight," Knight advised.

For a few moments there was no reply, then an answering flash appeared in the *Nazia's* window.

"All safe?" Hal flashed.

"All O. K."

"Those men outside are really dangerous."

"We've had some."

"Then keep where you are. Don't open port until we have driven them off. Going for help now."

"O. K."

Either the exchange of messages had been unobserved by the Wots, or else, as seemed more likely, they had not realized that the ship's flashes were anything more than accidental. Hal descended and handed the lamp back to Heerdahl.

“What now?” he asked Knight.

“We’ve got to rouse Chicago and get them on the job.”

“I beg your pardon?”

Knight grinned.

“I suppose it does sound a bit strange to you. You see, old man Headington came from a place of that name, on Earth, so he chose to call our main city after it for old time’s sake—he thought it sounded homely.”

“Lead on. Now that I know the others are safe. I’m all for seeing your idea of Chicago.”

CHAPTER IX

Ambush

Temberly plucked at Hal's arm, his face was white with anxiety and his eyes pleaded for reassurance as he asked:

"You're sure they'll be all right, Hal? I mean, Lucy's in there and if anything should happen to her—" He left the sentence uncompleted.

"They'll be all right, old man. They're as safe there as any place in the universe. I'll bet a twelve-inch rocket shell would only dent the *Nazia*."

"Yes, of course," said Temberly. "I thought so, it's only—well, you know."

"I know."

A hoarse, sawing kind of whisper came from Crawshaw.

"Freda, for God's sake, come back. We're going now."

Freda, who had wriggled forward to the very edge of the clearing, stopped her camera, sighed and came squirming back to them.

"Lucky I brought a telephoto lens—it's a pretty long shot, and about the worst possible kind of light. Still, I think I've got it here," she said calmly, patting her camera.

"You'll drive me grey," said Crawshaw. "You little devil, how many times have I told you —?"

"Now, Bill dear, don't be a bear. You know perfectly well that I will not be ordered—"

"Come on," said Knight. "The sooner we get away, the better. It's not healthy here. Arrul is leaving five of his Gorlaks to watch. He and the rest are coming with us. He's given orders that one of them is to overtake us and report if anything seems to be moving here."

The procession took up its march while the Gorlaks who were to remain slid among the bushes. They seemed to disappear almost uncannily, so like was their color to that of their surroundings.

Knight led them in silence through the monotonous forest with a sureness and lack of hesitation which puzzled Hal. At last he inquired how it was done. Knight looked surprised.

"That's odd. I never thought of it I just know which is the general direction of Chicago—that's all."

"But how?"

"Sort of instinct. You use a compass on Earth, but as it doesn't work here, I suppose we've subconsciously developed a high sense of direction. But even if I were wrong, Arrul would tell us. Gorlaks always seem to know where they are."

As they trudged on, Hal put another question on a subject yet unexplained.

"We expected to find this world teeming with primitive monsters. So far we've only heard one, and seen a number of little, rabbit-sized creatures? Aren't there many big reptiles?"

"According to history, there were plenty, but they've mostly been killed by us or by the Wots. You see, rifles can do a lot in eight hundred years. A land reptile, that is, a large land reptile, is rare now, but there are plenty of weird things in the seas and rivers. That's been one of our greatest stumbling blocks. We think it probable that, although there is a great deal of water, there is more land than the continent we know, but we can't find out for certain."

"But surely, in all this time—"

“Think of our conditions. Nobody has yet managed to make a ship able to withstand the bigger marine monsters. If such a ship were built, there would then be the fuel problem. Such coal as we have is, geologically speaking, very recent and very poor, at that. On Earth you are said to have hard wood which burns well, but all our vegetation is soft, with a high percentage of water. Some of us have been drilling for combustible oil, but we have found none. It is no good depending on wind, for there seldom is more than a breath stirring.

“We have been able to manage a compact storage battery for our planes and other purposes, but it is no good for long-distance work. Besides, even in this continent there are some parts where planes are attacked by *pteranodons*, almost as big as the machines themselves—even the *pterodactyl*, which is comparatively small, is likely to wreck a plane if it should fly at it. Luckily they have learned to avoid these parts.”

“What a happy planet,” remarked Heerdahl, who had joined them. “But the things which really get me are how and why you use ornithopters—we were never able to do anything with them on Earth?”

“Oh, that’s easy. None of our ground is clear for take-off or landing, what’s more we can keep very little of it clear if we try. It’s always like this again if left for a few days.” Knight kicked a bunch of tangled white growths. “The water’s out of the question for a plane, as it is for a ship. So that killed the idea of a screw-driven plane. None of our chemists has been successful in duplicating the explosives which drove the *Ark*, and the only men who knew the secret were killed when the ship landed. So that puts rockets out. The only thing to do was to evolve something which would cope with both our conditions and limitations.”

“But the lift?”

“You must remember the denseness of our atmosphere, and the way design advances when concentrated upon.”

Heerdahl nodded.

“I’d like to examine one of these machines of yours.”

“You’ll have a chance soon.”

Vida had been looking worried ever since they had left the clearing. Now, with a quick glance round to see that none of the Gorlaks was within hearing, she asked:

“Are you sure that it was quite safe to leave the Gorlaks to watch?”

“Safe?” Knight looked puzzled.

“I mean are they quite trustworthy? There’s no chance, for instance, of them giving warning to the Wots that we are here?”

For a moment Knight looked indignant at the questioning of the little creature’s loyalty. Then he remembered that Vida could not be expected to understand.

“The Gorlaks are our friends,” he said with slight reproof in his voice. “They keep well away from Wots, in fact we gave them rifles to shoot Wots.”

“You gave them rifles to use against your own kind?” Vida asked incredulously. “Why?”

“Partly because Gorlaks are a delicacy to Wots.”

“You don’t mean—?”

“Yes, they eat them.”

Vida’s eyes widened with surprise and horror. Instinctively, she looked back along the line to the mother Gorlak and that little furry-headed baby which regarded the world so solemnly. She shuddered and felt suddenly sick.

“No,” she said. Heerdahl burst in.

"But they're—they're—good heavens man, it's almost cannibalism."

"That's how we look at it," Knight nodded. "The Wots, however—"

A high pitched cry in the rear, cut him short and brought the party to a halt. Arrul came up the line, bringing with him a Gorlak who panted heavily.

"What is it?" Knight asked.

The messenger reported that about fifty of the Wots had left the clearing where the ship lay, and made off into the forest.

"Following us?"

No, the Gorlak said. They were away on the left somewhere, but he had thought it better to report.

"Quite right," Knight agreed. He considered for a moment. "I don't suppose it means anything but, Arrul, you might scatter your folks and keep a lookout."

"Gorlaks," he remarked as the march was resumed, "are wonders for not being seen. They'll find out what is happening, all right."

"You were talking about the Wots," Heerdahl prompted.

"It is difficult to explain them without delivering a lecture," said Knight. "You see, so many causes have combined to make them as they are. Firstly, you must remember that they are descended from a fanatic or the close followers of a fanatic. It is even probable that Watson became thoroughly unhinged towards the end. He certainly compiled a remarkable book which seems to consist in part of an old work called the Bible, but mostly of his own instructions and prophecies.

"The Wots have so based their customs upon him, that in the course of time the teaching of Watson, himself, has become more important to them than the earlier part of the book. I have heard some of our scholars say that as Moses was to the Israelites so is Watson to the Wots—that conveys little to me but, perhaps, more to you."

"You mean that they almost worship him?"

"Some of them go further than that. There are figures and shrines set up to him in many places."

"But their attitude to the Gorlaks?" asked Vida.

"That is an outcome of Watson's teaching. He might not have approved of their manner of treating the Gorlaks, but he wrote that man is the supreme work of God, and is the only possessor of a soul—therefore the Gorlaks are considered to be animals just as much as any of the reptiles. The slaughtering of the little grey people has become almost a point of honor with the Wots—a sort of defence of their own status."

"That sounds like a kind of logical madness."

"It is. You see, not only do they practice natural birth and disallow incubation, but in the absence of any food problem or any form of control, they have been able to breed promiscuously and at random—with some queer results. While we Dingtons realized that breeding, in such a small community, must be carefully watched so that no one strain will become over-emphasized, the Wots took no such care.

"Inbreeding is not harmful provided that the stock is well-matched, but among them the strain of Watson's mania—and possibly that of several of his followers—was allowed to run riot. The result is that the unstable and fanatical race of Wots is more than twice as numerous as our carefully-raised nation of Dingtons. We are beginning to be faced with a number of very grave problems."

“So the Wots really went native.”

Knight looked puzzled; the phrase was evidently unfamiliar to him. Hal explained:

“I mean that we have a similar problem, though a small one, on Earth. In the tropics we find that a white man either conquers the conditions, or is conquered by them. There is no maintaining an easy level. It would seem, from what you say, that the Dingtons have conquered Venusian conditions, while the Wots have been beaten by them.”

“That just fits it,” Knight agreed. “Except that you flatter the Dingtons. We still have an uphill fight.”

“What I can’t understand about these Wot people,” interposed Crawshaw, “is why the devil they want to attack us. We arrive on a perfectly friendly visit, and the first thing they do is to lay siege to our ship. Why?”

“Just because you are blasphemers.”

“We are?”

“Watson told his lot that the Earth was destroyed—they’ve always hated us because we said it was not. Now you have turned up and, from their point of view, you are a set of living blasphemies.”

“But surely—well, hang it all, don’t we prove that the Earth still does exist?”

“That annoys them all the more—you obviously have not had much to do with a fanatical religion. Its very strength is its own immense obstinacy. If they once admitted that you have really come from Earth, then all the doctrine of Watson would begin to totter.”

“But—”

“Look out,” Knight cried, in sudden alarm.

Hal checked immediately. There was a sweet flavor in his mouth and nose. He tried to speak but the words would not come. His head swam and he had a sense of horrible sickness. Dimly he was aware of a hand firmly gripping his arm.

CHAPTER X

The Wots' Ruse

Hal's first sensation when he opened his eyes was a splitting headache. He lay for a moment on his back, looking up through the pale branches. The sky was darkening, but still shot with vivid streaks of color. Something stirred beside him and in a flash he remembered recent events. He sat up with a groan at the stabbing ache which the movement caused. At one side, Knight crouched with his head in his hands, while on the other Arrul squatted, looking at them both with concern.

"Oh, Lord," he muttered, putting both hands to his temples.

"It'll pass in a few minutes," Knight's muffled voice assured him.

To Hal's astonishment, the prediction proved true. The ache lifted as suddenly and definitely as if an actual weight had been removed. He looked around for the rest of their party. No one else was in sight, and he turned anxiously upon the other.

"Where are they? What's happened?"

Knight looked at him miserably and shamefacedly.

"Wots," he said. "Arrul thinks that the large party of them which left the clearing, made a quick march and cut us off. He couldn't get back in time to give us any warning."

"But why didn't they take us with the others?"

"Overlooked us. Arrul turned up at the last moment and dragged you into the scrub. I managed to stagger there as well, and he contrived to hide us both. Don't talk too loudly—there may be some of them still about."

"But, man, they've got Vida, Temberly, all of them."

"I know, but we can't help them if we get caught too."

"What will they do with them?"

Knight shook his head. If he knew he was not going to tell.

"To think that I was caught with an old trick like that," he said, with a mixture of disgust and remorse.

"Like what?"

For answer, the other pointed to a plant which grew close by. Hal could see that it was the same kind of Venusian flower which had earlier covered Temberly with pollen.

"They wedge the petals apart with a little rod and pour a kind of powder inside. Then, having attached a fine wire to the rod, they clear off to a safe distance either leaving the wire in the victim's path, or taking the loose end in their hands. The moment the wire is jerked the rod slips, and down comes the upper petal, puffing the powder out like a poison-gas cloud. Then they just come up and collect those who were near enough to breathe any of it, and tie them up before they have time to recover—it's a common Wot trick."

The last of the light had almost gone. Knight turned to Arrul.

"Can you take us through the dark?"

The Gorlak nodded. He never spoke unnecessarily. Knight seemed a little cheered.

"With luck, we'll be in time. They won't have got the others to the clearing yet. Wots never travel by night—they'd have to use lights and that would make them too good a mark for the Gorlak snipers. If we can get somewhere and send Chicago a message, we ought to be well on the way by dawn."

"I suppose they will be taking the others to the clearing?"

"It's an even bet. Let's get on."

Led by the little Gorlak, they stumbled on through the dark forest.

Lucy, on the *Nazia*, spent an uneasy night. It had been decided that since they were perfectly safe, the best course was to follow ordinary routine. Accordingly, after supper they retired to bed. She soon found that the prospect of sleep was remote, seeming momentarily to recede further. She tossed restlessly listening to the snores which drifted down the corridor from those two hardened campaigners, Mackay and Freeman. She envied them their power of detachment.

Her Madonna-like face bore wrinkles as she worried over the safety of the other party. The message flashed to Smith, "*Going for help now*," had been so brief and uninformative. She wished it had told more, though, of course, there had been the risk that the besiegers might have noticed.

"Going where? And to get help from whom?" Lucy asked herself.

Several times she crept quietly from her cabin to the main living room and peered out at the attackers. In the dim light she was able to see that they had not left their posts, but lay sleeping on the open ground. What were they waiting for? Surely they must realize that the *Nazia's* stores could support those inside for weeks, if necessary. But, if it came to that, why should they be hostile at all? None of the crew had offered fight until attacked.

Once more she climbed back to her berth and this time, while her thoughts wandered off after Temberly and the others, sleep overtook her.

It was Smith who woke her in the morning.

"Come here," he was whispering from the doorway.

"Go away while I get dressed," she commanded. "What is it?"

"It's the men outside. Come and watch them a bit."

The half-naked savages were all awake now. Some had made off for the forest, presumably in search of food, others were obviously on guard duty, while still more amused themselves according to their lights. It was to a group of the latter that Smith pointed. He and the girl watched them in silence.

"What's wrong with 'em? Have you ever seen people behave like that before?"

Lucy turned her head away. She was feeling sickened and disgusted and her face showed it.

"Yes," she said. "Once. It was amongst the more dangerous patients in a mental home."

Smith nodded.

"I wondered if that was it. But the queerest thing is that the others don't seem to take any notice of them. Do you suppose they're all mad?"

"Either that, or they are so used to it that they don't notice," Lucy replied. With an effort, she had overcome her instinctive revulsion and was watching critically again. The two engineers entered the room and stood behind them.

"What is it?" Mackay asked. Lucy told him.

"By gosh, you're right," he agreed after a few minutes' inspection. He gave a grimace of distaste; the normal man's first reaction.

"No good thinking of parleying with that lot," he said decisively. "We stay right here until the others bring along an army of keepers, or whatever it is they've gone to fetch."

He turned away from the spectacle outside and shepherded the rest to the middle of the room.

"Now we are going to eat," he announced. "What shall it be for breakfast?"

"I don't think I—" Lucy began.

"Oh, yes, you are, young woman. You needn't think I'm going to let you be put off your food by a bunch of lunatics, not even if I have to stuff it into your mouth myself. Come along and see what there is in the larder."

Under Mackay's spell of cheerfulness, they almost managed to forget the loose-lipped creatures and their unpleasant antics outside. By the end of the meal, they felt a great deal improved in spirits. Mackay asked:

"Now what are we going to do? We don't know when the rest will be back, so we might as well get on with something useful in the meantime. Now you, Lucy—"

Smith, who had drifted across to the window again, called back over his shoulder.

"Something's doing in the forest. There's a whole lot of these brutes streaking over there as fast as they can leg it, and there's another lot coming out to meet them."

Lucy picked up the field glasses and joined him. She twisted the focusing screw for a moment, then the glasses fell clattering to the metal floor. She swayed and went suddenly pale.

"What the—? Catch her, she's fainted!"

Mackay snatched up the fallen glasses.

"My God," he said, "they've got them!"

Nobody spoke for a moment.

"Hal's not there. Good man, Hal, he's dodged them. There's still a hope that he will be able to get help unless—" He stopped abruptly as the possibility of a grimmer cause for Hal's absence struck him.

The advancing Wots brought their prisoners close to the ship and arranged them in a row before the window. All had their arms tied behind their backs and looked weary and disheveled. Various of the Wots had proudly possessed themselves of the rocket-shell rifles and pistols, but the other accoutrements remained with their owners, even Freda's camera still being slung upon her side, and Crawshaw's machete dangling from his belt, tantalizingly out of reach of his bound hands.

Temberly, white-faced, looked up at them and raised his eyebrows inquiringly. Mackay caught his meaning and nodded, pointing behind him to where Lucy lay. Vida stood among the captors with a cool aloofness, while Heerdahl appeared to be testing the effect of a potent flow of rocket-service language. One of the Wots hit him a blow across the mouth, sending him staggering to his knees.

"Swine," said Mackay under his breath.

"I don't like the looks of this," Freeman murmured.

"You're right—it's pretty ugly."

There was a pause while several of the Wots consulted. One pointed to the two women, but the rest shook their heads. Then Temberly appeared to catch their notice, and they nodded agreement to some plan. The little biologist was roughly pushed nearer the window while the rest of the prisoners were drawn aside. One of the Wots produced a length of thin cord, tied it into a loop, and placed it about Temberly's head. Mackay's fists clenched whitely as he glared in futile helplessness.

"This is hell," muttered Freeman.

The Wot slipped a short rod through the loop, and began to twist . . .

A sound which was half whimper and half scream startled the two engineers. They swung round to see Lucy rushing from the room.

"By heaven, she's right," cried Mackay, "we can't stand for that."

He charged after the girl, catching up a machete as he passed.

"The Wots' ruse was successful," Heerdahl told Hal afterwards. "It was bound to be. Those four could not stay quietly inside the *Nazia* watching poor Temberly's eyes almost start from his head and seeing his face go livid with agony while the Wots gleefully tightened the cord. Crawshaw and I struggled like mad, but we couldn't do a thing other than tell the Wots what we thought of them. Yes, they got the others out of the ship, all right, but you ought to have seen them come.

"There was a big bunch of Wots waiting by the port, all ready to pounce—you could see them crouch for the spring as the door began to open. But they didn't know Mackay and Freeman—nor did we until then. Those two plunged out with heavy machetes whirling like wild buzz-saws. Man, it was astounding; they must have mowed down half the gang in the first rush, then a lot more Wots ran up to help.

"Mackay and Freeman stood back to back and hewed at the ring around them. I could see Mackay's face, and I'll never forget the way he grinned as he laid about him. Over his shoulder I could see Freeman's head bobbing about, bound with a white bandage—he wasn't doing too badly, either. None of the Wots dared to try a shot at such close quarters. And, believe me, those Wots in the front were just sliced, there was no dodging, because their pals at the back were pressing them forward.

"There was another bit of fireworks going on round Temberly. Lucy came out of the port, slid around behind the mill the other two were making, and rushed for the man who was doing things to Temberly. Her fingers were crooked like claws as she came tearing at him. Lord, man, you should have seen his face when she'd finished—well, it just wasn't a face, that's all.

"Of course, it couldn't last. Somebody put a rifle stock in the way of Mackay's machete and knocked it out of his hand; even then it nearly decapitated another Wot as it flung free. Mackay still smiled. He doubled up his fists and started busting their jaws, but they piled on him and then got Freeman from the back. Some of them managed to grab Lucy, and then they'd got the lot of us—except Smith. Nobody had noticed him in the general dust-up. We thought he must still be in the *Nazia*, but one of the Wots gave a yell and pointed. There was Smith, he'd got through somehow and was legging it for the forest; he was mighty close to it, too. About six or seven Wots fired at once. That was the end of Smith, poor devil.

"We began to wonder what was the next ingenious little beastliness in the Wots' minds. It wasn't long before we found out."

CHAPTER XI

Rescue

Arrul, the Gorlak, led Knight and Hal forward unerringly. At times the growths became so thick that even the dimness overhead was blotted out, and they were forced to hold one another to keep together in the darkness.

"Can the Gorlaks see at night?" Hal asked.

"Very little better than we can, if at all, but they seem to have some warning sense of obstructions—I've seen blind men avoid things in the same way. The doctors say that it is due to sounds being reflected by the objects."

They trudged monotonously on in silence. Hal was unable to see his watch, but it seemed certain that several hours had passed before they at last worked clear of the trees and stood on the edge of a large open space.

"That was very well done, Arrul," Knight said. Turning to Hal he nodded:

"From here, we can 'phone Chicago to be ready."

"From where?"

Knight pointed ahead. Hal gradually was able to make out the bulk of a huge building, so little darker than the sky which backed it, as to be almost invisible. While they were hurrying forward, Knight drew a small whistle from his jacket and produced that same wailing note to which Arrul had earlier given answer. Some seconds later, doors in the building opened to emit a beam of light which momentarily dazzled the three. They ran forward, Knight calling to the men silhouetted in the opening. To Hal, the diminutive appearance of these guards gave a new idea of the scale of the building. Soon they passed in through a tall archway and the gates clashed behind them.

"Wait here a minute," Knight said.

Hal watched him disappear through a small doorway, and then turned to study the surroundings with growing astonishment. It was evident, at once, that this was no single structure, but a whole town. The lighting was dim, for, as he guessed, the inhabitants were most of them asleep. But it showed enough for him to see that the buildings were arranged in concentric circles, and that he was standing between the two outer rings.

Straight ahead a large archway pierced the facade and through it he could see the road continuing for some distance, alternately dark and light, as it passed under more blocks or across more open spaces. Lights were showing here and there from scattered windows both in the ring before him, and in that through which they had entered. He was puzzled that no lights had been visible as they approached and asked Arrul the reason.

"Snipers," said the Gorlak with his customary economy of speech.

The guardians of the gate had been regarding Hal with a deep interest. It was obvious that they knew him for a member of the rocket ship. One of them overheard his question, and volunteered information:

"Originally, we were never safe from the Wots. Our only method of preserving ourselves from their marauding bands was to wall our cities solidly, and leave no opening for bullets. The Wots were far bolder in the old days than they are now. A century ago this city had to stand sieges, but even now the walls are necessary, as the Gorlak said, to save us from being

picked off by snipers. One could fight an army, but against sharpshooters . . .” He completed the sentence with an expression of disgust.

Knight came hurrying back.

“I’ve got through to Chicago. They’re getting things ready. We ought to be able to get there before they start, if we hurry.”

The guards had wheeled out a long, low, black machine. As the two slipped into their seats, Knight turned to Arrul.

“Collect your people and wait for us,” he said.

Arrul nodded solemnly, and the car slid off towards the center of the city.

“Straight road all the way to Chicago from the opposite gate,” Knight explained to the mystified Hal. “We rarely go out of the cities at night, but we’ve got to risk Wot bullets this time.”

Their approach had evidently been signaled, so that the far gates stood open and ready for them to shoot out on to a broad highway. Knight crouched lower over the wheel and put his foot down. The machine was remarkably silent, and seemed to go like the wind. Hal remembered that the other had spoken of storage batteries as almost the only method of powering on Venus. As they sped through the night, he asked:

“Why don’t you use radio? A portable transmitter would have saved us hours—in any case, I should have thought it was a necessity on this planet.”

“Won’t work,” Knight replied, his eyes fixed on the road. “Somebody’s always got new ideas to make it possible, but they never work out. You see, we’ve not only got two or three reflecting layers, but reflecting curtains, as well. It would be easy if they were constant, but they’re always shifting with temperature and climate. Apparently quite haphazardly—at least, no one yet has been able to predict their movements. Radio’s worse than useless if it is ninety-nine per cent certain to let you down.”

Hal remembered his own transmitter’s failure to raise the *Nazia* and nodded comprehendingly.

Knight, concentrating on driving, was quiet for a while, and Hal lay back in his seat to ease his weariness. He was almost dozing when the glare of lamps down the road, startled him. Knight sheered the black machine to one side, giving room to a row of heavy, squat shapes.

“Tanks,” he said gleefully, “they’ve not lost much time.” A few moments later he pointed ahead:

“Chicago.”

This time, it was no lightless city that they approached instead, the whole massive outer wall was bathed in a flood of whiteness.

Closer, Knight ran the car off the road, and sprang out. Hal followed, bewildered at the sight before him. The Dington forces were assembling for action.

The foreground was a scene of rushing activity, while behind, the wall of this new Chicago swept up in the floodlights like an enormous black cloth. Hal was struck with a sense of incongruity. In front of what might have been the ramparts of some medieval city, he could see tanks swiftly crawling from the huge main gateway on to the road. And, every now and again, a shadow as of a monstrous hat passed across the wall as one of the strange Venusian flying machines sank flapping, to take up its position in line. Everywhere there seemed to be a bustle and confusion, and a shouting of commands.

Knight hurried over to a group of officers and spoke for a few minutes, then he returned to Hal.

"That's fixed," he said. "They're letting us have a three-seater machine, and we start in ten minutes."

The take-off of the ornithopter was a curious sensation for a rocket pilot. Knight first depressed a lever on the dashboard and there was a rapid fluttering of wings outside. The whole craft vibrated uncomfortably as it lifted and begun to rise straight up. Looking left and right, Hal could see a long line of the machines churning the air in similar fashion. Down below, yet another detachment of tanks was streaming along the road.

"Looks as though your whole military force must be in this," he said.

The other grinned.

"Most of it is, and feeling pretty sore, too. After all, we've waited for you for eight hundred years and we feel you've had a pretty poor reception."

As he spoke, he leaned forward and made an adjustment. The shuddering of the machine stopped abruptly, for a moment it seemed to hang, then the wings slowly began to move again, this time with great, surging beats. Hal could see that at the bottom of their strokes, the tips reached well below the level of the landing gear, and he understood why the rapid, short movement had been necessary in rising. At first, the occupants were forced back in their seats as each heavy sweep forced the plane forward, but once the desired speed was attained they seemed to swim smoothly on in a silence broken only by a swishing which barely penetrated to the cabin.

"If we are going straight there, what about the tanks? They'll be far behind, won't they?" Hal asked.

"They aren't too slow on the road, though the forest will hold them back a bit. The Chicago tanks are really a reinforcement; those from the other cities ought to arrive much the same time as we do," Knight explained. "You know," he added, "your arrival has precipitated a proper war. Most of us have been waiting of having a slam at the Wots on a big scale for a long time; now we've got a cause which overrides all the peace party's protests."

The sky was beginning to grow lighter. In the thick air of Venus, the dawn was a spectacle of rioting color to make Earthly dawns a dull memory. Knight began to look worried. They were still some distance from the *Nazia*, and he was afraid of the things which might take place before they could arrive.

The day was nearly an hour old when they passed over the end of the road, and the city at which they had called in the darkness. They could see that the spaces between the concentric rings of buildings were filled with Dingtons who looked up, waving to the fliers as they passed. Faintly the sound of cheering rose to them and then dropped behind as they sped out over the forest. Knight pointed down to the lanes of crushed debris streaking the country below.

"The tanks are on ahead," he said.

It seemed to Hal that they flew dangerously near the ground, but he found that all the other ornithopters were on the same level, and realized that, as the day grew warmer, visibility was shortening in a way which made spotting from altitude quite impossible. Already the two far wings of the aerial fleet could only be dimly seen.

Half an hour later they caught up the tanks. Hal had only received a distant impression of these during the night; now an exclamation escaped him as he gazed down. The machines

were traveling on both wheels and tractor treads at a rate which was almost half that of the fliers. At the front of each projected two supports, holding what at first appeared to be a disk of bright metal. A nearer view showed it in reality to be a wheel of knife blades, revolving in the horizontal plane at high speed. By these devastating instruments, the soft growths were being swept away like melting butter, and the remains crushed to a dirty white pulp beneath the grinding tanks. Hal shuddered at the thought of the carnage should any of the Wots attempt to obstruct the monsters' paths.

A blasting roar from somewhere not far ahead, jerked him back to the matter in hand.

"Rockets," he exclaimed. "The *Nazia's* rockets, what the devil are they doing?"

A moment later they reached the clearing and could see the glimmer of the ship's hull. As they swept towards the clustering Wots, Knight pressed his machine gun button. He purposely fired high for fear of hitting the prisoners, but the effect was instantaneous. Scared faces turned up for one glance at the descending fleet of ornithopters, and their owners scattered in every direction.

Scarcely a shot was fired in reply as the hundreds of Wots bounded for the safety of the forest. Several planes sank fluttering beside the *Nazia* where three bound figures stood; the rest hunted the fleeing Wots to the trees. From one side of the clearing rose shrieks of terror as the wretches found themselves trapped between the pursuing machine guns of the ornithopters and the deadly tanks breaking cover ahead. As the machine landed, Hal sprang out and ran towards his roped friends. He noticed that the *Nazia's* port stood wide open, and a horrible fear gripped him.

"Where are the rest?" he demanded as he cut Temberly's bonds. "Where's Vida?"

"Those devils have got her; carried off all three of the women," said Crawshaw.

"And the men?"

"Dead, like we'd have been in another ten minutes," Heerdahl replied.

"Which way did they take the women?" Knight asked.

"Over there," Crawshaw pointed. "A plane like one of these came along. They bundled them all three into it and flew off that way."

"Damn them," said Knight. "I've always said that they'd got hold of some of those machines which were reported wrecked."

He turned to an officer.

"Find accommodation in planes for these two men," he directed, pointing to Crawshaw and Temberly. "We'll take the other with us. Put some tanks on guard here. We've got to be quick. You two get aboard," he added to Hal and Heerdahl.

Hal demurred momentarily.

"What about taking the *Nazia*?" he suggested

Knight took his arm and urged him towards the ornithopter.

"No good for this job. Too big, and besides, you can't use your guns. Come along, time's precious."

The great wings threshed furiously, and again the machine shuddered into the air.

CHAPTER XII

Finale

The clearing slipped behind and they were able to catch glimpses through the trees of feverish activities proceeding below. There was the sound of intermittent rifle fire. Knight pointed down.

“Arrul and his people are on the job,” he said. “There’s many a Wot down there who wishes he had never developed a taste for roast Gorlak.”

“Good luck to Arrul—I’m with him altogether,” growled Heerdahl.

“Judging by the sight around the ship, you didn’t do so badly yourselves,” Knight commented. “I didn’t count the Wot bodies, but there were plenty of them.”

“Not my doing, worse luck,” said Heerdahl. He went on to tell of the heroic fight of Mackay and Freeman, and the death of Smith.

“The next thing,” he continued, “was the arrival of the flier and the kidnaping of the women—and there were we, each with a dozen Wots hanging on to us, and all tied up, too. It was hell. We couldn’t do a thing but kick out, though we did that hard enough. After the plane had gone, they thought it was time to take it out of us, and started giving nasty looks at Freeman. He’d paid out a number of Wots in the scrap, and they weren’t pleased about it—they weren’t fond of Mackay either, but he had been disarmed a bit sooner than Freeman.

“Well, they held a bit of a talk and began to look so pleased with themselves that we knew something pretty beastly was in the wind. With nasty grins, they hauled Freeman away from the rest of us. First they ripped off his clothes, and then they tied a rope to each of his ankles and wrists—that wasn’t too easy: Freeman’s were tough fists, but they did it, and started dragging him towards the stern of the *Nazia*. It was only then that we saw their idea, and we had to stand by and watch them tie poor Freeman across the rocket exhaust tubes. One of the Wots went into the ship.

“I guess Mackay just went mad then. God knows how he broke loose, but he did, and before we knew what was happening, he was on that crowd with a machete in each hand—carving at them with strokes which ripped them to bits. I’ve seen a few rough houses in my time, but Mackay’s show made them all seem like petting parties. The Wots just melted away in front of him—those who didn’t get sliced. I don’t blame them, either. I know I’d have moved fast if I’d been faced with those two machetes and Mackay’s grin behind them. He ploughed through the gang right up to where Freeman was spread-eagled over the tubes. He’d only time to slash one of the ropes through before the Wots were back at him and he had to turn on them.

“It was just then that the Wot executioner found the rocket keys. He couldn’t see from the control desk what was happening back at the stern, so he just pressed.

“There was a gush of flame, with a roar which nearly split our ears, and the whole ship slid a couple of yards forward.”

Heerdahl paused a moment, then he added:

“When the smoke cleared, there was no sign of Mackay nor Freeman—they had been flashed out, and two dozen Wots with them. It was a mercifully quick end . . . A couple of minutes later, you turned up.”

For a time, nobody spoke. Knight's look was grim as he pushed the ornithopter at top speed. Hal seemed to be staring blankly ahead, all expression wiped from his face. It was Heerdahl who felt that he must break the silence his own story had created.

"Where, exactly, are we heading?" he asked in a tone which strove to be normal.

"To the Wots' one town of any size," Knight replied, catching the other's mood. "It's called Ararat."

"More traces of Watson—he was a Biblical old fellow, wasn't he? But I'd gathered that the Wots were more or less nomadic?"

"They are, mostly, but this is a sort of shrine in memory of Watson—their great religious meeting-place. Besides, they had to have some central manufacturing place for weapons and tools. Luckily they've never made more than small arms; it would need more organization and control than they like, to go in for big guns."

Hal broke in. There was a hard edge to his voice.

"Can't you get this damned thing to go any faster?"

"Flat out," replied Knight shortly.

The field of vision was so limited that they found themselves passing over the outskirts of the Wots' city before they had realized that they were near the end of the journey. Roughly made, single-story huts appeared among the trees, growing more numerous and more closely packed as they advanced. Soon they were looking down on twisting, narrow streets. The city of Ararat had more of the higgledy-piggledy impermanence of a gold-rush town than the solidity of a nation's metropolis. Moreover not a solitary figure was to be seen in any of the roads.

"Where—?" Hal began. Then a look of horror spread over his face.

They had reached an oval arena, packed with thousands of the semi-nude Wots. All were facing the far end, their heads bent down as though in prayer. On a great block, at the far end of the arena, was mounted the gigantic stone figure of a man. He was dressed in the clothes of a fashion long past, and was in the act of raising both hands to heaven, as though invoking.

"So they've made an idol of Watson," Heerdahl murmured.

Hal did not hear. He was gazing at a form standing before the block, dwarfed into insignificance by the huge statue towering above. From a metal collar about her neck, a chain led to a staple set in the stone. She saw the plane as it came, and lifted her arms in an imploring gesture. Simultaneously, the Wots seemed to break the spell which had held them. They flung back their arms, and a volley of stone flew through the air towards the lonely figure.

Knight slowed and banked steeply to bring his machine gun to bear. He could see a second plane, flying low over the crowd. He heard a great cry of "Freda", and saw a man drop from it.

By all rights, Crawshaw should have killed himself in that rash leap, but he did not. He landed sprawling in the space which lay between the crowd and its victim. In a split second he was up and running towards Freda. She sank under the hail of stones as he reached her. Crawshaw was flagging, something inside him had not stood the strain of that jump, but he reached the fallen girl and flung his own body across her as a shield.

Somewhere a rifle cracked. A spray of machine gun bullets answered and, as the other planes came up, each added its stream of lead. The Wots surged first one way and then the other, faltered, and then broke, trampling one another under foot in a wild dash for the safety

of the narrow streets. Still the machine guns mercilessly followed them; the Dingtons were out for blood this time.

Knight landed his ornithopter near the towering statue of Watson. Hal walked slowly from it to the two who lay before the stone block.

The others saw him shake his head and then gently lay his coat over the clasped figures. He stood for a moment looking down upon them, before he turned to walk unsteadily back.

"They are both dead and they are both smiling," he said quietly. "I think I should like to die like that."

"Hal," a voice cried. Vida's voice.

Hal opened his mouth, but at first no sound came.

"Where are you, Vida?" he managed at last. His tone was curiously unsteady.

"In a cell under the statue."

It was the work of a few minutes to free Vida and, with her, Lucy. Vida flung herself into her husband's arms and wept uncontrollably with relief.

Temberly bounded from a machine whose wings had scarcely ceased to flap and ran towards Lucy. Her eyes, too, were glistening wetly as they met.

"My dear—your head," she cried.

But Temberly had forgotten the angry red weal across his brow. His heart had been aching more than his head. They forgot too the merciless slaughter of the Wots and their city of fanaticism as the machine guns and the rifles of the Gorlak hordes pressed on to the killing.

"Did you know that stoning was their punishment for blasphemy?" Heerdahl asked.

The other admitted it.

"I was afraid so. The Wots seem to be travelling a reverse path; very soon, they would have been true savages, perhaps below the level of the Gorlaks. We must kill them off now, all of them; else we will never feel safe."

Heerdahl pondered in silence for a while, then:

"It's odd," he said reflectively. "Here are we, reaching out to the stars, while they sink back to the slime. Where does it all lead?"

"We must go to older worlds to discover that."

Of the rest you know. Newspapers and films have shown you pictures of the Venusian life. Temberly's book, "The Flora and Fauna of Known Venus", is a best seller. Most of poor Freda's salvaged pictures and notes have been published. Hal and Vida Newton have described both in print, and on the radio, the royal way in which the Dingtons treated their visitors when the *Nazia* was landed near that new and strange Chicago—all this is common knowledge.

My task has been, not to describe Venus, but to tell the story of her discoverers. And though five of those who set out have joined that glorious company of adventurers which has paid with its lives for the conquest of space: yet their memory is no less to be honored than that of the four who returned and the one who remains. On? Yes, Heerdahl is still on Venus, helping Knight to build a second *Nazia*. Any day may see them come, roaring like a man-made meteor, towards the Earth.

THE END

[The end of *The Venus Adventure* by John Wyndham (as John Beynon Harris)]