CAPTAIN FUTURE
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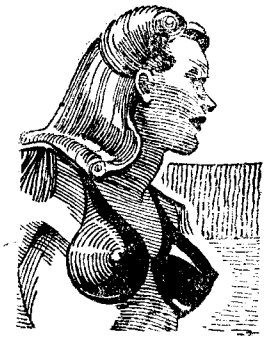

Curtis Newton and the Futuremen

in

a Complete Book-Length Novel

Days of Creation

By BRETT STERLING

Four Powerful Factions Work at Cosmic Cross Purposes in a Game of System-wide Stakes As Curt Newton and His Staunch Comrades Set Out to Create a Brand New Planet to Add to the Family of the Sun! 11

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all hitherto existing planets have taken up their abodes not far from the Equatorial Canal, where the climate is most pleasant. They have come in bewildering variety, and form the most cosmopolitan population yet seen within the System.

They have built up, with Government help, three main cities—Lunar City, named for the Futuremen's home, Cometstown, for the tear-drop-shaped vessel, and what may come as a surprise—Gragville, named, it need not be said, for the great robot himself.

The choice of a name for Gragville came only after an excited and somewhat amusing controversy that lasted for more than a month.

The mayor of what had at first been known as Settlement Number Three wrote to Newton asking that either he or Simon accept the honor of having the city named after himself, and be present at the dedicatory exercises. Simon, who had long since passed the stage of seeking such honors, refused at once.

Curt Newton, who had other matters to interest him at the moment, and could not spare the time needed to visit the city, declined politely, stating that the planet's name was honor enough, and suggested instead that the new metropolis be named after either Grag or Otho. And as he temporarily needed the services of neither the android nor the robot, he shipped them both off to Futuria, and the delighted but worried mayor of Settlement Three now found himself facing a real problem.

Synthetic Men Seek Honor

Should the city be named for Otho or for Grag? The two synthetic creatures were both anxious for the honor, and all the quarrelsomeness in their natures came to the fore.

The mayor, too discreet to show his preference either way, proclaimed a special election to settle this great question, and for several weeks both Grag and Otho threw themselves into electioneering with all the vigor and skill of veteran politicians.

It was a bewildering and not uncommon experience for a voter to find himself approached by the two rivals at once, each securing a firm grasp on some part of his clothes, and extolling his own virtues.

It is doubtful whether either Grag or Otho won many voters in this fashion, for their usual victim was too paralyzed with fright to understand what either of them said. The real decision was apparently the result of a whispering campaign—or rather, of two whispering campaigns, one of which failed to achieve its effect.

Voters Become Divided

Otho's tactics were to split Grag's supporters into two rival groups—one in favor of Gragville, the other in favor of Robotstown. In this way he hoped that even if he didn't obtain a majority of the votes, at least he would be able to win.

However, Grag's supporters saw through this maneuver, and made it clear that they were heartily opposed to Robotstown. The name didn't necessarily apply to Grag, and then too it might have been misleading.

At the same time, following Grag's directions, they repeated to any listeners they found that Otho had been made a fool of by one Bror Ingmann, Terror of Space—as narrated in "Days of Creation." This lie had already been exposed, but it still found ignorant believers, and Gragville squeaked through to a narrow victory.

Grag magnanimously permitted a suburb of his city to be called Otho Heights—to be greatly chagrined some time later when he learned that the suburb had outgrown the town proper and was considered far superior as a residence.

Mystery Shrouds Mountain

No description of Futuria would be complete without some reference to the Haunted Peak, an unexpected evidence of superstition to find on a planet which had been constructed synthetically and should have been entirely without mystery. But even before the planet was officially opened to immigration, strange reports were circulated about mysterious noises and events occurring in the neighborhood of a peak not far from the South Polar Ocean.

There was no evidence that any familiar life-forms had made the peak their home, and an official investigating committee denied absolutely that this part of Futuria was inhabited.

Popular opinion still insists, however, that the peak had become the home of invisible men from outer space. Astonishingly enough, this belief is shared by none others than Curt Newton and the Brain.

"Some day, Simon," observed Captain Future, "we'll have to investigate that place. There should be at least as much to learn as from a study of past civilizations."

"Some day, lad," agreed the Brain. "Meanwhile, we have our studies on magnetogravitational waves to occupy us."

Curt Newton nodded. And yet, he had a feeling that the Haunted Peak might be even more important than the investigations that now occupied the attention of the Futuremen. Some day, as he had observed . . .

Reluctantly, he relegated the idea to the back of his mind. It was a mystery that for the time being must remain unsolved.

●

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UNDER OBSERVATION

(Continued from page 6)

And don't you fall into the fuel vat, Pee-lot Greninger. Now, go stand in the corner with Kiwi Kozarsky. When I have a full squad lined up—and that won't be long now—we'll engage in a gentle and gentlemanly free-for-all about the cover.

WORLDS OF TOMORROW

By Rodney M. Palmer

Dear Sarge: After this war there will be a development of magazines running along the same lines of CAPTAIN FUTURE, et. al. When writers try to build these stories they will find themselves against a brick wall. This wall is being constructed bit by bit by your feature, WORLDS OF TOMORROW. You seem to be carefully mapping out the entire Solar System for the benefit of readers.

Writers will have two alternatives: They will either study carefully the maps and data published in this feature, and try to adhere as close to them as possible, or they will map out their own idea of the system and follow *it!* In the former, the result will be the curtailment of imagination and development, and in the latter there will be utter confusion among science-fiction readers. If, in 1945, five books appeared on the stands, one stating that Mars was a dead world, another it had a secret population inside a hollow shell, another that it was covered with a shallow sea through which the sand beneath could be seen from Earth, and so on, the result would be demoralizing. The plausibility of science-fiction would be shattered at a blow. With this situation continuing month after month eventually it would become dull and unbelievable. Readers are a finicky, petty bunch.

Writers of the Black Bat, The Crimson Mask, and the Phantom have a common ground and setting upon which to write their stuff. Science-fiction writers have no such ground.

There will be a trend toward making all the characters on other worlds of human stock. A very good idea. This makes them more likeable and understandable. The motives of other worlds will be appreciated clearer.

By all means relegate WORLDS OF TOMORROW to places unknown to readers (other universes, and specific asteroids) or do away with the deadly thing altogether! Though the thing is interesting and whimsical in itself, it is the psychological aspect of it that has me worried.—*226 W. 60th St., Chicago, Ill.*

Personally, Pee-lot Palmer, the old Sarge thinks you are full of rocket gas, but there is material for a good bunkroom argument in your letter, and I turn you over to the tender mercies of your fellow junior astrogators. At least, your letter presents a different view from the usual communique, and the old space dog will welcome a little open discussion. Hop to it, you space imps.

THE MAD SCIENTIST

By Monroe Kuttner

Dear Sarge: It's me again, the Mad Scientist. Sarge, I must congratulate you on C.F. It is now the best S.F. mag on the stands.

I have a few ideas for C.F., Sarge. First, publish it oftener. Second, when you can get enough paper, why not have a C.F. annual starting with a reissue of the first 3 issues of C.F. this year, the next 3 issues of C.F. the next year and so on. You could charge 25 or 30 cents. I'm sure there are plenty of S.F. fans that haven't read the first issues of C.F. and would buy it. And there'll always be more new readers to read past issues. Third, if possible, why not put Capt. Future on the radio as a serial? There'll be plenty of S.F. fans and other people besides that will want to listen.

Well, that's all, Sarge, keep C.F. going strong.—*41-16 51 St., Woodside, N. Y.*

You know, Kiwi Kuttner, you might have dug up a pretty good idea in that trilogy reprint scheme—after the lifting of the paper restrictions, of course. How many of you pee-lots would like some day to see, say, a

couple of such issues per year until all the Captain Future stories have been re-issued? Would you pay as much as a quarter per copy for such a book? And would you like a new cover or a reproduction of one of the original covers? Kick this idea around until blast-off time.

JUST A SPACE WOLF

By Austin Hamel

Dear Sarge: Well, another issue of CF, and another Under Observation full of quips, suggestions, and gripes.

The first thing that I would like to discuss is the cover. Although this was a very good cover considering it was done by Bergey, why doesn't CF take an example from SS or TWS? Their last four covers were simply tops. They all showed a picture of a spaceship, except the Winter SS which showed the inside of a ship with the hero and heroine gazing outward. But speaking of good covers, the Winter CF was not so bad at all, Jane Randall looked better on this cover than she has for a long time. When I first glanced at her I got as hot as Malcolm Jameson's "Giant Atom." Oh, didn't you know? I'm a space wolf. . . .

If you had a contest for the best letters I would choose without hesitation Chad Oliver (the looney lad of Ledgewood). He really gives me a laugh or two, and he knows SF. Speaking of imaginary contests, why not have a real one?

Your inner pics are the best of any SF mags. Did Orban do the novel? If not, who did? Also, how does the artist who drew the pics for "To the Dust Returneth," spell his name, Soklos, Soko, or Solot, or what?

I am not going to complain about trimmed edges or a Bi-monthly, all I will say is that after the war please try and do something about it, okay?

Also, dearest Sarge, I am joining THE FUTUREMEN with this letter, but please do not get sore when I tell you that I am sending the Summer issue cover instead of the Winter, as I found the Winter issue too nice to deface. If it is unacceptable, please tell me and I will send you the right cover.

By the way, whatever happened to the Fall issue of CF, or is it now becoming an annual?—*2090 E. Tremont Ave., New York 62, N. Y.*

No, Junior, CAPTAIN FUTURE has not become an annual—as you dang well know. It is a quarterly. Sokoli is the name of the artist you are asking about. And Orban did the pix for the Captain Future novel. And after the war we are planning on doing a number of interesting things. Now, go line up with the cover boys in the dark corner, and the old sarge will get around to you shortly.

HAIL THE FUTUREWOMEN

By Martha Mason

Dear Sarge: Enclosed is my application for membership in the "Future Women," and I would like very much to join.

I have just begun to read about Captain Future a few stories back and I think he is grand. The stories are very interesting.

(Continued on page 118)

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Time seemed to stand still as Blackbeard and Joan Randall stared into each other's eyes (Chapter IV)

DAYS OF CREATION

By BRETT STERLING

Curtis Newton and His Staunch Comrades Set Out to Create a Brand New Planet to Add to the Family of the Sun!

CHAPTER I

The New Planet

HARTLEY BROOKS almost exploded.

"The interfering fool!"

Brooks did not say the words aloud. The anger and rage that were seething within him as he listened to the red-haired young man were near the boiling point, but none the less he managed to smile. His well laid plans might be crumbling about him, the interplanetary empire he had coveted for so long might be escaping his grasp—but his external appearance was that of a man well pleased with himself and with everyone else.

For Captain Future, whatever Brooks might call him, was in reality far from a fool. And it would not do for Future to suspect all that was at stake in the matter soon coming to a vote.

Brooks, with the fixed smile almost seeming to grow out of his face, glanced casually about him. The Interplanetary Board of Governors, which had been called together in special session to consider the System's greatest problem, was hanging intently on Future's every word. There was no sign of disagree-

A COMPLETE BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

ment with what he was proposing. And Hartley Brooks, together with the few members who would vote as he directed, dared not attract attention to himself by openly opposing the popular Curt Newton.

"The question of overcrowding," Captain Future was saying, "must be faced frankly. Halfway methods, such as have been tried before, must be discarded. Take a look, gentlemen, at the situation that actually exists on several of the more densely populated planets."

The televisor screen glowed. One of the hanging cities of Mars appeared before their eyes. Layer after layer of crowded buildings, crowded streets, pallid and unhealthy-looking people, passed in review.

"You see the results of lack of adequate sunlight. It is true that sunlight substitutes exist, but they are expensive, and so long as men in power remain greedy, they will not be supplied in sufficient quantity to maintain what we consider normal health. Consider now the condition here on Earth itself . . ."

The smile on Hartley Brooks' face became sardonic. It was almost as if Future were making a personal attack upon the capitalist. For that hanging city of Mars belonged to Brooks. It was *his* greed that was being damned. Those overcrowded towers on Earth, those swarming underground beehives on Venus, that thin strip on the Twilight Zone of Mercury—all were his. He wondered if Captain Future had any suspicion of that truth. He had covered his trail well, but still one never was sure about Curt Newton.

"As for the outer planets, we have succeeded in establishing colonies on many of them," Future's resonant voice went on, "but they will never absorb the excess population from Earth alone, not to speak of Mars and Venus. Jupiter and Saturn, vast as they are, are for the most part uninhabitable by humanoid types. Neptune, Uranus, and Pluto are almost total losses. There remains but a single possible solution."

BROOKS grew tense. He knew what was coming, but it would not be any more palatable for that. He had worked hard these past few years. Operating behind the concealment of dummy brokers, he had slowly been gathering the threads of a great monopoly into his hands. Railroads, shipping, interplanetary traffic, heavy industry, food manufacture—it was hardly possible to name an important basic industry in which he did not have the controlling share.

He would be the nearest thing to a czar that the System had ever known. And now the entire fabric of his empire was being torn to shreds by this interfering, serious-minded young—he sought for suitable word. "Fool" did not fit Curt Newton, the man who was known as Captain Future.

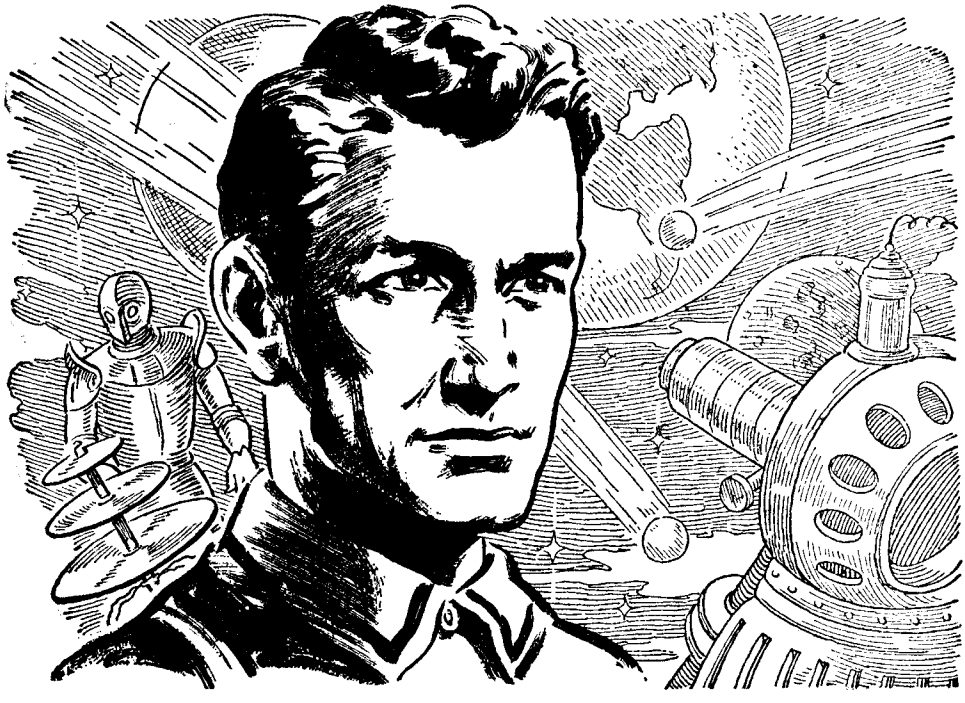
"I propose, gentlemen, that we build an entire new planet, which will circle the sun between the orbits of Earth and Mars. I have already submitted to your president the preliminary calculations which prove the feasibility of the plan. I need but your approval to go ahead."

There it was, the solution to the System's greatest problem, a solution that would put an end forever to all of Hartley Brooks' dreams. Building the planet would be a government project; no private corporation was large enough to handle the job effectively. Its heavy industry, its space ships, its food factories, everything of any importance would belong to the System Government. Its very existence would smash any threat of private monopoly.

Captain Future had finished speaking, and the applause that now swept the huge hall was spontaneous. Brooks joined in, applauding all the more vigorously as the physical exertion afforded some relief to the emotions he felt. He had just one month in which to act. Except in time of war or special emergency, no construction bill could become law without two readings before the Board of Governors, with at least a month intervening. The bill was sure of passage at the next meeting of the

Board, to be held on Mars, but meanwhile that month might come in useful. He was thankful for the red tape which prevented the project from being started at once.

As the president announced that the vote in favor of the bill was unanimous, there was another wave of applause. Brooks arose from his seat and moved slowly toward the exit. He wanted to see Captain Future at closer range.



CAPTAIN FUTURE

At the door of the council hall he stopped suddenly. He had almost collided with something that floated silently in the air, a case whose presence he had not previously noticed. He stared at it —and shuddered as two cold lens-eyes stared back.

This was Simon Wright, the Brain, one of the Futuremen. The lens-eyes seemed to drill into his skull, reading his mind, dragging out into open daylight the thoughts that he had been keeping so carefully hidden. He turned away.

Captain Future, on leaving the hall, had stopped to speak to a pretty, dark-haired girl. This was Joan Randall. Hartley Brooks paused, listening to the words that came to his ears.

"What it amounts to," Curt Newton was saying, "is that we have a month's vacation. We're going to spend it investigating those ruins on that planetoid, Baldur. Simon thinks the ancient inhabitants achieved a degree of civilization beyond our own."

"Sorry I can't come with you," replied Joan regretfully. "The Planet Patrol wouldn't hear of my taking a vacation at this time."

Hartley Brooks began to fumble in the pockets of his clothes. He found a cigarette, put it in his mouth, then frowned. It had failed to light, quite naturally, as he had chosen a dud that he kept on hand for such purposes. He muttered a curse at the inconvenience of these new-fangled automatic contrivances, and began to search through his pockets again. Then he walked away a few steps. But he was listening more intently than ever. He had switched on

a tiny portable sound-magnifier that he carried with him at all times.

CAPTAIN FUTURE had not apparently noticed him. "We'll leave Eek and Oog at the Moon," he was saying. "Those animals are a little trying on the nerves at times, and I'd rather have them fed automatically than see Otho and Grag waste half a morning petting them and coaxing them to eat."

Joan was smiling. "Poor Otho and Grag! You'd deprive them of the things they love most in this world."

"I'll be depriving myself," replied Curt, and looked deep into her eyes.

The financier grunted to himself. These personal matters were of no concern to him. But at the significance of that first statement he had overheard, his eyes glittered.

He moved along again, thinking rapidly. One reason he had reached his present position was that he had never waited for opportunity's knock. He had always been able to recognize opportunity while it was still at a distance. In Future's words he had recognized his chance.

Fifteen minutes later, he was speaking over his own private Mars-Earth tight-beam televisor system to Kars Virson, his most trusted lieutenant. Virson was the head of his personal detective-and-spy agency, and had been invaluable in his rise to power. Tall and lanky, he had the vacant stare of a helpless moron and the cold, remorseless brain of a murderer. Now his eyes widened as he listened to Brooks' voice.

"Ever hear of Baldur?" asked the financier.

"Sure, Chief! He was a Greek god who got bumped off—"

"He was a Norse god, you idiot. But I don't mean that. I'm referring to the newly discovered planetoid."

Kars Virson hesitated. "Sounds kind of familiar. Isn't that the place where some guys got killed in a landslide?"

"That's it. A party of twenty was wiped out completely. The landslide was precipitated by unpredictable magnetic forces caused by the presence of unidentified metals."

Over the sensitive receiver, Hartley Brooks could hear the faint sound of Kars Virson scratching his head. The vacant face seemed puzzled.

"I wouldn't know about that, Chief. What's on your mind?"

"I want another landslide to occur."

"Oh—I get it. Dynatomite will do the trick. It'll be a cinch. Who do you want bumped off?"

"Captain Future and his Futuremen."

There was a pause, and in the next second Hartley Brooks heard another peculiar, faint sound, as of a man swallowing hard. When Kars Virson's voice came back to him, it sounded troubled and undecided.

"That won't be so easy, Chief. You see, Future is wise to all such tricks, and—"

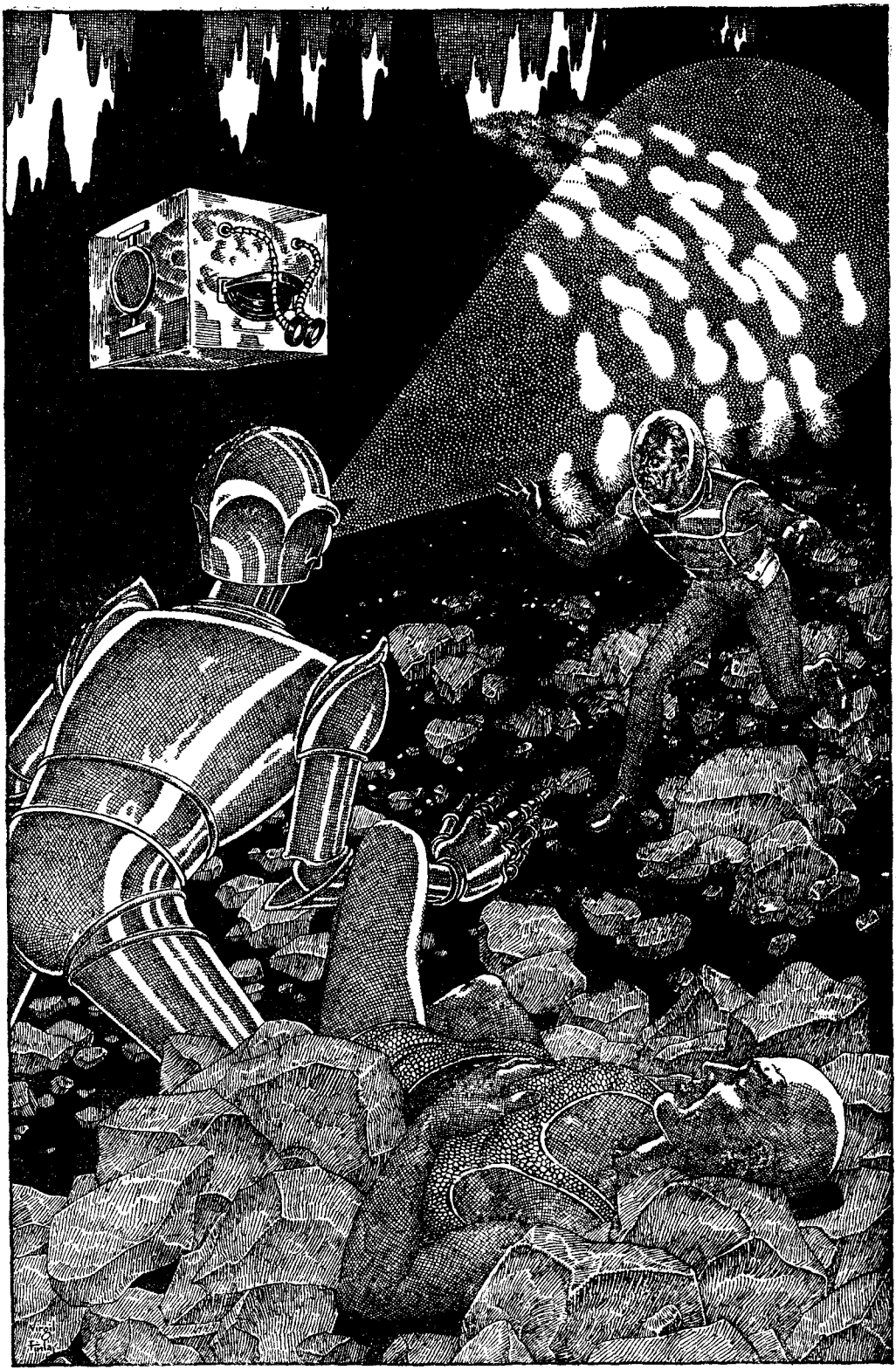
"I know that as well as you do. Nevertheless, your job is to get rid of him and his companions. Make no mistake about this, Kars. Either you do this, or some one else does. In the latter case, that some one else will take your place. I don't care to be served by incompetent cowards."

Another pause. Then: "Well, *maybe* I can manage it, Chief. But it won't be easy. Future would get wise if there was anybody else on that planetoid with him, or within a million miles of it. He's got ways of finding out. Our only chance would be by long-distance control. And for that, I'd have to know when he's setting out, and when he'll arrive."

"I imagine he's leaving at once. He intends to investigate some ancient ruins that have aroused his interest."

"Ruins? That makes it easier. I can plant this dynatomite, with a visor set near it, so I can keep an eye on what's going on. When he gets in range, I press a button. Bang, he goes up in the air—if there's any air in the place. And the explosion destroys all the evidence, so nobody can tell what happened."

Virson's voice was becoming actually cheerful. A light sparkled in his watery eyes. "Say, Chief, I think I'm going to



Under the Brain's direction, Grag's eyes emitted a purple glow (Chapter VI)

enjoy doing this. It'll be the neatest job I ever pulled. Only I'll have to work fast. I'll have to find the ruins, plant the stuff, and make a getaway before he shows up."

"That shouldn't be too difficult. You're about a hundred million miles closer to Baldur than he is right now. So, get busy."

As he moved away from the visor set Hartley Brooks smiled. In those few words of Captain Future's no one else would have recognized opportunity. He had. And therefore, within a month, there would be neither Captain Future nor Futuremen. No new planet would be created. And the System of Free Interplanetary Republics would become in reality the private interplanetary empire of Hartley Brooks.

CHAPTER II

The Witness

INSTEAD of slowing down, the teardrop-shaped vessel raced in for a landing, and then a scant mile from disaster, quivered in every riveted seam as the braking rockets burst out in sudden flaming blasts. Within the *Comet*, the metallic voice of Grag, the robot, roared in dismay.

"*Chief!* That crazy refugee from a test tube is trying to wreck the ship!"

Otho, the android pilot, grinned in delight. Of Captain Future's three companions, he was the most human in appearance. He might have passed, indeed, for an ordinary man, except that his lithe body had a curiously rubbery, boneless appearance, and his chalk-white face and slanted green eyes held a superhuman deviltry and mocking humor. Otho was a man, but a synthetic man. He had been created in the Moon laboratory long years before.

Now he was overjoyed at having startled Grag. "Just practicing quick stops," he explained with elaborate casualness. "The Chief said it was okay. Too bad it upset your delicate nerves. You probably have some rust spots on the central ganglia."

The *Comet* was dropping slowly now, so slowly that the planetoid beneath seemed to grow imperceptibly. Grag snorted.

He had been created in the same laboratory as Otho, in the long-dead past. But unlike Otho, he had been made of metal. He was a gigantic manlike figure, seven feet high. His metal limbs and torso hinted at colossal strength. But the bulbous metal head, with such strange features as gleaming photoelectric eyes and a mechanical loudspeaker voice-orifice, gave no sign of the intelligence and loyalty that resided in the complex mechanical brain.

Nearby, the Brain, entirely oblivious of the strange behavior of the *Comet*, as well as of the squabble that was now following, was absorbed in a study of film graphs of previously discovered Baldurian inscriptions. By far the strangest of the Futuremen, he was yet the most human.

Once he had been Simon Wright, a brilliant, aging Earth scientist. Dying of an incurable ailment, his living brain had been removed from his human body and transferred into a special serum case in which it still lived, thought, and acted.

The Brain now inhabited a square box of transparent metal. From one face protruded stalked, lens-like eyes, as well as microphonic ears and speech apparatus. Compact generators inside the case emitted magnetic tractor-beams that enabled the Brain to glide swiftly through the air and to handle objects and tools.

THE *Comet* nestled slowly into the landing place that Otho had selected, a rocky hollow between two bleak hills. Captain Future had already slipped into his space suit, his mop of tousled red hair and his keen gray eyes lighting up the handsome space-tanned face within the transparent glassite helmet.

Otho left the controls, and began to don his own suit. Grag, who did not breathe, and needed no protection against the airless cold outside the ship, still rumbled on about the injury to his feelings:

"Chief, maybe you did tell him he could practice quick stops, but I'll bet you didn't tell him he had to pick a spot a mile away from a landing place to try it. Myself, I'm kind of rusty at driving the *Comet*—"

"I'll say that living scrap pile is rusty," jeered Otho. "That hot air of his is oxidizing all his rivets."

Curt Newton smiled absently, and stared at one of the instruments on the ship's control board. "Otho," he said quietly, "while you were busy exchanging compliments with Grag, did you happen to notice that the detector dial is registering five plus?"

"Huh? What's that, Chief?" Otho stared at the dial. "Holy sun-imps, you're right! There's somebody else on this planetoid!"

Curt was busily adjusting the viewfinder of a short-range space-visor. Slowly a face came into sharp focus, a weak, none too attractive human face with shifty eyes, and mobile, uncertain lips. Beyond the face was the old battered hulk of a space ship, built some fifty years before for short-distance freight hauls.

"Wonder what that prospector is doing here, Chief," rumbled Grag. "This place is no bonanza for space miners."

"Looks like a petty crook," suggested Otho. "Maybe we ought to question him, and if he can't explain himself pick him up, and turn him over to the Space Patrol."

"We've got more important things to do," decided Curt. "We'll keep our eyes open to make sure he doesn't try to harm us, and meanwhile, we'll get started digging at those ruins."

A few million miles away, Kars Virson, at the visor screen of a space vessel that was drifting a safe distance off the well-traveled interplanetary lanes, grew tense with expectation. His usually vacant face now registered intense excitement.

He saw the four Futuremen leave the ship and approach the ruins where deadly charges of dynatomite had been planted. His finger hovered over a button, and then drew reluctantly away. It would be fatal to get three of the Futuremen and leave the fourth alive. He must get *all* of them in one blast. And Grag, the one who would be most difficult of all to destroy, was lagging behind.

Actually, Grag was interested in the Earthman they had detected earlier. But Kars Virson, with his space-visor of limited view, saw no Earthman. He believed merely that some natural object had claimed Grag's attention. And he waited in a fever of impatience.

A few moments later his chance came. His finger sought the button so eagerly that for a fraction of a second he fumbled. Then he had made contact, and the scene on his televisor screen went blank as the dynatomite explosion destroyed his pickup equipment on Baldur.

The first victim of the explosion had been the sending part of the visor set. But the Futuremen were dead, he was sure of that. He had killed people with much smaller charges of dynatomite. He licked his lips happily, and put in a call to the waiting Hartley Brooks on their private beam.

ONLY one person actually saw the explosion; Edward Loring, the small, shifty-eyed Earthman. He had noticed the *Comet* while it was still high above Baldur, and had been frightened almost out of his wits by Otho's mischievous handling of the controls. From then on, he had watched the ship and its passengers from a distance, fearful of who they might be. Clever, and occasionally reckless, he now exercised extreme caution. He was wanted on numerous charges of robbery, forgery, and similar crimes, and he was taking no chances of falling into the hands of the Space Patrol.

The sight of the Futuremen had

alarmed him, despite his failure to realize that he himself had been under observation. He had heard, as had every criminal, of the quick-witted Captain Future, of the lithe Otho, of ponderous Grag, and the fearful Brain. Then he realized with a feeling of relief that they were not seeking him.

From then on he had spied on them with less of fear, but with more of curiosity. What did the Futuremen expect to find on this deserted, out-of-the-way planetoid? Gold, platinum, uranium, radium—perhaps some of the newer precious elements? There might be something in this for Edward Loring.

Then came the inexplicable explosion. He saw three bodies buried under an avalanche of rock. He saw the fourth, that of Captain Future himself, thrown high into the air, almost beyond sight, before it began to float slowly down again. The slowness of the descent puzzled him, until he realized that Future's gravity-equalizer must have been torn off his body. And Baldur's natural gravity was extremely low.

Captain Future settled to the ground and did not move. For a moment Edward Loring stared in dazed silence. Then he scrambled eagerly toward the motionless planeteer.

The face was bloody, the body limp. The glassite helmet had been shattered. No breath came from the pinched nostrils. Loring had seen dead men before, and his eyes gleamed. This was one tracker of criminals he need never fear again.

He ripped open the space suit, and eager fingers fumbled through Curt Newton's pockets. His face fell slightly at what he found, for Curt had been in the habit of carrying little ready money. Then his eyes fell on Curt's right hand . . . and a delighted expression spread over his face.

On one finger was a large ring with a gleaming sun-jewel in the center, and nine planet-jewels surrounding it. This was Captain Future's famous signet ring, a design of the Solar System with jewels that moved in the proper order of the planets, powered by a tiny atomic motor.

Loring removed the ring, which was obviously valuable for its own sake, and slipped it onto one of his own fingers, where it rested loosely. The other Futuremen had been buried by the explosion. Anyway it was unlikely that any of those unhuman creatures had carried objects of value to the ordinary person.

But one master prize Loring did not overlook. No other ship in the Solar System could match the *Comet*. And there was no one to claim it but himself.

Loring easily found the air-lock, and entered the tear-drop-shaped vessel. Most of the instrument board was a bewildering maze of dials and thermometer-like threads of liquid, but he could recognize the atomic starter, the different throttles, the brake-rocket controls—all that was really needed to operate the ship. He gingerly tried the starter.

THE ship rose jerkily, but he soon managed to smooth out its course. He had handled the controls of many ships in his time, and compared to the tubs which were usually the best he could get, this one was a delight. He made up his mind. He was not going back to his own ship.

Then a sudden thought struck him. Future's absence from his usual haunts would be noted soon. There would be an investigation. His body and the bodies of his companions would be found, and not far away from them, Loring's old ship. That must be disposed of.

The task turned out to be easier than he had expected. He simply nosed up to the old tub in the *Comet*, pushed it along until it was free of Baldur's weak gravity, and left it drifting in free space. Some day it would be discovered, like the famous *Marie Celeste* of a few centuries back, empty and undamaged, and offer a puzzle for the Space Patrol to solve. Meanwhile, it could not possibly connect him with what had happened on Baldur.

But the *Comet* itself . . . he shivered. The tear-drop design was unique. The *Comet* would not long go unrecognized. And when it was learned that there was

neither Captain Future nor any of the other Futuremen within it....

He drove on, troubled in mind. It was no longer possible for him to abandon the vessel now, and at any rate, he would have hated to do so. The *Comet* was the kind of ship he had always dreamed of. But it was too characteristically Captain Future's. So for that matter, was the remarkable ring he had taken from Future's finger. Any one, anywhere, would recognize both the ship and the ring.

He had proof of how difficult it would be for the *Comet* to go unnoticed within the next hour. A patrol ship flashed close, and he shuddered, feeling sure that the game was up. Then the ship veered away again, sending out several signal flashes in salute.

"There's no need to be afraid," he muttered to himself. "I can pass as Captain Future. I can pass . . ."

A light began to grow in his eyes. "No, I can't, but I know some one who can!"

He opened the forward throttle wide, and the *Comet* leaped ahead. As the miles sped by, an idea ripened in his brain. It was startling. It would require almost more courage than he had, but it would work. He was *sure* it would work. And by the time he had reached Earth, it was fully formed.

He landed in a secluded spot, left the *Comet* unguarded in full confidence that no one would dare interfere with it, and sought out Hro Zan, actor at liberty. Hro Zan stared at him stupidly, but impressively.

"You've got something for me to do? I don't understand. You're not a manager, you've got nothing to do with shows."

"I'm offering you the greatest role of your career," promised Loring.

Hro Zan twirled one of his waxed mustaches. He was a tall, powerfully built man, over six feet in height, and the one-quarter Martian blood in him lent an air of gravity and impressiveness to his glance. Still in his thirties, he had the air of a dignified savant . . . and the brains of a bird. And though he himself was not a criminal, his stupidity made him a

A tall, bearded man was dispersing the heavy insects with the force-field of a curiously altered proton-pistol (Chapter XVII)

useful tool for the clever man who was.

"You're joking," he said finally.

"I didn't make a trip of over a hundred million miles merely to joke. I've got something good for you."

HRO ZAN drew himself up.

"I have five other offers," he announced. "I've almost decided to accept an engagement for a serious comedy that's going to play the Mars-Earth-Venus circuit. I want you to know, Loring, that you can't just secure my services at the last moment. Two years ago, when I was playing the leading role in 'The Villain of Mars'—you may remember the rave notices I received, by the way—my leading lady was Mona Granis, and she told me it was an honor to act with me. Anyway, a producer came to me, and—"

"Stop raving, you idiot," interrupted Loring impatiently. "I'vt got a job that will pay you more in the next few months than you can hope to receive in a lifetime."

"You have?"

"Yes, Curt."

"Curt? My name is Hro Zan."

"Not from now on. I'm christening you Curt Newton. Get used to the sound of it. Learn to answer to it. It's a role you're going to play twenty-four hours a day."

"Curt Newton," repeated the actor, with slow dignity. "I seem to have heard the name before. I remember, in Venus City—"

"I'll have to dig up an android and a robot," murmured Loring, almost to himself, "and then I'll have to do something that's practically impossible—I'll have to find you a Brain. But I'll manage somehow."

"Curt Newton," said Hro Zan once more. "Yes, I'm sure I've heard the name. He was a scientist who discovered gravity."

But Edward Loring was paying his newy acquired dupe no further attention. He was dazzled by the golden future his growing idea was opening before him. Why, with care, he could milch people of the Solar System in Future's name for untold wealth. At his leisure he could concoct schemes that, under the cloak of Curt Newton's fame, would bring in golden revenue in an endless stream.

As for discovery, or for the Planetary Patrol—he shrugged. Under Curt Newton's protection, as long as he shied clear of violent crime, he need have no fear. Already he had forgotten the planetoid Baldur. His next step was the acquisition of the Moon.

CHAPTER III

Blackbeard

IT was the hiss of gas that revived Curt Newton. The man who had been known as Captain Future sat up slowly and stared about. Almost unconsciously he wiped away the blood that was trickling down his face. Then, as he turned his head, he choked, and at that moment he realized where the hiss of gas had come from.

His glassite helmet had ben shattered, and the air had leaked out. But a small stream of oxygen had been trickling past his face from a pipe that led to the tank strapped to his back. He awoke suddenly to the fact that his life depended on this tiny stream. The trickle of oxygen was due to the fact that there was a break somewhere in the line, and if there was one break there might be another, and the oxygen might be ebbing away into the airless void. Without knowing how they acted, his fingers deftly sought for the unwanted break in the pipe and found it. A quick dab with a plastic repair material from his belt, and the pipe was repaired.

Judging from the pressure of the escaping oxygen, he had a supply sufficient for several hours still remaining. After that—he shrugged. He had a more pressing question to answer.

"What happened?" he whispered to himself.

He frowned painfully. "There was an explosion, and then . . . I seem to remember some other people. . . ."

He stared about him in perplexity. It was at that moment that he realized he did not remember his own name.

At first a feeling of near-panic seized him. It disappeared as he stood up, almost floating into the air with the effort. That reminded him he could use a gravity equalizer. Strange that he should recall that when he couldn't recall his name.

Even more strange that he should recall the principle of the device, that a gravity-equalizer depended for its effect on the formation of a low-energy high potential ponderomagnetic barrier invented by . . .

He frowned again. He could remember facts that had nothing to do with him personally, but he seemed completely to have forgotten names. With an intentness that was almost physically painful, he tried to recall who he was, why he had come here. But the effort was useless. His mind simply would not respond.

He moved slowly in the direction where the explosion had taken place. A heavy mass of rock had fallen here, effectively burying any companions he might had had. There was no doubt about their being dead. He must think of himself. Never mind who he might be. Somehow he must secure food, water—and air.

He studied the instruments in his belt. Only one seemed to offer any hope. It was a proton pistol, that depended for its effectiveness on atomic disintegration. If only he had suitable material to work with, he might set off a self-sustaining, high-energy process that would support an exothermic chemical reaction. And his oxygen could then be drawn from the rocks themselves.

Something seemed to stir in his mind. One of his companions had been carrying a set of tools for some purpose he could not now remember. "I think his name was . . . was. . . ."

The name had been almost on the tip of his tongue. He felt horribly disappointed when it slid away and was buried in the depths of his unconscious mind. He could not even remember now whether it began with a "G" or a "K."

He found the instruments Grag had been carrying, partly buried by the explosion. There were several elements represented in the different alloys, including copper and iron. That settled one problem. He *would* be able to breathe, at least until he starved to death.

SOME hours later, when an ugly, medium-sized space vessel edged in with snorting rockets for a jittery landing, the men who clambered slowly out in awkward space suits stared at him with an amazement they did not attempt to conceal.

"By the Gods of Space, Urg, here's a man who doesn't have to breathe!" cried one of them, a short, squat Martian whose face was as round and good-natured as a Martian doll's.

Then he got a closer glimpse of the man who had been Captain Future, and whistled. Two jagged wounds across the strong space-tanned face had produced a sinister, almost demonic effect. The tousled hair, red no longer, but stained a purplish black by a gust of vapor resulting from the action of dynatomite on unfamiliar minerals, added a frightening touch that reminded the Martian of a Uranian devil-giant. All in all, this was no customer he would have wanted to meet in a dark alley in Mars City.

The man had looked up at his exclamation. "Take off your helmets and make yourselves at home," he invited.

"What are we supposed to do for oxygen?" demanded the squat Martian.

"What I'm doing. I'm getting it from these rocks. There's so much of it, I'm letting it escape freely."

By this time Urg had approached. Tall and lanky, he had a calculating look in his eyes that was hardly customary in a Venusian. His eyes took in the scene at a quick glance that left him puzzled.

"What the devil's going on here?" he demanded of the man who was creating

his own oxygen.

"Nothing much. I've been waiting for you."

Urg and the squat Martian interchanged glances.

"You know who we are?" demanded Urg suspiciously.

"No. I don't even know who I am myself. But I had an idea that some one would notice these atomic flares and cruise in to have a look at what was going on."

Urg's face wore a puzzled frown. "What do you mean by saying you don't know who you are?"

"Exactly that. I awoke after an explosion to find myself apparently alone on this forsaken planetoid. I know I had companions, but all indications are that they're dead. I think we were on a scientific expedition, but I don't remember what we were investigating. I did recall, however, enough about science to rig up this oxygen unit."

He pointed to the rock-disintegrator set-up he had devised, with his proton pistol to start it going.

"A scientist, eh?" mused Urg. "Do you think we could use a scientist, Seldor?"

The short squat Martian seemed puzzled. "I've been used to thinking that we could get along with nothing but a pilot who knew the spaceways, and men who weren't scared of death, and could handle an atom-gun, but all the same—" He scratched his head. "Any man who could rig up something like this is worthy of consideration."

He waved his arm to indicate the rock-disintegrator.

"That was easy. I needed oxygen, and it was a question of working in a hurry or suffocating to death," said Captain Future. "The thing I'm proud of is the way I used the excess energy to construct an atomic flare."

"You can handle a space ship?" asked Seldor.

"I think so, but I'm not sure. Once I got my hands on the controls, I'd know."

Urg nodded. "You retain a certain muscular memory, even though your brain isn't functioning fully." Urg had received an education in five colleges spread over three planets, and he was not a man to permit his underlings to forget that fact. "And in time you'll probably remember who you are."

"I've been trying so far without success. And I've got a feeling that it's important for me to remember."

"It'll come to you suddenly, maybe in a week, maybe in a half year. The best thing is not to worry about it," advised Seldor. "In the meantime, if you'd like to get off this oversized piece of rock, to some place where you don't have to make the air you breathe, I guess we can accommodate you."

URG'S attitude had become unaccountably tense. The man who had been Captain Future did not know why but he sensed the fact.

"That's why I sent up those flares," he answered quietly. "I'll work my way back to any port you name."

"Our port hasn't got a name," replied Seldor. "Something like you. You see, we're prospectors."

"Yes?"

"We do our prospecting," put in Urg, "in other people's ships."

"I see. Pirates."

"Like to join us?" Urg pursued.

Urg's voice was smooth and unconcerned, but the man who heard his invitation made no mistake about what was going on in his mind. Urg was giving him his choice of staying alive or dying.

"I've been waiting for you to ask that,"

Curt Newton Battles Against the Sinister Cunning of Resourceful Space-Booter Rab Cain in RED SUN OF DANGER, a Complete Book-Length Novel by *Brett Sterling* Packed with Interplanetary Surprises — Coming in the Next Issue!

promptly accepted the man who had been Captain Future. "I'm with you."

"Then let's get back to the ship. We don't want to waste any more time here."

As they picked their way over the rocky landscape, one of the men asked essentially the same question that had been troubling the ex-Captain Future.

"What do we call him, Seldor?"

Seldor considered. "His beard's coming in purplish black. And with those scars he's going to have, I don't think he'll do much shaving. Make it Blackbeard."

"Thanks," said the newly christened recruit. "That name will do as well as any. You're Urg's assistant, aren't you?"

Seldor shook his head. "Urg and I are co-captains," he explained briefly. "Some of the men are prejudiced against Venusians and others against Martians. It takes two of us to keep them in line."

Seldor's attitude was casual, like that of the other pirates, but Blackbeard was not fooled. He had joined a group of men whose lives were dedicated to robbery and murder, and he too would have to rob and murder along with them if he expected to stay alive.

The pirate craft was small but sleek, with atomic engines that seemed almost too powerful for the size of the ship. Told that he would be expected to help handle one of the atom-cannon that thrust grimly from the vessel's snout, Blackbeard nodded as if no job could have been more to his liking. He was hoping that the test of his eagerness to aid his new-found companions would not come before he had a chance to plan what to do.

But his hopes were not destined to be fulfilled. Four hours after he had stepped on board, an eager voice resounded through the pirate vessel.

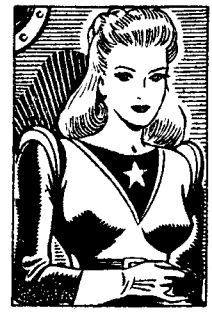
"Freighter ahead of us, sir!"

"All men to battle stations!" roared Urg. His eyes glittered with the lust for battle and loot.

Blackbeard moved silently toward the controls of the gun he had been ordered to handle. Come what may, he knew that he was not going to fire at the other ship.

CHAPTER IV

The Trap



THEY overhauled the other vessel with startling ease. It was obviously old and slow-moving, useless for anything but moving freight.

"Hope they've got a worthwhile cargo aboard," murmured Urg.

"We'll know soon enough," observed Seldor.

One of the gunners spoke nervously. "They're in range now, Captains. Maybe we ought to let them have it."

"No use damaging the cargo," returned Urg. He spoke into a space visor. "Ahoy, there! We've got you under our guns, and you can't get away. Better surrender before we start firing!"

The entire crew waited breathlessly for the freighter's reply. When it came, they stared at each other in bewilderment.

The old tub underwent a sudden transformation. Its sides swung out and back, revealing ugly snouts of atom-guns, aimed straight for the pirate ship. They were heavier and more numerous than the guns of their pursuers. The ship itself suddenly assumed the swift trim outlines of a cruiser of the Planet Patrol. And in the receiving screen of the space-visor, a space-bronzed, somewhat amused face stared at the dumbfounded Urg.

"Sorry, Captain," came an ironic voice. "We're not as helpless as we appeared to be. I think it would be preferable if *you* were to do the surrendering!"

Urg lost his head completely. "Fire!" he yelled. "We'll fight it out with them! Fire, you blasted space rovers!"

Blackbeard acted quickly. One member of his own gun crew moved to obey and found himself sprawling on the floor. A swift beam from Blackbeard's atom-pistol turned the control panels of the neighboring guns into heaps of useless,

smoldering metal. "There's no sense in committing suicide," he said grimly.

"It's better than being sent to rot away on Cerberus, you space-struck idiot!" snarled Urg, furiously.

He plunged at Blackbeard, his hand clawing for the atom-gun at his own belt. Blackbeard shot first. Urg's gun fell to the floor, a puddle of molten iron. Urg shouted in pain as the beam scorched his hand.

"Any one else prefer suicide to Cerberus?" asked Blackbeard grimly.

No one did.

MOMENTS later, there sounded the clang of the other ship bumping against the pirate vessel. Magnetic grapples held the two ships together, and in a few seconds, the air-locks were in contact. The pirates muttered sullenly to themselves as the members of the Planet Patrol came aboard.

A tall, lean, space-tanned Venusian was in charge.

"We rather expected a struggle," he said in pleased surprise. "Glad to see you had more sense."

"You wouldn't have got us so easily if not for that rat," growled Urg. Hatred for Blackbeard twisted his face into a scowl. "I suppose he's a spy of yours."

"Not that I know of," returned the Venusian, regarding Blackbeard with interest. Then he turned to the others again.

"You will kindly disarm yourselves, gentlemen, and then precede me into the other vessel, where suitable hospitality is awaiting you."

Atom-guns fell into a heap in the center of the ship's floor. Blackbeard retained his to the end.

"You, too," ordered the Venusian politely. "We will investigate your case later."

Reluctantly Blackbeard surrendered his weapon. With dispatch all of the prisoners were herded into the patrol vessel. Cells were waiting for them, and here they were detained, to be removed one at a time for examination. Each was returned minutes later, cursing and uncommunicative.

Only Seldor shed any light on the situation for Blackbeard. He was returned to the cell next to that of the newest pirate recruit.

"Sure, it was a trap for us," he growled in answer to Blackbeard's unspoken question. "The Planet Patrol has been after Urg and me for months. But it wasn't only us. There's a drive on to clear up this area of pirates and outlaws. We were just unlucky enough to be the first to tumble into this clumsy trap. And, by the way, Blackbeard, Urg may be mad as a sun devil for what you did, but I hold you no grudge. You really saved our lives. We'd have been blasted into cosmic dust if we had started fighting."

"What are they going to do with us?" asked Blackbeard a bit helplessly. "I still can't figure out where or how I ought to fit into things—anywhere."

Seldor shrugged philosophically. "The rest of us are going to serve a prison term on Cerberus, of course. As for you, I don't know. I put in a good word for you. Why not? You really did us a favor."

There was nothing to do but wait. Blackbeard sat down on his bunk and fingered the ugly cuts on his face which were roughly scabbing over. He wondered if he would recognize himself as a definite person if he saw his reflection in a mirror. Probably not.

Finally it was his turn to be examined.

A pair of guards took him from his cell and marched him along the main corridor of the disguised patrol ship.

"What happens now?" he asked them.

"You made it possible for us to capture the pirate vessel without firing a shot," replied one of the guards. "You are to be examined by a special officer of the patrol."

Blackbeard strode along between his burly and armed guards in silence. He recognized the interior of this vessel as a space patrol cruiser, and wondered how he knew this fact. Had he ever been a prisoner aboard such a ship before?

A moment later he was presented at

the opaque plastite door of a small office which was definitely not the main office of the commander of this police cruiser. Both guards drew their ray guns and motioned him to open the door and enter.

"This is a special examination," warned one of them, "but don't try any tricks. We have orders to blast you down if you make one false move. Walk in."

Frowning, wonderingly, Blackbeard did so. He crossed the threshold of the little office, uncomfortably aware that a pair of ray blasters were trained on his back. And then he stopped short in genuine surprise.

From a desk in the room the special patrol officer had arisen and was standing there in an attitude of shock at his villainous appearance.

Blackbeard was conscious of as great a shock. For the officer was a tall and slender, dark-haired and beautiful girl in the abbreviated uniform worn by women members of the Interplanetary Police when off duty.

For a space time seemed to stand still as Blackbeard and the girl stared into each other's eyes. Only vaguely was the man conscious of her feminine allure.

His mind was whirling, spinning, striving to grapple with the illusory idea that he should recognize this woman—that he had seen her before.

One of the guards spoke, explaining the situation.

"This is that fellow who fused the pirates' firing controls, Captain Randall."

CHAPTER V

Bror Ingmann, Terror of Space

ON Baldur, Grag once more stretched his mighty muscles, and heaved. The rocks above him yielded slightly, then held firm. As Grag relaxed in the attempt to free himself, they fell back into place again, locked as securely as ever.

"By all the little devils of Pluto," rumbled Grag. "To think that I, the strongest man in the System—though that animated rubber doll, Otho, would say I'm not a man at all—should be stuck here like a helpless infant Martian in his incubator-nest!"

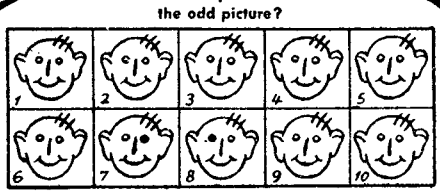
He knew what the trouble was. The weight of rock above, equivalent to many tons on Earth, was little indeed here on Baldur. But several flat slabs must have fallen across the debris that covered him in such a way that their ends made a neat joint. The harder he pushed, the more securely he locked them in place.

Af first he had been merely enraged at realizing his helplessness. But as time passed, and his first fury had been expended in a vain struggle to free himself, he had begun to worry. He knew well enough what had happened. There had been an explosion of dynatomite, judging by the accompanying odor. He could recognize it by means of his artificial

[*Turn page*]

WHAT DO YOU SEE? WHAT DO YOU SAY?

All the same except one . . . which is the odd picture?



ANSWER: Number Five. He is only "two-faced"

sense of smell, even though he did not breathe. The force of it had torn out a huge crater, and then the debris had fallen back and buried him. But where were his companions?

If Curt Newton were alive, why had he not come to the rescue? Grag could think of only one answer. Curt needed air to breathe. The explosion, even if it did him no other harm, had probably torn his oxygen line. And without air Curt Newton would die.

Grag did not put the logical conclusion into words, even mentally, but he saw no way of escaping it. Curt Newton must already be dead. And what went for him went for Otho, too. For Otho also needed air. Only the Brain was a non-breather like Grag, and he needed a continual renewal of the nutrient serums in his case, just as Grag needed an occasional chunk of copper to supply fuel to his atomic power engine.

"Holy sun-imps," said Grag helplessly, using Otho's favorite oath. He was the only one of the Futuremen left alive. He must be. And without his companions, he might as well be dead, too.

He began to repeat to himself all the oaths he knew. To some slight degree, they eased his feelings, and besides that, he enjoyed hearing the sound of a human-type voice again. Even his own. Or as poor Otho, whom Grag had never appreciated enough, would have said, *especially* his own.

Then—just in case—he tried to push the rocks away once more. They held. And time continued its relentless flight.

ABOVE the planetoid, a small space vessel wheezed asthmatically, fell for a time to silence, and then began to cough and spit like a marsh-tiger. The lone voyager inside wiped some of the sweat away from his forehead.

"Durned fools," he muttered. "I said them rocket-feeds weren't working right. I told them. Wait'll I get back and let 'em know they almost cost me my life. 'You blasted idjits,' I'll say, 'whaddya mean tellin' me, Bror Ingmann, you know more about ships than I do? I been a prospector nigh onto fourteen years, and what I don't know—' "

He spat in triumph, then continued his monologue. The ship dropped down with breathtaking speed, then hovered above the surface motionless, and finally bumped to the ground. Bror Ingmann picked himself up slowly, and began to pull on a space suit.

"Not many men coulda made a landing like that," he mused absently as he stepped out through the airlock. He made a gesture to scratch his head, found the helmet in the way, and let his hand drop frustrated to his side. This was as barren a planetoid as he had ever seen. No air, no water, no nothing. Only rocks and—

He caught himself. There *was* something. It might be valuable, too. Far off to one side several rocks were glowing like the embers of a logwood fire such as he had once seen back on Earth, red, and orange, and yellow. His eyes brightened. Those rocks might be *extra* valuable. They probably contained—and from supposition he passed at once to certainty — they probably contained radium, uranium, even new elements.

He ran over, like a lumbering bear, to take a look.

The apparatus he found was where Blackbeard had left it.

"Pits of Pluto, it must be worth millions!" he muttered to himself. "This here other feller dug out lots of it." This he decided from the crater left by the rocks Blackbeard had used in creating oxygen. "And he left his tools. That must mean he intends comin' back."

Having checked this reasoning and decided it was valid, Ingmann examined the tools. "Funniest gadgets I ever did see. Maybe they're valuable, too."

He picked up a peculiarly shaped rod whose end had been smeared with disintegration catalyst. "Don't look much good for diggin'," he grumbled deprecatingly, and poked it at one of the glowing rocks.

Then his jaw dropped. But he himself rose, so rapidly that at first he thought he was leaving the planetoid for good.

Beneath him, the ground was heaving. Under the force of an atomic explosion set off by the catalyst, rocks were spouting upward in beautiful long curves, some of them glowing orange and red like the rock he had touched. A cloud of dust had formed suddenly, and was trailing after him, like a comet's tail. But he felt nothing. It was as if he were standing still, or coasting at a terrific speed through space without using his rockets.

"Moons of Mars," he said resentfully, "you can't trust nobody or nothin' in these strange places."

He had reached the top of a long slow parabola, and now, so gradually that at first he wasn't sure it was happening, he began to come down again. He picked up speed as he fell, and for the second time, landed on Baldur with a bump.

Thanks to the planetoid's low gravity, his injuries were chiefly to his feelings. He rose painfully to his feet. And then, once more, his jaw dropped.

The ground near him was heaving again, this time as if being cast up by an explosion in exceedingly slow motion. Rocks flew apart, one or two of them narrowly missing his head. Then Bror Ingmann swallowed hard. A metal man was rising out of the ground.

GRAG had felt the tremor of an explosion vibrating through the ground around him. He had felt the rocks leap up above, then settle down even lower than before. He wondered what was happening. He waited. Suddenly he realized that those slabs which had been locked together before might now be disengaged. He exerted all his strength. Bursting upward from his temporary tomb, he stared at Bror Ingmann.

He saw an Earthman about six feet in height, strong and burly even through the clumsy old space suit. The man had a formidable, square-cut face, with the flaring mustaches of an old Viking, and the fierce old eyes of a veteran space pirate. All the resentment stored up in his long imprisonment underground boiled to the surface. He touched the Earthman's helmet, so that his voice might carry better than if it had to travel through the ground.

"Who are you?" he roared.

The grim face frowned. "Don't think you kin scare me, iron man. I been prospectin' nigh onto fourteen years, and I seen your kind before. I tear robots apart. They call me Bror Ingmann, Terror of Space. There was a robot I mishandled once . . ."

Then he swallowed, and the fierceness went out of both voice and expression. "I'm tough, I am. Only I ain't lookin' for trouble."

Grag snorted in disgust. He knew a braggart when he met one. What he would have liked to see right now was a really tough customer, some one who knew how to fight, and was anxious to do so. He had a lot of energy to work off. He wanted to get his steellite fingers on the party responsible for that explosion.

He turned on his heel abruptly, leaving the Earthman gazing after him. Then quickly and systematically he began to dig.

It was a long job, even for Grag. The dynatomite had torn up a wide area, and his companions might be buried anywhere. He noticed the Earthman withdraw after a time, as his oxygen tank began to empty, but he paid no attention.

Finally, after several hours, he uncovered the body of Otho. For a moment he gazed at it, motionless as a metal statue. A wave of emotion overwhelmed him.

"Poor Otho!" A human being would have been tearful, but Grag's eyes could achieve no tears and his voice remained but a deep rumble. "He was a fine companion," he muttered, conscious of the inadequacy of his words. "If only I had treated him better."

There was a frown on Otho's white features, as if he had died fighting. Grag turned his face away. All his life, he thought, the memory of how he had behaved to the android would torture him. With a deep sense of shame, he moved the body aside, and continued digging.

Many hours later, he came across the

Brain. The compact box-home of Simon Wright had been covered by a thick layer of debris, but was apparently uninjured. Nevertheless, Simon gave no sign of life.

Grag could hardly go on. The Brain, his own creator, dead! For once in his life, the robot felt weak and powerless. Finally, he placed the Brain alongside the body of Otho, and continued to dig. But, to his relief and perplexity, nowhere could he find a trace of Curt Newton.

The Earthman had returned by now with a new oxygen supply from his ship and was watching with the curiosity of a child. Grag, intent on his search for Curt Newton's body, heard him speak, without paying too much attention.

"Friend, I—I ain't sayin' I'm s-scared, but they look sort of d-dangerous to me!"

"Quiet!" roared Grag. Then he realized that the Earthman must indeed be badly puzzled at what was going on. He looked up. Bror Ingmann was running toward him. The fierce Viking face was pale with terror. But Ingmann was not referring to Grag's companions.

Some distance away, a group of what appeared to be small furry rodents were approaching, marching forward like an army. No more than a foot or so long, and half that in height, they seemed to be oozing along the ground behind him.

Grag recognized them at once. They were not individual animals at all, but parasitic cell-colonies, such as were occasionally found on several of the less frequented planetoids. It mattered little to them whether the animal they attacked was of metal, silica, or organic matter, for they had the power to digest almost anything. They did not kill at once. Having selected a victim, the colonies would dissolve, their cells penetrating those of the host until they were dispersed through the animal's entire body.

For several days the host might feel nothing. And then as suddenly and completely as the one-hoss shay, the host would collapse. And the parasitic cells, swollen now in size and multiplied in number, would emerge, to seek new victims.

Ordinary methods of defense were useless against a danger like this. For several valuable seconds Grag simply stared. He might outrun the attackers —and he would not be ashamed to run, either—but Baldur was a small planetoid and eventually they would catch up with him.

Through Ingmann's space-helmet, Grag could see the terrified eyes of the self-named Terror of Space.

"You might try your gun," he rumbled. "What have you got it for?"

Ingmann's atom-pistol lanced a beam at one of the small gray heaps of cells. The thing simply split in two. And each half kept on coming.

The next moment, Grag heard something that froze him in his tracks. "Use your eyes, Grag!"

It was not the words that startled him but the sharp rasping voice in which they were uttered. The Brain's voice! The Brain was alive!

CHAPTER VI

Pygmalion

SIMON CARTWRIGHT'S mind had recovered from its shock.

"Wide pupils, distant focus, and ultraviolet below two thousand Angstroms," directed the Brain coldly. "Quickly, Grag!"

Grag's eyes opened wide. The fear-stricken Bror Ingmann gaped as he saw the lenses change shape and emit a faint violet glow.

That was all he saw—except for the manner in which the approaching cell-colonies disintegrated. It was like magic. Even a proton-pistol never produced as striking results. For a proton-beam was always accompanied by sharply visible light, but the wide circle of ultraviolet Grag had produced was all but invisible

to any eyes but his own.

"You should have thought of that yourself," rasped the Brain reprovingly.

Grag nodded sheepishly. "I'm sorry, Simon. I sometimes forget how my eyes work, just as an ordinary person forgets how *his* work. The idea of using the photo-electric cells to generate certain light, as well as detect it, just didn't occur to me." Then his eyes opened wide again, and this time no ultra-violet came from them. "But I thought you were dead, Simon! You didn't move."

If the Brain had been capable of making the gesture, a shrug would have suited his words perfectly. "I couldn't free myself, and I knew my nutrient serums wouldn't last indefinitely, so I simply suspended animation. It was the only thing to do. Then the vibrations of your voice reached me through the ground, and I awoke again."

The Brain paused, and his stalk-eyes examined Bror Ingmann as if he were some strange specimen of planetoid life. The Terror of Space broke into a cold sweat. He hadn't recognized the metal man, for there were other robots beside Grag. But the Brain's appearance was unmistakable. These were Futuremen. He had heard of them but he hadn't known they'd be so frightening. If only he could get away from here.

The Brain turned to Grag again.

"Where's Curt?"

"I couldn't find him, Simon! The low gravity makes digging easy, and I've turned up all the debris left by the explosion, but there's no sign of him."

"You haven't overlooked the *Comet?*"

"The *Comet* is gone."

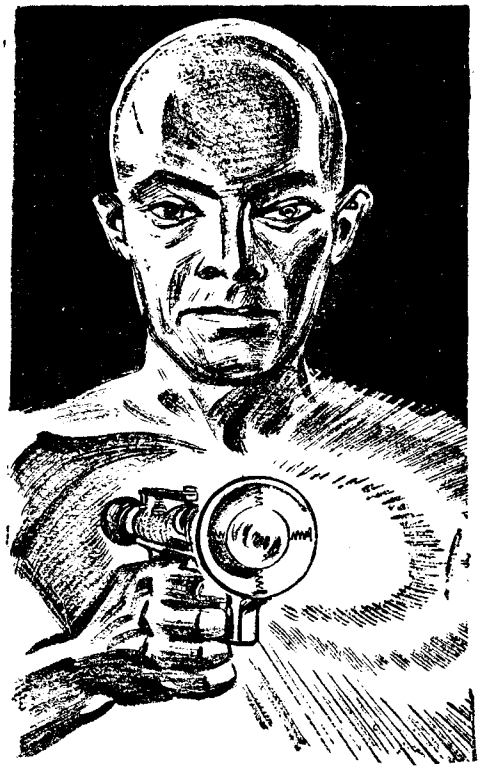
The Brain was silent for a moment, pondering. "I can't imagine Curt's taking it without leaving some sign."

"I can't imagine his leaving us at all," declared Grag.

"Under certain circumstances, that is quite possible."

SIMON fell silent again. When next he spoke, it was but to utter a single word. "Otho?"

Grag almost choked as he pointed toward the lifeless body of the android.



OTHO

"He was buried."

"So of course he suffocated." The Brain sounded almost impatient. He addressed Ingmann. "You have a medical kit in your ship?"

"An old one. I don't have any of these new-fangled drugs."

"An old one will do. Go with him, Grag, and get it. He's afraid of us and might be tempted to blast off, so be sure to bring him back. And bring back also a steady-pressure pump and an oxygen tank."

"Now, look here," said Bror Ingmann desperately. "That's my ship, see, and nobody ain't tellin' me what I'm gonna do—hey!"

Grag had picked him up and slung him over his shoulder. The Terror of Space protested so loudly that even after he was more than a dozen yards away, the Brain's audio-receiver vibrated heavily.

When Grag returned, Ingmann was considerably more subdued. His fear

had been supplanted by curiosity. He couldn't imagine what the Brain was planning to do.

Simon's eyes scanned the opened medicine kit rapidly, picked out several items, and swung around toward Grag. The voice-box barked out a curt order, and Grag began to mix the selected chemicals.

A tractor beam from Simon picked up a hypodermic syringe, filled it with nutrient serum from his own case, and injected the liquid into Otho's inanimate body. Bror Ingmann shifted uneasily from one foot to the other. He didn't understand this at all.

The Brain now took the mixture of chemicals which Grag had prepared and sprayed it over Otho's face, and into his mouth and nostrils. Next he connected the steady-pressure pump to one of Otho's arteries and set it going. Blood began to course through the dead android's body once more.

"How about the oxygen, Simon?" asked Grag.

"When I tell you."

They waited in silence. The pump was noiseless, and the needle of the gauge remained absolutely motionless, so that for a long time nothing seemed to happen. Then the needle began to quiver. Its vibrations increased in amplitude until there was a swing of some forty millimeters of mercury.

"His heart's beginning to function," observed the Brain. "Feed him the oxygen, Grag. But don't keep the funnel too close to his nostrils."

Grag obeyed, and Ingmann began to shrink away. This business of bringing a dead man to life smacked of black magic to him. Suppose the dead man came back, but his soul belonged to the devil, as the ancients used to believe?

The Brain was apparently not worried about that. He waited patiently. Then suddenly there was a loud howl, and Ingmann almost fainted. Otho, who a moment before resembled a motionless statue of white marble, leaped high into the air. His voice died away at once as he left the ground, but the sound of it haunted the old prospector until the android came down again. There was no doubt about it, Otho *did* belong to the devil.

But the devil was apparently not very sure of his victim, for Otho having leapt into airlessness, was choking. "More oxygen," said Simon calmly, and Grag, his metal face expressing none of the emotion of which the robot was capable, hastened to comply.

"Why, you misguided meal for a metal-eater, what's the idea of putting that acid on my face?" yelled Otho. "It almost burned the skin right off!"

"You see, Simon," sighed Grag, "that's the thanks we get. We should have let this piece of worn plastic stay dead. We'd have been a lot better off."

"What? I was dead?" exclaimed Otho, startled.

"Well, of course, you wouldn't be able to tell the difference, Otho. It's so close to your normal state," explained Grag.

"It's no time for joking, Grag," reproved the Brain. He faced the incredulous android. "Without air, you couldn't help dying. But you didn't die as a human being dies. You lack autolytic enzymes to dissolve the tissues of your body. Therefore, all the colloids that had coagulated were reversible. The job of bringing you to life was nothing to that of creating you in the first place. And the time required was infinitely less."

"Why throw good time after bad?" muttered Grag.

BUT the Brain was in no mood to listen to an exchange of compliments between the two synthetic Futuremen. He spoke to Ingmann. "Does your ship have a clock?"

"Earth or Mars reckoning?"

"Either one," returned the Brain impatiently.

"I go by Mars. Last time I looked, and that was about ten hours ago, it was Wednesday, five-fifty-five-twenty."

"Which day of the month, and which month?"

"Well, unless they've changed the calendar again, it's February thirtieth."

"So we've been lying here more than

a month," observed the Brain.

"I could have told you that, Simon," said Grag.

"No, Grag, for all you knew, it might have been a year. When you're living at low energy, your sense of the passage of time is extremely inaccurate."

"The Board of Governors must have finally passed that planetary bill," suggested Otho. And then something seemed to strike him. His slanting green eyes opened wide. "Say, where's the Chief? Last thing I knew he was walking along just ahead of me."

"Being dead hasn't improved your wits any," rumbled Grag gloomily. "The Chief is missing."

"He isn't dead?"

"We haven't found the body. You don't think, Simon, that he could have been blasted off into space, do you?"

Simon considered. "It isn't likely. A dynatomite blast has a powerful brisant effect, but the total energy involved isn't too high. And at any rate, the explosion couldn't have blown the *Comet* away."

"No, it couldn't. I've been trying to think why the blast took place at all. Some prospector, like Bror Ingmann here, must have forgotten where he planted a charge. And we accidentally set it off."

The Brain's pressor beams raised him into the air, where he hovered weirdly. "This was no accident, Grag. Some one deliberately tried to kill us all, then made off with the *Comet*."

"That prospector who looked like a petty crook!" exclaimed Otho. "I'll never forget what he looks like. Wait until I get my hands on him!"

"He may have been more clever than we realized."

"Possibly," agreed the Brain. "That's one thing we must find out." The stalk-eyes swiveled around to stare at Ingmann. "You'll take us to Mars?"

"Aw, now, Mr—er—Brain," Ingmann began, and his voice trailed off helplessly.

"You'll be paid for your trouble more than you could ever earn as a prospector."

"And you'll learn a lot," added Grag.

"Not from you," put in Otho. But his heart was not in the remark. He was worried about Curt. And, like his companions, he was greatly puzzled about many things.

Meekly, the Terror of Space led the way to his ship.

CHAPTER VII

The Terror of Otho

INGMANN'S ship was a slow one, and the trip to Mars required more time than they had anticipated. On the way, however, a radio flash gave them one important bit of news. The Mars meeting of the Board of Governors had *not* been held on the date scheduled. The inexplicable absence of the Futuremen had led to a postponement of several weeks. The final passage of the bill to create a new planet was to take place when Captain Future appeared.

They landed at Radium City at a small spaceport used mostly for cargo ships. Bror Ingmann turned hopeful eyes to his uninvited guests.

"I got you here okay," he said. "Now maybe you can go away and let me be alone."

"We have no intention of inflicting our company on one who does not desire it," said the Brain coldly. "But we may still need your ship. If you wish, you may remain in some obscure place, out of harm's way, while we investigate."

Ingmann scratched a worried head. "N—no, that don't sound so good to me. Nobody can operate this ship like I can. I better stay around."

"Good idea," grinned Otho. "Your older brother will take care of you."

Grag turned to gaze suspiciously at the white-faced android. There was a gleam of anticipation in Otho's eyes, as if he were enjoying the thought of some

clever trick he had planned.

"What's that about an older brother?" asked the Terror of Space suspiciously.

"Excellent idea, Otho," rasped Simon. "Until we learn who our enemy is, we'd better not appear as ourselves."

"You Futuremen talk in riddles," complained Ingmann crossly. "I ain't got no older brother."

"But you will have," Otho assured him.

The android sat down in front of a gleaming metal plate that could serve him as a mirror. Incredibly rapid white fingers skipped through the medicine chest. And before Ingmann's startled eyes, another Terror of Space began to take shape.

Even Grag was forced to utter a grudging compliment at the final result. For Otho's plastic face had broadened out, grown into a fierce duplicate of the dumb-struck Bror Ingmann's. In a faded suit of the latter's clothes, padded to fit his slighter frame, he could be distinguished from his model only by the fact that he was slightly broader and scowled more frighteningly.

Ingmann swallowed hard. "You ain't aimin' to walk around like that?"

"That's the general idea," returned Otho, and for a moment the scowl was wiped away by a pleased grin. "Come on, pardner. We gotta do a little investigatin'. And, by the way, my name is Snor—Snor Ingmann. We're the Terror Twins."

Bror followed open-mouthed as Otho led the way out of the ship.

A stranger might have noticed one insignificant difference between the two formidable brothers who lumbered across the space port and into the bustling Martian town that lay beyond. The older and more frightening of the two had slanting green eyes that darted everywhere and saw everything in the time his companion required to absorb a single trifling detail. But as it happened, no stranger felt tempted to stare long into the eyes of either man.

WHEN Bror Ingmann showed a tendency to linger among the intriguing sights of the pleasure district through which they passed, Otho impatiently urged him on. Bror frowned menacingly. Though he permitted himself to be hurried into moving on, there were some vague threats that he could not help uttering.

"You'll be sorry you done this to me, pardner. Bror Ingmann ain't no man to forget insults."

"I'm not insulting you," explained Otho impatiently. "I'm simply in a hurry."

"Where we goin'?"

"To a space port."

Bror's lower jaw dropped. "But we just came from one!"

"No reason why we can't visit the others," returned Otho acidly. "I'm looking for a ship. It's probably berthed at one of the larger places."

"Pardner, I don't understand—"

"You don't have to understand. Move, you space-blasted hunk of meteor-meat!" roared Otho.

The baffled Terror of Space mumbled to himself more fiercely than ever. But he followed Otho meekly.

Otho found the *Comet* at the space port nearest the council hall where the Board of Governors met.

On the way, he had heard a news report which puzzled him, but this did not stop him from searching. The Board of Governors had met yesterday and finally passed the bill providing for the creation of a new planet. They were supposed to have waited for the return of the Futuremen. He wondered why they had changed their minds.

The *Comet* looked exactly as Otho had last seen it on Baldur. Guards surrounded it, and he did not attempt to get too close, merely staring in bewilderment. Only Captain Future could have brought it here—and Captain Future would never have left his faithful companions. The whole thing didn't make sense.

Then he heard a commotion in the crowd. A small group of people was moving toward the ship, but there were too many spectators in the way for Otho to discern who they were. It was not

until the guards had cleared a path for them that Otho glimpsed their faces.

He gasped. Striding toward the ship was Captain Future himself! And with him was the shifty-eyed Earthman they had seen on Baldur, now very expensively dressed, and looking as dignified as any judge!

Could this Earthman have saved Curt when the dynatomite exploded? That was possible, but it still didn't explain why Curt had gone off, leaving the other Futuremen still buried.

Two other men came into view, and this time Otho's eyes almost popped out of his head.

They were Grag and an android who was the very image of his undisguised self!

Grag was carrying a metal box with stalk eyes!

The rage that was seething within Otho was so furious that he almost strangled. He understood it now. Even if he had not seen the pretended android, the sight of an apparent Brain being carried by a robot would have given the game away.

This Captain Future was an impostor. The robot and the android were impostors likewise. And the pretended Brain could only be an inanimate machine. It was probably nothing but a lifeless box, that must be carried about.

As for the Earthman, he was either the villain himself or an agent of the man who had set off the dynatomite. Otho's brain sought for gaps in his understanding of the unknown enemy's plot, and quickly filled them in. The man must have planned to kill off the Futuremen, steal the *Comet,* substitute his hirelings, and somehow cash in on Captain Future's name. It was the only way of looking at things that made sense to Otho.

SLOWLY, he was mastering his rage. The astonished Bror Ingmann, at his side, was staring back and forth from the pretended android to the real one, as if unable to believe his eyes.

"Stop showing your surprise!" hissed Otho. "Act as if, as if—"

And then his own self-control snapped. For the imitation android had suddenly bent back, twisting his body almost double, to pick off the ground some trifle he could have obtained more easily by simply stretching out an arm. He thought he could impress the crowd, did he?

He thought that little grand-stand tricks like that would make people think him genuine, win their respect? Otho's synthetic teeth gritted alarmingly. He'd show this faker!

An incredible leap took him over the heads of the startled guards. As he landed on the ground again, some of them rushed toward him, but the quickest fist in the Solar System lashed out to strike them aside before they even realized Otho's intentions. Then the maddened android was rushing at his imitator.

The man, whoever he was, seemed both startled and frightened. "'Ware Snor Ingmann, Terror of Space!" roared Otho, and stretched out an avenging hand.

None of the onlookers was ever quite sure of what followed. They saw the two men, apparently Otho and a burly space miner, execute a series of twists and turns that they would later maintain were impossible. Otho twisted the impostor into a knot, untied him, spun him around like a hoop, and leaped through it.

Then he whirled around the man like a Phobos-snake, until he seemed only a blurred spiral.

More guards were coming. Otho tied his howling victim into one last knot, and hurled him at them. Then a final giant leap took him over the *Comet,* into a group of small surface vehicles. Otho dived into one of them, started it racing ahead, and as it reached a corner, leaped out.

He had the satisfaction of seeing the guards pursue the empty vehicle.

He ran a quick hand over his features, molding them into a new shape. On the other side of the *Comet,* people were yelling, as if some new disturbance had arisen. Otho slipped quietly into a side

street. The pursuit behind him had apparently died away.

He reached Ingmann's ship without being molested. The Brain listened to his story with interest.

"I think we're beginning to understand a few things more clearly," he commented at last. "But I'd still like to know where the real Curt is."

"I didn't hear anything about that," admitted Otho.

"You wouldn't," said Grag. But he was evidently not thinking about Curt. He seemed to be trying to stifle a feeling of amusement.

Otho looked at him sharply.

"I THINK we'd better leave, Simon," commented the robot.

"Yes. For the present we may as well permit these gentlemen to think their plans will succeed."

"Wait a minute," put in Otho. "What about Ingmann?"

"*You've* taken care of Ingmann," explained Grag happily.

"What do you mean?"

"We had a radio report of what happened near the *Comet*." Grag appeared to be licking his lips. "Bror Ingmann, Terror of Space, was captured on the tarmac, and readily admitted his guilt in assaulting one of the Futuremen. 'I git that way every once in a while,' he told the police. 'I'm mild by nature, but now and then somethin' comes over me. I guess it was this sight of this here android showin' off. I don't like show-offs nohow, so I decided to put him in his place."

"What?" growled Otho. "He took the credit?"

"He certainly did. And the name of a certain Futureman named Otho is now mud in popular opinion!"

"You should learn to control your temper, Otho," reproved Simon. "Your actions might have led to a search for us and revealed that we were still alive. Fortunately, there is little chance that Ingmann will ever reveal the truth. His story of two androids, two robots and two Brains would sound insane, and I imagine he knows it and doesn't want to be confined to an institution for the mentally ill.

"Then too, he's been starving for esteem all his life. His self-bestowed title of Terror of Space is sufficient indication of that. And now that in the eyes of the public he is a major hero, he's certainly not going to admit the truth."

"All the same," observed Grag, "we'd better get out of here."

"Where shall we go?" asked Otho.

"To the Moon-home," answered the Brain. "We'll borrow the ship temporarily, and pay Ingmann for it, as well as release him from jail, later. The impostors may try to reach the Moon first. If they do, that will be the end of them. They'll never get past our automatic defenses."

Otho slid into the control chair, mumbling to himself.

As the ship rose slowly, he could hear Grag's voice, lowered to a rumbling monotone.

"I guess it was the sight of this here android showin' off. I don't like show-offs nohow . . . ?"

Otho yanked at the rocket-throttle so furiously that he almost tore it off. Even the Brain looked up at that.

CHAPTER VIII

The Impostors

BEHIND the closed doors of the *Comet*, Edward Loring was raging. "You fools! After all the trouble I've been taken to teach you your roles!"

The man who was impersonating the android stood facing him unhappily. He was Calvin Shane, a perennially unfortunate Earthman who had once been a rubber man in a circus. "Nobody had any suspicions, boss," he protested. "It was just one of those things."

"You mean to say that you weren't recognized?"

"Me own mother couldn't know me. This here Ingmann was crazy. You yourself heard what he told the cops."

"Yes, about your showing off. And he's right. You still seem to think you're in a circus."

"Okay, if you just want me to *look* the part, I'll limit myself to that. But you'll be the first one to complain."

"Shane is perfectly justified," observed Hro Zan importantly.

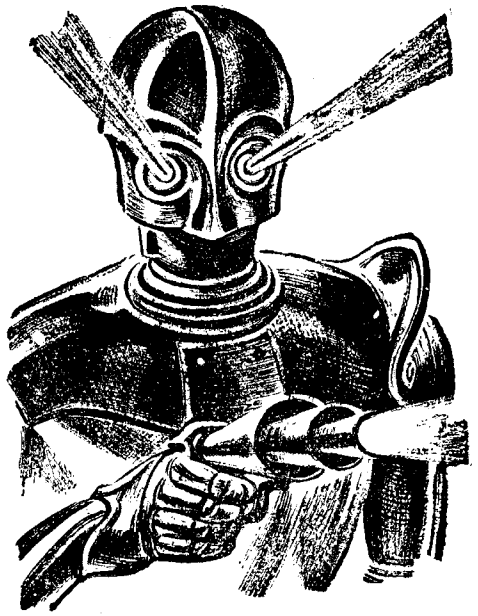
"Oh, he is?" Loring turned in fury to the actor who was such a startling double for Captain Future. "You're a fine one to talk! After the trouble I've taken with you—molding your face, teaching you how to walk like Future, how to speak like him, how to gesture like him—after the hours I've spent before his films, studying each movement, and trying to get it through your thick head that he was a real man, and not a character in some melodrama, that you can play better than the man who created the part. After I've given you the most expensive educational courses on the market, trying to put at least a smattering of science into that numskull of yours—"

"You needn't go on," said Hro Zan with dignity. "I resign."

"You resign? You histrionic moron. Do you think this is one of those polite comedies you always talk about? The only time you resign from this is when we split the swag and drop the whole thing—or else when you resign your life."

"I think you got yourself worked up over nothing, Chief," commented a metallic voice. This came from a Jovian named Vens, who possessed a stolidity and good-nature that nothing had so far shaken. Encased in a metal shell, he was the very image of Grag. "Nobody suspected a thing."

"You think not?" Loring spoke savagely. "I've been trying for weeks to impress upon this—this idiotic tragedian that Future and the Futuremen act naturally, that they don't pose. And the minute we walk into the council hall he strikes an attitude that smells of Martian ham a mile away. The king conferring a sight of himself upon his loyal subjects, no less. There was one fellow who almost fell out of his chair. He must have laughed himself silly."



GRAG

Calvin Shane nodded. "I noticed him. Financier by the name of Brooks. Some of these rich men have sharp eyes. But most people paid little attention."

LORING bit his lip. "I hope not. Meanwhile, if we're even pretending to go ahead with this planet-building, we'll have to hire some good men. After all, we'll need a little more time to cash in on Future's name, and we'll have to put up a good bluff while we are collecting funds."

"After we finish with the planet, why not try the Moon-laboratories?" put in the hulking Jovian. "I understand there's some valuable stuff there."

"*I* understand that the place is well guarded."

"We'll go easy. With the real Futuremen dead, we shouldn't have too much trouble. And we can take our own good time. I can break into any place—if I'm not interrupted."

Loring nodded. Shane and the Jovian were good men. Too bad he had been forced to rely for the key imposture

upon such a mental lightweight as Hro Zan.

Hro Zan felt insulted. He had heard many unpleasant things from directors, managers, and other actors, but he had never been subjected to such indignities as had been his lot since undertaking the role of Captain Future. Moreover, the part was not one for which he cared greatly. Captain Future, to his mind, hadn't lived. He had gone to strange places, experienced remarkable adventures, fought his way through danger at great odds, but he had never, or so Loring claimed, got drunk on tekeel liquor.

Hro Zan had taken this failing of Curt Newton's very much to heart.

With Loring's mind occupied by the necessity for making a pretense of building a planet—as absurd and uninteresting a project as Hro Zan had ever heard of—the actor had his chance. He slipped out of the *Comet* so quietly that no one noticed his going.

Half an hour later he was seated at a table admiring the floor show of the Radium City Country Club. Several goblets of tekeel had gone swimming down his throat, and the effect was heartening. He had begun to appreciate himself.

"Waiter," he said importantly. The robot waiter stared, but did not move. He was cued to remain motionless until he had actually received a patron's order.

"I'm a great scientist, waiter. First I thought I was Isaac Newton, but now I know I'm Curt. Ever study tekeel liquor? Simon and I did once. It's good for you. Improves the health. Waiter!" he roared suddenly. "Another drink!"

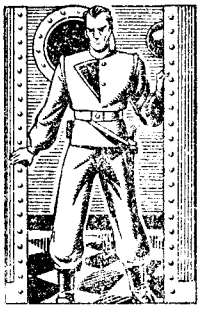
The robot obediently moved off. Around him, Hro Zan could see heads leaning toward each other, lips buzzing. So people knew who he was? *Hm*, somebody must have told them. Or maybe he was so famous they didn't have to be told.

They didn't.

It was not long before all Radium City knew that Captain Future was drunk on **tekeel liquor.**

CHAPTER IX

The Pirate and the Lady



BLACKBEARD was staring with so little pretense of politeness or common courtesy that Joan Randall felt a slow blush reddening her cheeks. Her eyes snapped dangerously. She was a member of the Planet Patrol as well as a woman, and it annoyed her that something about this horribly disfigured ruffian appealed to her in way that was quite outside the matter of duty.

"How long have you been a pirate?" she snapped at him.

"I don't think I've ever been one," Blackbeard replied in a husky voice.

"What were you doing aboard that ship? Vacationing?"

"You might call it that," he agreed coolly.

For a moment sheer anger and surprise at the man's impudence prevented Joan from speaking. Slowly, however, she regained control of herself. She even managed to smile. "And how long did your vacation last?"

Bleackbeard stroked his beard, which was now little more than an uppleasant growth of stubble. His wounds imparted a sinister air to the gesture. "Several hours," he answered finally.

"I'm sorry we had to interupt. And before that?"

"I was stranded accidentally on a planetoid."

"How?"

"My ship left without me."

Joan bit her lip. "How would you like to continue your vacation," she asked pleasantly, "on Cerberus?"

"Not at all." He grinned. "It's rather unfortunate, isn't it, that the decision's up to a court, and not to you alone?"

"Yes, but I can influence the court."

"Not in view of the facts. I don't know what my pirate friends said about

me. But I think you realize how little their evidence is worth. The officer who boarded the ship will testify that I aided the Planet Patrol by keeping Urg under my gun until he and the others had been disarmed. There is no one who can testify that I aided the pirates in any way. No sane court would send me to Cerberus."

As he spoke, he continued to stare at her.

"You've seen me before?" she snapped.

"I think I have. But I don't remember where."

"There's something familiar about you, too," said Joan slowly. "You're sure you haven't been in any patrol line-ups?"

Blackbeard smiled faintly. "Are you asking me to incriminate myself?"

The question was a mocking one, but behind it, Joan detected a certain disquiet. He very definitely did not wish to speak about his past history. Very well, she woudn't speak about it. But there were fingerprints, Bertillon measurements, eye-retina patterns, all the other marks of identification which aided in the tracking down of criminals. Meanwhile, according to the testimony, this man was entitled to some consideration in this case.

On the other hand, Blackbeard had already considered the possibility that he might have been a criminal, and he had been troubled by the thought. The fact that a member of the Planet Patrol had at first glance struck him as familiar drove home the warning. And when the trim and attractive Captain Randall hinted that she might have seen him in a patrol line-up, Blackbeard began to have serious doubts of himself.

Meanwhile, he found the interview disconcerting for another reason. He had hoped, from the moment he realized he had forgotten his name, that the sight of a familiar face would start a chain of memories that would enable him to recall everything. Well, he had gazed at a face that was undoubtedy familiar —and things hadn't worked out that way. His type of amnesia wasn't going to be cured as simply as that.

The Planet Patrol ship, he learned, was on its way to Mars. And although it was agreed that he was no pirate, it seemed that Captain Randall felt that his testimony would be useful at the Martian court. So, while he would be released at Radium City on his own recognizance, he was to consider himself a System witness.

Blackbeard smiled grimly. He knew what power could be used to enforce this polite request. He agreed to the terms, saluted Captain Randall, and preceded his guards out into the corridor cheerfully.

IN THE days that followed aboard ship, Blackbeard found himself growing to like the girl. He liked the frank open way in which she approached him, believing as she did that he was a criminal. She didn't examine his features furtively, or try to take his fingerprints from the objects he handled. She wanted his identification patterns, and she asked for them.

Blackbeard laughed. "You've got no right to them, you know."

"If I had a right, I wouldn't ask your permission."

He thought over the request. If he were a criminal, he'd be found out sooner or later. The Planet Patrol system was too thorough to have missed him. If he weren't—well, that would be good to know also. He consented.

It was while they were waiting for the report from Planet Patrol Center that the incident with the Plutonian freighter occurred. This particular vessel, the *Space Monarch,* seemed to be headed for Earth at the time the Patrol ship loaded with pirate prisoners encountered it. Blackbeard, overhearing the conversation between Joan and one of her subordinates concerning it, frowned slightly. The *Space Monarch,* it seemed, was a problem that the Planet Patrol had thus far failed to solve.

"There's no doubt that it's somehow involved in the transradite drug-smuggling that's been going on for the past few months," said Joan. "But somehow, we've never been able to obtain proof."

"May I suggest, Captain Randall," observed the respectful officer to whom she spoke, "that we stop the ship and search her with the transradite detector?"

Joan shrugged. "That's been done before, without result. But I suppose it's our duty to do it again."

Shortly afterward, Blackbeard heard their voices die away. The freighter had been duly brought to a halt. When later he heard Joan's voice once more, he could detect both disappointment and bewilderment.

"That freighter's captain sneered at us," she exclaimed. "He knew we wouldn't find anything!"

"It's barely possible the ship wasn't carrying transradite."

Joan shook her head impatiently. "That's the conclusion we've always come to. And yet the stuff continues to be smuggled into Earth. It always makes its appearance shortly after the *Space Monarch* has landed! It's true that the mineral is so transparent it's almost invisible, but it's also radioactive, and our detector would have found it if it had been aboard the ship!"

In his cell, Blackbeard chuckled, and called out, "Captain Randall!"

Joan returned along the corridor and confronted him, her face cool and unconcerned.

"Yes, prisoner twenty-four?" she said.

"I couldn't help overhearing your discussion, Captain Randall. I think I can be of some help."

"Indeed?" Her voice was sarcastic. "I suppose you know the exact place inside the ship where the transradite is hidden?"

"I'd say it differently," he replied. "But I prefer to let you see with your own eyes. Suppose you let me out of here—I can't escape, of course—and I'll lead you straight to the drug—if that freighter carries any."

"The freighter's a few thousand miles astern of us by now."

"It will be easy to overtake. Apologize to the captain for the inconvenience you're causing him, and allow me to do the searching."

Joan's eyes studied him curiously. "You seem to have a great deal of confidence in yourself—Blackbeard."

"I have."

Joan hesitated. Then she gave the order to turn the ship about. And soon afterward they overhauled the Earth-bound freighter.

THE captain was surprised to see them, surprised and annoyed—but polite. And he was puzzled to see Joan approach him in the company of a man who was obviously a prisoner, under the muzzle of an atom-pistol carried by a wary patrolman.

"Anything in the ship you think you've overlooked, Captain Randall?"

It was Blackbeard who answered. "No, Captain, nothing in the ship. Just a little transradite outside," he said mockingly.

The freighter captain's face turned pale, and tiny beads of perspiration began to form on his forehead. "I'm sorry, but I—don't understand."

"I think you do. Do you want me to get into a space suit and drag the detector outside, or will you confess quietly now how you've been smuggling transradite?"

For answer, the captain turned away and tried to plunge down a long corridor. Blackbeard hurled himself lithely after him, and the two men crashed to the floor in a swirl of flying fists. A few seconds later, Blackbeard alone arose.

"You might regard that as a confession," he smiled. "Although it really wasn't needed."

"You mean," asked Joan incredulously, "that he's been smuggling the transradite on the *outside* of the ship?"

Blackbeard nodded. "It's just as infusible as the metal hull, so there's no danger from the friction of any atmosphere. The hull, of course, absorbs or reflects all the radiations, which is the reason why your detector showed nothing *inside* the ship. And as transradite is practically invisible, it could be carried in full view without danger of being seen."

"Very clever," said Joan reflectively. "There's only one other man I can think

of who might have guessed the solution —and he's about as different from you as night from day."

"He's probably honest. I guess I have the advantage of the criminal mind. I simply asked myself, if the stuff had to be smuggled, how I would have done it, and the answer was simple. Set a thief to catch a thief, you know."

"I wonder," mused Joan aloud. "I'm beginning to think—well, we'll know in a day or so. And I thank you for your aid, in the name of the Interplanetary Police. This will count in your favor, also."

It was the next day that the radioed report on Blackbeard arrived.

"You're unknown," said Joan impassively. "Either you're honest or you're so skillful a criminal that we have no record of you. Too bad there's no universal System registration to tell us who you really are."

"I'm not sure myself who I am," Blackbeard admitted sadly.

"Looking at your face, I still have trouble believing you're not a pirate."

"Looking at yours—" he began, and broke off as he looked. Then, very deliberately, he put his arms around her and kissed her.

Joan's face was a flaming red. Her hand smacked against his bearded cheek so hard that it tingled. "You—you—"

"I suppose I am something of a pirate after all," he observed. "But the things I steal are well worth taking."

Joan turned on her heel and left him.

In a way, she felt, the blame for what had happened was hers. She had allowed herself to become too familiar with him. She had encouraged him. From now on, she would treat him with the coldness he deserved.

And yet, the kiss had been not unpleasant. Alone, she blushed again, this time unhappily. Where was her loyalty to Curt Newton, if an ordinary none-too-attractive stranger could give her a thrill, and make her forget, even momentarily, his existence?

For the rest of the trip, she avoided Blackbeard. For his part, Blackbeard

[*Turn page*]

had found another puzzle to solve.

"I've kissed that girl before," he told himself in bewilderment. "What reason —or rather, what right—did I have to kiss her?"

HIS question remained unsolved by the time they landed on Mars. Blackbeard tried to put it out of his mind as he viewed the bustling activity of the red planet. Soon he would be faced with more important problems to solve —the problem, for instance, of where his next meal was coming from. For, once the Planet Patrol had decided it didn't want him, he was on his own.

Mars was familiar to him. The rust-covered deserts, the hanging cities, with their unhealthy-looking population, the wonderful sky-piercing palaces of the rich in the suburbs—all stirred memories which remained beneath the surface, and confused him without giving him a clue to the truth about himself. Even the space ports, which he seemed to know like the palm of his own hand, failed to touch off a train of thought that might reveal his past.

There was a tear-drop-shaped vessel, the *Comet,* berthed at one of the space fields, and while he was still some distance away, he could hear the uproar that came from a crowd nearby.

In response to his question, a grinning Martian explained eagerly what had happened. The *Comet's* passengers, it seemed, had undergone an unpleasant experience.

"These Futuremen are supposed to be unbeatable," said the Martian. "But, friend, I've never seen anything like this Ingmann lad in action. He took Otho and twisted him into knobs."

The *Comet,* the Futuremen, Otho—all were familiar names that somehow failed to elicit the proper response from his own mind.

He listened to the Martian's explanation somewhat absently. What had occurred was after all nothing but an ordinary brawl, and he was not interested in brawls. He would have liked, however, to meet this Captain Future, possibly to enlist his scientific help.

CHAPTER X

The New Planet

AN hour later, still prowling near the space field, Blackbeard had his wish. A door in the *Comet* opened quietly, and a man stepped out with furtive haste. The tall space-tanned figure and the unruly red hair indicated that here was undoubtedly the famous Curt Newton.

The man hurried away before Blackbeard could speak to him, to reappear a few moments later out of the shadow of a space liner. Blackbeard followed, somewhat puzzled. The furtive manner did not tally with what he heard of Captain Future.

Outside the space port Blackbeard ran into Joan Randall again. She was accompanied by a keen-eyed, white-haired veteran in the uniform of a marshal of the planet patrol. She had only a quick word or two to spare for him as she hurried on. Both she and her elderly companion appeared worried.

Blackbeard had an idea they were going to visit the *Comet,* and instead of hastening after the red-haired figure, he waited. A few minutes later, he saw them returning. Joan's face was white, the old marshal's red with anger.

"If you're looking for Curt Newton, Captain Randall," observed Blackbeard, "I think I know where he's gone."

"So he *isn't* in the ship!" roared the marshal. "I knew they were lying!"

Joan seemed uneasy and at a loss. "I don't understand why, Ezra. It's almost as if they wanted to avoid us. Both Grag and Otho were cold and distant, and Simon didn't even come over to say a word."

"Pretends to be working at his experiments," grunted her companion. "And sends that fellow Loring over to make apologies. I wonder where they picked him up. The Futuremen ordinarily

wouldn't tolerate such a man for a minute."

Blackbeard waited silently. The marshal, he now realized, must be Ezra Gurney, of whom Joan had spoken on the trip to Mars. But somehow he was sure that he had met him before.

Joan was biting her lip. "They all seem different," she said. "Even Curt must have changed, or he wouldn't be associating with Loring. And, Ezra, I can't believe that story Loring gave us of unusual radiations in space having had a temporary effect on their minds."

"Sounds fishy to me." The sharp old eyes turned critically upon the tall bearded man who stood waiting. "You say you know where Captain Future has gone? Who are you, anyway?"

Joan hastened to explain, and the irate old marshal at once became almost friendly.

"He was headed for Radium City," said Blackbeard.

"We'll have a talk with him. Come on, Joan," said Gurney.

They evidently expected him to follow, so Blackbeard went along. Captain Future not being a man who could long remain unrecognized in Radium City, they had no difficulty in picking up his trail. As they entered the Country Club, they were almost overwhelmed by the laughter that swept the place.

Blackbeard could hear Joan's gasp of incredulity.

"It's Curt they're laughing at! He's drunk!" she murmured unbelievingly.

Ezra's eyes were steely. "You stay here, Joan. I'll have a talk with that lad."

But the unsteady red-haired figure did not wait for Ezra. He had already caught sight of them, and came wavering to greet them.

"You're Joan Randall," he said. "Recognish you from your picture. Nish girl, nish girl."

Blackbeard, staring at her with sympathy, could see not only the painful embarrassment in her face, but other emotions—fear, wonder, curiosity. This was not the Captain Future she had known.

"Steady, Curt," snapped the old marshal. "We'll have to get you out of here."

"Whaffor? Nish plashe here." He folded Joan's arm under his, patted it affectionately. "They told me shtay away from you, said you would know shomething wrong." He winked at her. "Nothing wrong. Noshirree!"

He straightened up with an effort, and with Joan on his arm began to stride across the polished plastine floor with a pompous dignity that struck Blackbeard as curiously affected. The bearded man's brow wrinkled. The famous Captain Future had all the professional tricks of an actor in some cheap melodrama.

Then suddenly, a voice spoke from the doorway, a voice that was trying to appear calm, and yet could not conceal the rage that lay underneath. "Curt!"

The man who spoke was small and shifty-eyed. His face was pasty with fear. He was accompanied by an android and a great robot.

Captain Future's face darkened. "Loring!"

The little man hastened across the floor to meet him. "Excuse me, Miss Randall," he said as, without spoken instructions, the android and the robot each seized one of the drunken man's arms. "I wanted to spare you this. That's why I told you he was on the ship, but couldn't see you."

Everyone was staring curiously. Blackbeard, taking in the strange scene, remained unobtrusively in the background. Neither Loring nor his companions noticed him. If the situation had called for technical skill or physical strength, he would have come to Joan's aid, but as it was, he felt that she must handle the matter herself.

"Since when has Curt taken to drink?" Joan asked bitterly.

Loring shrugged. "Since his return from that expedition. I told you that those radiations had a very unfortunate result. Simon is working on something to overcome their effects, but I'm afraid that his experiments will take a little time."

He turned to the staggering figure

again. "Come along now, Curt," he said mildly. But beneath the gentleness of his tone, Blackbeard could still detect the undercurrent of rage.

The tears were coming to Joan's eyes as she watched the tall, handsome figure being led across the floor. Ezra touched her arm.

"No use staying here any longer, lass."

They left the establishment, Blackbeard trailing behind. Outside, the girl turned to the old marshal.

"Ezra, we'll have to watch over him!"

"I'd like to, Joan," said Gurney, and his grizzled head bowed helplessly, "but we both have our duties, and I don't see how we can."

"I think I know a way." Blackbeard was speaking thoughtfully. "Captain Future will be needing technical assistants soon for that plant-building project and I need a job."

"That would be perfect," returned Joan, "if we only knew who you really were, and could trust you."

"I could have one of my men apply," said Ezra. "We're rather short-handed at the moment, but it could be arranged."

Blackbeard was staring straight at Joan, waiting for her decision. Her eyes rose to meet his, then dropped.

"I think we'd better accept Blackbeard's offer," she observed at last. Her eyes rose again to those of the ugly bearded man. "You'll watch over Curt Newton carefully, for my sake. He's —everything—to me."

Blackbeard nodded, feeling at the same time a growing resentment against the man to whom he was going to play nursemaid, as he watched the girl and the old marshal walk away.

Apparently neither Joan nor Ezra Gurney had thought of it, and he was too proud to mention the fact that he had no money. He preferred wandering hungrily about the gaily lit city, trying to recall when he had last seen it before —and who he had been at the time. In the morning, shortly after a bright sun rose over the horizon, he made his way toward the space port where the *Comet* was berthed. He was going to bluff his way into a job.

It was Loring, he discovered, who was doing the hiring of men, not Captain Future. His temper was a bit more under control than it had been the previous evening, but at the same time Loring was distinctly uneasy. Blackbeard gained the impression that he was afraid of something.

Loring's shifty eyes ran quickly over Blackbeard's figure.

"You're a scientist?" he demanded.

"That's putting it mildly."

Loring's eyebrows went up. "Any one else beside yourself think well of you?"

Blackbeard decided to make his bluff a good one. "The President of the Space Institute on Venus, the Director of the Terrestrial Geophysical Laboratory, practically all the professors in the Martian Academy of Pure and Applied Sciences, and a couple of thousand others besides," rattled off Blackbeard.

"Excellent!" exclaimed Loring. "You must be loaded down with references. I'd like to see, say, a dozen of them."

"No references. You'll have to take my word."

Loring gazed at him sharply. "I could contact some of these people."

"It wouldn't do any good. You see, you wouldn't know by what name to refer to me."

"You've been in jail?"

"Not at all," explained Blackbeard easily. He had prepared in advance a story he figured might appeal to Loring. Now he let it slip out, almost casually. "Nobody has proved anything against me. But certain people *did* have suspicions, which I don't care to dignify by discussing. So, obviously, I cannot give you my right name."

Loring's fingers drummed against a desk top. Blackbeard smiled to himself. He had an idea of what was going on in the man's mind. Loring seemed to be engaged in some project that he did not want known. He was probably taking advantage of Curt Newton's temporary illness which meant that if anything dishonest was involved, the last

thing he wanted was a group of assistants who were themselves honest. Only men who were none too scrupulous could be induced to keep their mouths shut about whatever shady things they saw.

On the other hand, without definite information about the men he was hiring, it was difficult to be sure about their scientific attainments. It was a real dilemma, and for his own sake Blackbeard decided to give Loring a hint as to the solution.

"Why not hire me temporarily?" he suggested. "Try me out for, say, a week, and if at the end of that time you don't like the way I work, you can fire me—without wages."

"You are confident of yourself."

"Once you see what a help I am, you won't be able to get along without me. And you won't need any other assistants," replied Blackbeard boldly.

"I'm not so sure of that. But consider yourself hired. And bring your stuff into the ship. We're blasting off soon."

A few moments later, Blackbeard was inside the *Comet*. Once again he had that haunting sensation of familiarity. As he wandered about the ship, several more technical applicants came aboard, went through a session of questioning, and were rejected. The Futuremen themselves, as if unwilling to associate with the common herd, remained hidden.

About midday, they blasted off. Loring himself was at the controls, and Blackbeard noticed that although he was heading the ship toward the inner part of the System, Earth itself was not on their path. There could be only one conclusion. They were traveling toward the planet that was now in process of construction.

The days aboard ship were placid and monotonous. The Brain remained completely hidden, Grag and Otho hardly spoke except to each other, and the tall, red-haired Captain Future was watched over as carefully as if he had been a prisoner. Only Loring paid any considerable attention to his technical assistant.

It was during the second week out from Mars that they sighted the new world that science was creating.

Their first glimpse of it was simple enough. A string of space-freighters was dumping metal ore upon an asteroid that had been towed in from some place between Earth and Mars. The asteroid was a way station. Beyond it, no more than a pinpoint in space, was another, and beyond that still another. More than a thousand asteroids, Blackbeard learned, were being utilized.

This was the outer shell, a sort of scaffolding of the new planet. A hundred or so miles beyond was a second ring of asteroids. Upon these had been built the matter-creating machines constructed by the World Government according to the specifications of the Futuremen. This herculean but preliminary work was being done by dozens of contracting engineers. The most important work to be handled by Captain Future and his personal staff, came later.

They could watch the various crews in operation as they cruised slowly by. Each matter-creating machine was a vast oblong mechanism, at the top of which were banks of small keys. From the face protruded dozens of nozzle-like spouts.

As they watched they could see clouds of shining particles spurting from the nozzles. Some of the clouds disappeared before their eyes. Others coagulated into differently colored lumps of ore. The non-metals and the lighter metals themselves were being manufactured here, for the new world.

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CHAPTER XI

Catastrophe Averted

THE *Comet* slowed down, and cruised at a leisurely pace toward this second ring of asteroids. It stopped finally near a matter-creating machine that was turning out huge clouds of sodium chloride. The plans for these machines, brought back to Earth by Captain Future from his successful search for the birthplace of matter, had been submitted to the Board of Governors along with other details by Curt Newton.

Jackson, the engineer in charge, seemed flattered at their visit. He came aboard at Loring's invitation somewhat hesitantly, but soon showed an overwhelming desire to talk.

"This, of course, is old stuff to you gentlemen," he said apologetically. "But it's new to me, and I still can't get over my luck at being placed in charge here."

The engineer was staring respectfully at the imitation Captain Future. Hro Zan smiled, as he had been taught, and observed casually, "Yes, yes, I can imagine," and excused himself, leaving the engineer alone with Blackbeard and Loring.

"I'm no scientist myself," remarked Loring. "I'm just Captain Future's business manager. All I can see is that you're creating something out of nothing. It looks pretty mysterious to me."

"Remarkable, but not mysterious. We're creating the lighter elements from the cosmic energy being radiated through our portion of space. The cosmic potential being rather low, we have no choice but to import the heavier metals." Jackson indicated the several dozen nozzles. "In the original mechanism, these numbered hundreds. But Captain Future himself devised this simplified form for our present purpose."

"Each nozzle, I imagine, emits a different element," Loring remarked.

"A different isotope of each element. You'll have noticed that each machine is creating just one or two elements, the isotopes being approximately in the same proportion as in the elements found on Earth. That simplifies operations exceedingly. That, in fact, is one of the reasons the Interplanetary Government has been willing to take charge of preliminary operations, leaving to the Futuremen only the task of fitting in the final core."

Blackbeard, who had been watching and listening intently, now interrupted. "I see half a dozen of the machines are creating only oxygen. I don't like it."

The engineer stared at the offending machines, and laughed. "I suppose you're afraid the oxygen will go off into space. But you needn't fear. It's being held in place near each ship by artificial gravity.

LORING regarded Blackbeard distrustfully. "How did you know they were making oxygen?"

"By watching which nozzles the clouds came from. The oxygen is formed as a fine mist, which, immediately vaporizes."

The engineer nodded. "I was wondering myself how you knew, but of course, that's the answer. Future has published several scientific articles about the device, and you appear to have read them carefully. Incidentally, this question of oxygen is the only one on which Captain Future and the Interplanetary authorities disagreed. I hope he's not angry at the change in his original plans."

"He's not angry," replied Loring dryly.

"I'm glad of that. You see, he suggested that the manufacture of oxygen be left to the last, so that the gas might be held by the natural gravity of the new planet. He had some objection, which I don't remember, to the use of the gravity machines. But that would have meant that in the latter stages of construction, our workmen would be

forced to use space suits, delaying things considerably. So, quite wisely, it seems to me—"

Blackbeard interrupted harshly. "You think so? Take a look at that!"

One of the asteroids which he had indicated a moment or two before had suddenly erupted into flames. The matter-creating machine, the men who had been operating it, the space-ship in which they had come, all had disappeared. They were now glowing gas and incandescent cinders in a sea of dazzling fire.

As Loring and Jackson gaped, Blackbeard rushed for the controls of the *Comet*. The ship was speeding toward the scene of the disaster before they had recovered their wits. Loring's face became white.

"Stop, you space-blasted fool, you're heading right for the fire!"

He threw himself hysterically at Blackbeard, who brushed him away impatiently with one hand. The tear-drop-shaped vessel skirted the flames so closely that it seemed the very plates would have buckled under the heat. Then it was past, racing for the next oxygen-producing asteroid. That one blazed up unexpectedly ahead of them, and again Blackbeard missed it by the narrowest of margins.

The imitation android and robot were rushing forward to learn what was happening. Loring screamed at them almost hysterically.

"Stop him! He's trying to wreck the ship! He's trying to get us burned alive!"

The fake robot lumbered forward, then stopped at sight of the weapon in Blackbeard's free hand.

"Get back or I'll drill your brain-box. Sorry, Grag, but there's no time to explain."

The Jovian inside the robot's shell was a prudent man. He halted, uncertainly. The next moment, Blackbeard had brought the *Comet* to a landing on a third asteroid. Jackson was shouting orders over his short-wave radio set. In space suits they rushed out of the *Comet*.

The clouds of newly formed oxygen had stopped rushing from the nozzles. Instead, another gas was now hissing out into the void, then collecting around them,

"That'll stop it," announced the engineer in charge. "Nothing like a nitrogen blanket to head off an explosive wave." He looked up to see Blackbeard racing toward him. "Take your time, Mister. We've got her under control."

Blackbeard's eyes were blazing like one of the stricken asteroid. He looked more than ever like an ancient pirate. "Cut off your nitrogen, and cut it off in a hurry! Shoot on your oxygen again."

"What, man, you must be crazy! That would be sure suicide!"

Blackbeard's fist caught him on the jaw, and he went down. Two men nearby started for him, but Blackbeard ducked quickly, and plunged for the bank of control keys. Next moment, enormous clouds of oxygen rolled out, at ten times the previous rate.

Two men caught up with him then, and hit him together. Blackbeard went over backward, and they threw themselves at him. The chief engineer, following closely behind Blackbeard, was staggering toward the control back.

"The man's crazy," he was muttering. "If the explosion doesn't get us this will. Ten times the normal rate!"

BLACKBEARD'S arm shot out of a tangled mass of arms and legs just as the engineer was about to bring his fist down on the control keys, and closed about Jackson's ankle. The engineer tumbled down, his head landing in the stomach of one of his own men. The man exclaimed painfully, "Ouff!" and relaxed.

Blackbeard's fist smashed into the solar plexus of his other still dangerous opponent. The man gasped, clawed feebly at him, then sank back. Blackbeard rose to his feet.

Off in the distance, several other asteroids were ablaze. Loring, not waiting to see what would happen, had

taken off in the *Comet*, and was now hovering in space, watching fearfully. But the asteroid upon which Blackbeard had been battling so fiercely was still apparently untouched.

A dazed victim of Blackbeard's fists was lifting himself to his feet, grunting with pain.

"Quick man!" Blackbeard spoke fiercely. "Where's the space-radio?"

"You think I'll tell you?" snarled the assistant engineer. He shouted suddenly to a fourth man, who stood some distance away, watching the scene open-mouthed. "Quick, Jan, radio for help! This man's crazy!"

Blackbeard caught Jan just as he reached the radio, hurled him away.

"Calling all remaining asteroids!" he began. A guttural reply reached his ears. "I don't care if that isn't the proper signal! This is a matter of life and death—*your* life and death! Cut off your nitrogen, and switch on your oxygen again, full force! Yes, I know it isn't safe, but it's safer than being caught in that explosive wave! And it's kept *us* untouched so far! Hurry up, men!"

Another asteroid sprang into sudden brilliance. And then, on its neighbor, the nitrogen stopped rolling out, gave way to high-pressure oxygen again. Slowly, the flames on the ill-fated asteroids died away, leaving only a mass of glowing rocks that would take months and perhaps years to radiate their heat into space once more.

The men he had fought so fiercely a few moments before approached cautiously now. There was no longer any fight in them. They stared at Blackbeard in sheer admiration. They knew that he had saved their lives, but they still couldn't figure out how.

Half an hour later, aboard the *Comet* once more, Blackbeard apologized.

"Sorry I had to be so rough, but as you can see for yourselves, I had little time."

Loring growled angrily. The chief engineer who had returned aboard their ship nodded.

"So that's why Captain Future objected to the use of the artificial gravity. A pity his advice was disregarded."

"He must have known the danger of this happening," agreed Blackbeard. "Artificial gravity is produced by electro-gravitational waves, which don't ordinarily interfere with the operation of the cosmic ray condenser. But occasionally, some of the partially spent rays, consisting mostly of high-speed particles, are emitted together with the created matter. The atoms of the excited matter are partially energized, and become exceedingly reactive chemically under the influence of the electro-gravitational waves."

"And when they happen to be oxygen, just aching for a chance to combine with whatever's around, there's all space to pay," added Jackson. "But what I don't quite understand is how you stopped the explosions."

"The first explosive wave was limited to its own asteroid. But the radiations emitted by the explosion had no trouble leaping the gap, and setting off another explosion on the neighboring one. Nitrogen was of no use in trying to damp the explosion because under the conditions that existed it would have combined with the oxygen to form nitric oxide. The one way to prevent the explosions from spreading was to absorb the emitted radiations harmlessly . . . and the most effective absorbing agent was high-pressure oxygen."

THE chief engineer grinned slowly. "Why, of course! I remember that even in the early Twentieth Century chemists knew that explosions had both lower and upper limits. Many gas reactions wouldn't begin until the oxygen was increased beyond a certain minimum amount, and would stop again when it passed a maximum. I should have thought of that myself."

Loring growled again, and studied Blackbeard's face curiously. He had certainly made no mistake in hiring this man. His knowledge of science seemed almost equal to that which the real Captain Future had possessed.

The engineer was shaking hands with

Blackbeard. "We are certainly in your debt," he commented. "If not for you, these explosions would have wrecked everything so far done—probably have meant the end of the project. It's a pity," he added, "that Future is so busy with his experiments that he didn't notice what was happening."

After they had returned Jackson to his main base, Loring and Blackbeard interchanged glances.

"No use letting him know that Future's mind has weakened," observed Loring.

"Perhaps not. But he was certainly curious."

Loring shrugged. "Let him make what he can of Future's pre-occupation. Meanwhile, seeing as the whole thing is at present being run by the Interplanetary Government, we're not really necessary. We'd better get out of here."

A few hours later, they were beyond the outer asteroid ring, headed for the Moon. Loring himself was at the controls again. Although he maneuvered the ship with reasonable skill, Blackbeard knew from his previous handling of the controls, that he himself could do better. He waited until Loring had twisted out of a particularly knotty traffic tangle, and was drying his forehead. Then he stepped over to the control panel.

"Mind if I try my hand?" he asked.

"You're a little more polite than you were before. Sure you're used to ships as complicated as this one?"

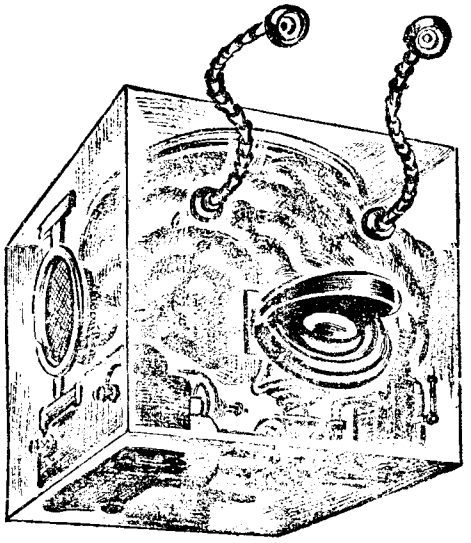
"You'll see, Mr. Loring."

Half unwillingly, Loring made way for him. Blackbeard's strong fingers slid over the controls as if they were old friends. Loring's eyes narrowed as he watched Blackbeard handle levers and instruments whose use he himself did not know.

"The *Comet* has several pieces of mechanism not found in any other ship. How do you happen to understand about them?"

Blackbeard laughed. "Don't let Captain Future kid you, Loring. Some of these things aren't as exclusive as he pretends."

There was clear space ahead of them,



THE BRAIN

and without warning, the *Comet* leaped ahead. Hurled backward by the sudden acceleration, Loring rebounded as if from a cushion of force in the air. Then the effects of the acceleration died away, and Loring's hair stood on end. For suddenly, though they were not more than four hours out of Mars, they were approaching Earth.

A HOWL of terror rose in Loring's throat, to be choked off by his frightened lips. They would crash! At that speed they couldn't help it!

The force cushion surrounding him was suddenly removed, and he fell to the floor. The *Comet* was proceeding at its normal pace again, heading for the Moon. Loring bounded to his feet in fury.

Blackbeard grinned at him. "How do you like the way I handle the ship?"

"You blasted space-devil, you almost wrecked us!"

"Do you have any idea of how many million miles we've covered in as many seconds?"

Loring gained control of himself. Time was important to him, and he owed something to Blackbeard for that. All the same, he resented the way in which the man had taken control of the *Comet*. Loring watched Blackbeard's fingers for a moment without speaking. Then:

"How did you get that extra speed?"

he snapped in angry tones.

"By means of the vibration drive."

Blackbeard's eyes suddenly clouded. He had answered without thinking. How had he himself known the name of this mechanism?

He wondered if he could have worked for Captain Future before.

Loring continued to eye him suspiciously as the tear-drop-shaped vessel drove for the Moon.

His eyes widened, as without instructions, Blackbeard headed for the side of the satellite that held the laboratories of the Futuremen.

"You know where Captain Future lives?" he demanded.

"Of course, who doesn't?"

There were plenty of people who didn't.

Loring made no further comment as the ship braked, began to settle down smoothly.

Blackbeard's hands flashed rapidly over the instrument panel. The *Comet* came to rest peacefully in a moon crater that might have been hollowed out for her.

Loring breathed a sigh of relief. There had been no difficulty at all in landing. Which meant that all he had heard about the automatic defenses of the Moon-home was a lot of nonsense.

Probably nothing more than rumors that Captain Future had spread for his own purposes.

He did not notice that Blackbeard's brow was wrinkled. The bearded man was wondering at himself. Why had his fingers moved over the instrument panel as they did? Certainly not for the purpose of braking the ship.

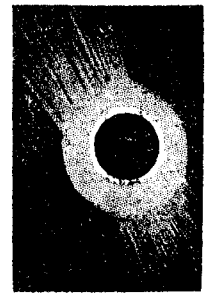
It was almost as if his hands retained a special memory of this place that his mind did not, as if in his hands lay the secret of his past.

But he had long since decided not to try to force a solution. He put the problem out of his mind once more, slipped into a space suit, and led the hesitating Loring out upon the Moon's surface.

The next moment a small three-headed monster leaped at them with rows of glistening teeth bared.

CHAPTER XII

Moon-Home, Sweet Home



LORING started back in terror, his hands seeking the atom pistol at his side. The three-headed monster that had frightened him now began to shrink into the ground. It oozed into a crevice, became a harmless gray rock from which the sunlight glistened. As two timid eyes peeked out from one side, Blackbeard shook with silent laughter.

The three pretended Futuremen, strangely ill at ease and subdued in what was supposedly their own home, had followed Loring and Blackbeard out of the ship. The tiny wireless set inside Blackbeard's helmet brought him the android's words.

"Why, it's Oog!"

Every one in the System had heard of the Futuremen's famous pets—Oog, the meteor-mimic, treasured by Otho, and Eek, the moon-pup which had won Grag's metal heart. As Blackbeard watched, the little meteor-mimic, which could imitate every object it had ever seen, changed to a fat little white lump, its natural form. It stared at Otho as if puzzled, then moved slowly away.

Eek, a small gray bear-like animal, came suddenly upon the scene, galloping toward Grag—and stopped just as suddenly. Grag, as if chagrined, rumbled angrily.

"The stupid beast! Every time we're away for more than a few weeks, he doesn't recognize me! He's got a memory as short as his appetite is long!"

The two animals huddled together, as if for protection. They circled warily about the group of men and approached Blackbeard. But when he leaned over as if to pet them, they retreated hurriedly.

"You've got a way with the beasts," said Loring.

"It's a way that doesn't go very far," replied Blackbeard. He stared in wonderment at the moon-pup. And the small, sharp-snouted animal stared back in bewilderment, its telepathic sense telling it that here was a familiar figure, and its eyes assuring it that the figure was a completely strange one.

Loring started toward the glassite windows of the dome that indicated the Moon-laboratory. Struck by a sudden thought, he turned to Blackbeard.

"Get back to the ship," he ordered. "The entrance to the laboratory is a secret, and Captain Future wants it to remain one."

Blackbeard nodded agreeably. "You're the boss," he said.

THEY watched the airlock of the ship close behind his stalwart figure. Then the pretended android faced the man who had hired him.

"How do we get into this place, anyway? Most of it seems to be underground. And there's no sign of a doorway."

"That's what we'll have to look for," admitted Loring. I didn't want Blackbeard around to watch us and realize our ignorance."

Hro Zan, his head at this moment as clear as it ever would be, growled aloud. "So now you admit that *you're* ignorant. You're always talking about *me*."

"Quiet, fool." Loring spoke absently. "There may be a door on the other side. We'll try that."

But the other side of the laboratory was a bleak wall of rock, with no sign of an opening visible anywhere. Loring stared at it with rising resentment.

"There has to be a way in," he said at last.

"It may be underground," suggested the Jovian.

"That's possible. Seeing as practically none of the laboratory itself is above ground, with little more than these windows showing, Future may have arranged to enter by a short tunnel. We'll scatter, and look for the opening."

Half an hour later, while the two wondering pets stared, they assembled again. The Jovian spoke first.

"Any luck, boss?"

"None at all."

"The only sign I've seen of anything interesting," said Shane, the gloomy pretender to Otho's identity, "is a moon-wolf. And I don't want to tangle with that."

"We'll have to break a glassite window," decided Loring. "Letting the air out may ruin the works, but there's no need to be too worried about that angle. We'll take what there is worth taking and run."

The Jovian lifted a large rock and brought it down with all his great strength on the nearest section of glassite. The rock rebounded, but the glassite showed not a scratch.

"What now?" he demanded. "This seems to be special stuff."

"We'll blast it with explosives," decided Loring angrily.

"Do you know how to set off a blast?"

"No. I thought you or Shane could do it?"

Shane shook his head. "We'll have to call on Blackbeard. And a fine impression it'll make on him if we can't get into our own house without tearing it apart."

"Devils of space!" muttered Loring.

"And you call *me* stupid," sneered Hro Zan. "Can't even find the door to your own house."

They ignored him.

"If only," mused the Jovian aloud, "the stuff weren't specially made—probably to resist meteors—I'd be able to cut through it."

"There's an idea," said Loring eagerly "I'll have Blackbeard make up a sharp cutting tool, without telling him exactly what it's for. He ought to be able to do the job." His eyes glinted in approval of the Jovian. "You can use your head, Vens. It didn't take you a second to think up an explanation of why that animal didn't recognize you, and now you've got the answer to this problem."

Somewhat later, however, they were not so sure. Blackbeard, when he learned of what they wanted done, was more than a little doubtful.

"Some of this special glassite isn't easy

to cut. Not that it's so hard, but that it's monocohesive, like a liquid. It flows back when the cutting instrument has passed on, and you've achieved nothing."

"It's like rock," growled Loring. "I don't see how it can flow back."

Blackbeard shrugged. "You might ask Future."

"That wouldn't do any good. Ever since he was subjected to those radiations out in space, his brain has been rather foggy."

HRO ZAN glowered. Blackbeard, however, was paying no attention to him.

"I have an idea of a method that might work. You might freeze the glassite with a retarding ray, so that the molecules don't flow back too readily. Then use your cutting device."

"I still don't see why you can't use an explosive," put in Hro Zan.

Blackbeard glanced inquiringly at Loring. "Where is this glassite, anyway?"

"Never mind. How long will it take you to prepare a retarding ray, and make a cutting device?"

"Several days."

"Start work at once," ordered Loring. Mentally, he cursed the delay. All this time wasted getting into a place that the real Future would have penetrated in a few seconds!

It was four days before both devices were ready. And on the fourth day they saw the sun blotted out.

They were out of the ship at the time. Blackbeard was instructing the bogus Grag in the use of the cutting device, and the pretended Otho in the manner of operation of the retarding ray. Loring was watching them, when Hro Zan suddenly looked up in alarm.

"It's getting dark!" he cried.

They all looked up at that. The slim crescent of Earth, shining with blue-green light, had gradually approached the Sun. Now the continent of Asia seemed to be taking a huge bite out of the solar rim.

"You must have seen this plenty of times before," commented Blackbeard.

"He has, but I haven't," returned Loring quickly. "What's happening?"

"An eclipse of the Sun. Of course, the people on Earth would consider it an eclipse of the *Moon*. It's much more effective as seen from here. Watch."

Darkness had spread over Asia. Now it edged toward the ends of the crescent, gradually enveloping them. And at the same time, the Earth advanced steadily, gnawing at the Sun's surface. Those continents of Earth which had previously been in darkness, now glowed with a faint ruddy effulgence, from the combination of light reflected from the Moon and whatever direct sunlight had been refracted around Earth's edges by its own atmosphere.

Loring was gazing upward, as if hardly daring to believe his eyes. Soon the Sun disappeared altogether, and all they could see was a shadowy Earth, the continents of one hemisphere visible as lighter shadows against the gloomy background of the oceans.

"I've never seen anything like it," he admitted huskily.

"I have," observed Blackbeard casually.

The robot looked up, his metal face shell weird in the dim light. "Where?"

"I don't remember exactly. It couldn't have been any closer to the Sun than Earth, as the inner planets don't have satelites. And it could hardly have been much further away, or most of the effect would be lost."

"I've seen plenty of eclipses from Jupiter," observed the robot. "They don't amount to much."

Blackbeard nodded. "I don't suppose I've been on the Moon before, or you fellows would have known it. It's possible I saw something like this from a ship out in space."

"You've seen everything," muttered Loring. Despite himself, he was impressed with his assistant's knowledge. He had thought Blackbeard a braggart, but he was forced to admit that the man had claimed for himself nothing more than the truth. "How long does this thing last?"

"About another quarter of an hour, as

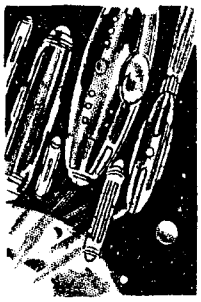
far as totality is concerned. The Earth's disk is so much bigger than the Moon's that solar eclipses are of longer duration here than on Earth."

The bogus Otho was staring upward with an intensity that could not be explained by his interest in the eclipse alone. "What are those patches of light moving off to one side of the Earth?" he demanded.

Blackbeard's eyes narrowed. A dozen ships were speeding toward the Moon, a few hundred miles beyond the edge of the Earth's penumbra. And the Moon, he knew, was no haven for either passenger liners or freighters. Those ships spelled danger!

CHAPTER XIII

The Moon Fights Back



ON the leading ship, Kars Virson sat at a private space-visor set. He stared at the frowning face of Hartley Brooks and replied respectfully.

"Yes, sir."

In his Earth home, Brooks' face twisted into what in a less suave man would have been a snarl. "Don't 'yes' me, Kars. You thought you had finished Future before this."

"I still don't see how I failed."

"You wouldn't. But your failure warned him, and I'm sure he suspects me. When he stalked into that meeting of the Interplanetary Board of Governors, he caught my eye. He had never looked at me before like that. He has no proof, but he knows."

"He won't know much longer." Virson promised vindictively. "We've got enough atom cannon along to blast the Moon itself out of existence, let alone Captain Future. Don't worry about him any longer."

"You fool!" Brooks almost groaned the words. "After what happened last time, you're still overconfident."

Virson shrugged. "It doesn't look like overconfidence to me. We've got a thousand men against four. We've got a dozen space ships with enough armament on them to blast the Planet Patrol out of the skies. And we'll be coasting in under cover of this eclipse, so that we can catch them by surprise. What more do you want, Chief? In a couple of minutes Earth's shadow will reach us, just as we're ready to open our attack. If you can think of anything else—"

"You know the details of your business better than I do," replied Brooks impatiently. "But remember, Captain Future is still the greatest scientific mind in this System, or anywhere else that I know of. I don't believe that story of vibrations affecting his mind, and you'd better not believe it, either. It's just intended to blind us to the truth, and throw us off our guard."

"He's not fooling me, Chief," declared Virson. "I'll be careful."

"You'd better be, if you value your own skin. Good luck, Kars. I'm signing off."

Virson stood up. His lean, shrewd face, with no trace of its usual vacant expression, was grim with determination as he strode toward the ship's gun-control room.

"The ships are synchronized?" he asked.

"Yes, sir." The ship's commander spoke respectfully. We're ready to blast them with a total of a hundred and thirty-eight guns, all the rays striking within five seconds of each other."

"Pass the word."

The commander touched a button, nodded.

"Fire!" ordered Virson coldly.

THROUGH the glassite window of the Moon-laboratory came a sudden fierce red glow. Somewhere, too, an enormous vibrator was in motion, making the Moon tremble under the uneasy feet that trod its bleak surface.

"It's the alarm!" gasped the robot. "Somebody's attacking us!"

"Back to the ship!" yelled Loring, panic mottling his face. "We may be able

to take off and outrun them! Quick!"

Blackbeard found himself running, but not toward the *Comet*. Several times before his hands had retained a memory his brain had forgotten. Now the knowledge of what to do seemed to have passed to his feet. As he ran, he kicked at a curiously shaped rock that resembled in rough outline the head of a moon-wolf. An opening appeared in a small moon-crater, and he plunged in. A second later, the bright glow from within the opening was cut off from the airless void outside by the clang of metal doors, cunningly shaped and coated to resemble the landscape into which they had blended.

He passed from the airlock into the Moon-laboratory itself. Power was already surging through the automatic force-barriers that the Futuremen had created to shield themselves from any attackers outside. The rays from a hundred and thirty-eight atom-cannon, hurled with full force at the barriers, rebounded into space. Shattered beams struck back at the ships which had fired them, and though weakened by dispersion, tossed the vessels about in the dark shadow that came from Earth.

The ships scattered, to offer a less vulnerable target for rebounding energy, and fired again. Blackbeard could feel the impact inside the laboratory. So far the barrier was holding well, a testimony to the skill and science of the Futuremen. But it had been meant to ward off a surprise attack, not a siege. It would not stand against a long-continued assault.

The laboratory was a maze of apparatus and control boards that would have baffled a skilled engineer for days. Blackbeard never hesitated. Feet and hands combined their memories, and he rushed from one control board to another, manning the defenses that should have been manned by all the Futuremen.

Three-dimensional space-visor globes gleamed along one wall, the images within giving the exact location of the attackers. In front of the globes, panels sprang alive with figures which told the position and velocity coordinates of each ship. Gravity-scanning devices registered the gross tonnage and the metal tonnage of the different vessels, along with their probable complement of men and guns.

"A dozen ships, all about the same size and fire power," muttered Blackbeard to himself. "I'd better start with the nearest."

The Moon-landscape suddenly changed its appearance. Proton-cannon yawned out of artificial craters, began to flash silently. Above each weapon, the force-barrier thinned automatically, then closed again as the proton-ray sped forth.

The dozen ships had been charging downward at full speed, attempting to bring the maximum force of their weapons to bear. As the first of them disappeared in a blaze of glowing vapor, the rest veered sharply. Blackbeard hit a second one before they raced out of range.

He knew they would come back, and they did, only a few moments later, sweeping in at an altitude of no more than a mile, in the belief that his cannon would be ineffective at low angles.

"They'll learn better," he told himself grimly.

He let them come close, knowing that the sharper the angle, the less chance of their own weapons penetrating the barrier, and the greater the probability that their atom-beams would ricochet. But as they came within range, he fired an entire bank of guns simultaneously. Five of the ships disappeared together. Two of the others, twisting feverishly to avoid his next volley, crashed together with a burst of orange flame, and came hurtling to the Moon's surface.

The rest had had enough. They swept across the horizon, to disappear from sight. The warning glow through the glassite, the warning vibration of the ground, both died away. The three survivors were not coming back.

AT HIS space-vision set on Earth, Hartley Brooks was trying frantically to contact Kars Virson. An hour sped by before he heard an answering voice.

"Kars!"

The face of one of Virson's commanders showed in the screen.

"Mr. Virson's unable to answer, sir. He had given me orders previously to tune in to your wave-length in case anything happened to him, but my generator system has been out of commission up till the present."

The financier's face was gray. "What's happened? Where is Kars?"

"Our attack failed, sir. We didn't stand the ghost of a chance. Mr. Virson's ship crashed into a neighboring vessel, and blew up. There were no survivors. He's dead, sir."

So Virson had failed again. And this time he had paid for his failure with his life.

Brooks breathed heavily. If Captain Future had lacked proof before that some one had tried to kill him, he would not lack it now. An investigating committee would have no trouble picking up the fragments of the wrecked ships, tracing them to their home ports, and thence to Brooks. The situation was growing desperate. He must act fast, and without Kars to aid him.

He must act fast, he repeated to himself. But for several hours he remained without moving, lost in thought.

CHAPTER XIV

An Affair of Weight

IN the Moon-laboratory, Blackbeard watched the images in the three-dimensional globes die away, he felt the ground grow quiet again. Not until then did he stop to wonder at himself.

A conclusion toward which he had already been tending, now rushed to meet him, inescapable. The familiar manner in which his fingers had handled the *Comet* had convinced him that he had piloted the ship before. His intuitive knowledge of what was within the Moon-laboratory left no doubt that here too he had been on intimate terms with every weapon, every bit of apparatus. It was obvious then that no matter what his previous name, he had been a close friend of the Futuremen.

He could deduce a little more than that. The Futuremen, he knew, were wary of inviting visitors to the Moon. Ezra Gurney, Joan Randall, on rare occasions a man by the name of Halk Anders, possibly a few others—these had been the only ones to win their confidence. All of them had been either members of the Planet Patrol, or somehow connected with it. It would seem then that Blackbeard himself had been a member of the Planet Patrol.

That would account, too, for the fact that Joan had thought him familiar. The fact that she had not identified him could be ascribed to the disguising effect of his beard and his scars.

He was sorry now that he had not tried to make himself known to her. The next time they met, he would correct that mistake.

There was something of a more startling nature he could deduce now. As the Futuremen had not rushed to the shelter of the laboratory and its death-dealing defenses, that could mean only that they knew nothing of what was inside it. Which in turn meant that they were not really the Futuremen!

All that had happened confirmed him in this belief. Captain Future was ill, possibly, as Loring claimed, because of exposure to strange radiations in space. He had no idea how it had happened, but there could be little doubt that Loring had taken advantage of this illness to substitute impostors he himself had chosen in place of the genuine android and robot. The Brain had not really made an appearance on either Mars or the Moon. No doubt, the real Simon Wright was likewise among those missing.

Blackbeard knew now why they had wanted him to arrange a glassite-cutting device. Because they did not know how else to enter the laboratory, and hoped

to break in by main force!

Dials on the walls of the laboratory were registering the vibrations of feet outside. So they had left the safety of the *Comet*, and were cautiously looking around again. He thought rapidly. He had to have a story to tell them, and he must make it good.

A FEW seconds later he seemed to pop up out of the ground to face a gaping Loring.

"Wha—what—where did you come from?"

Blackbeard grinned genially. "I never thought I'd come out of that alive. I hid between two rocks, expecting those atom-rays to burn me to a crisp."

"I was plenty scared myself." Loring glanced at the imitation android and Robot. "But Grag and Otho here assured me that there was no danger."

"We knew that the automatic defenses would account for any would-be invaders," put in the phoney Grag in his rasping voice.

"They certainly did." Blackbeard emphasized the point.

Apparently they did not suspect his own role in what had happened, and he did not want them to. He had already puzzled Loring a little too often with some of the scientific knowledge that seemed to rise to the surface through the clouds in his mind, and he had no desire to have the man too curious about him.

Loring and the others appeared strangely uninterested in the identity of the murderous attackers. He himself had no way of knowing who they were, and it would be wise, he decided, not to bring up the subject at all. Best for him to pretend interest right now only in the scientific problems the little man would bring him.

Actually, Loring and the pretended Futuremen had not the slightest idea of who was behind the attack. They had discussed the question feverishly, and come to the conclusion only that Captain Future had made enemies unsuspected by the general public. Evidently, they had stepped into a more perilous situation than they had suspected when Loring had first planned to take Future's place. And the realization that the unknown enemy might make other, perhaps more successful, attacks later, set the little man's teeth chattering.

Blackbeard appeared to be musing absently. "It's a pity that this rumpus had to occur. Now there'll be an investigating committee, and we'll have to waste days in giving testimony."

As he had expected, the very thought of this made Loring perspire within his space suit.

"We can't afford to do that. We have to get on with our planet-building," Loring said hastily.

"If we leave now," suggested Blackbeard slowly, "and there's no evidence that we've been here, it will be clear, even to an investigating committee, that the automatic defenses destroyed the invading ships, and that we ourselves had nothing to do with the whole affair."

"Where do we go to?" asked Loring helplessly. Without realizing it, he had come, as Blackbeard had predicted, to rely more and more on his new assistant.

"You have an outline of plans for the new planet?"

Loring nodded. "Curt, here, drew them up before his mind went bad, and handed them in to the Board of Governors, in the form of a technical memorandum. Most of the work is to be done by the government itself. The Futuremen themselves were to undertake the task of supplying a heavy core. But the Brain—" Loring hesitated perceptibly—"the Brain thinks a heavy core isn't necessary."

Blackbeard's eyebrows went up. "That's surprising. I'm beginning to think that those radiations affected the Brain as well as Curt. Any expert on geophysics knows that you can't build a stable planet with light elements alone."

"I'm no expert," returned Loring sullenly. "But I'll take Simon Wright's word on scientific matters."

"So will I. But possibly you didn't

understand him. Suppose you let me speak to him for a few moments."

"He doesn't care to speak to strangers," replied Loring, in obvious haste.

BLACKBEARD repressed a smile. As he had guessed, the real Simon Wright was not in the ship, and Loring was in deadly fear of the fact being discovered.

The pretended robot interposed. "Suppose you try to explain to us why a heavy core is necessary."

"I think I can. From what I've heard of Captain Future's methods, he was probably intending to create the lighter elements, those with atomic weights up to 30 or 40, by means of a matter-creating device he himself invented."

"You mean that he brought back from his search for the birthplace of matter," corrected the false Otho. "I was with him when he discovered it."

"Well, you would know." Evidently, the impostors had studied as much of Captain Future's history as was available to the general public. They seemed to know more about it than he did.

Blackbeard went on. "However, because of the low energy-potential throughout the System, it's very difficult to create the heavier elements. I imagine that Future intended to import whatever amounts were needed."

He could see that Loring was impressed and puzzled. At times Blackbeard seemed to be more clever than any man had a right to be.

"That's what Future states in his memorandum," admitted Loring.

"The net result would be that a planet with a diameter about that of Earth would have a density between one and two. Its gravitational pull would be so low that the atmosphere and water would be continually escaping, and would need constant renewal. That in itself would be reason enough for a heavy core.

"In addition, the settling down process, caused by the gradual contraction of the planet's mass, would be drawn out immeasurably in the case of so light a body. Earthquakes would go on for years, making normal life on the surface impossible. The whole purpose of building the planet would be defeated."

"You might have been reading Future's memorandum," admitted Loring. "He suggested as the solution to the problem the use of the recently discovered planetoid Thor."

"And I agree with him. I suppose you know that Thor is a small body, not much larger than Phobos or Deimos, but it's incredibly compressed. It appears to be made of such atoms as may be on the companion of Sirius, with a density of close to a ton per cubic inch. Use that as the core for the new planet, and the problem's solved."

Otho spoke slowly, his eyes searching Loring's face. "Of course, Grag and I have worked with Curt and the Brain for many years, and we know their scientific methods, but we're not really capable of judging a question of this sort. Perhaps if Mr. Loring would remind Simon of some of these things—"

"You might remind him, too," added Blackbeard with subtlety, "that on Thor we won't be bothered by an investigating committee, and will be able to conduct whatever scientific experiments are necessary without being disturbed."

"I'll see," replied Loring curtly. He disappeared, to return a few moments later. "Simon advised us to go ahead. He himself isn't interested. He's too busy trying to overcome the effect of those radiations on Curt's mind."

Hro Zan growled to himself. More and more he was growing to resent these slurs on his intelligence. Loring was always pretending that there was no difference between his normal behavior and the behavior of a Captain Future who suffered from softening of the brain. Well, he'd show everybody. And soon, too!

Meanwhile, Blackbeard was considering the situation somberly. Loring, the master of puppets, had himself become, without knowing it, little more than a puppet in the hands of his supposed

assistant. Blackbeard had persuaded him to leave the Moon-laboratory untouched and go to Thor with little more difficulty than if he had been dealing with a child.

Nevertheless, Blackbeard knew that the situation was not completely under his control. These men had undertaken to perform a serious scientific job, knowing that they would botch it. It was up to him to see that the job was completed as it should be. And in addition, he had the task of protecting the unfortunate Curt Newton, who was so helpless and pitiable a mental wreck that his very presence seemed to embarrass the pretended Futuremen.

Loring led the way back to the *Comet*. A few moments later, the vessel rose slowly, and headed for the asteroid belt. Blackbeard, at the controls, made no attempt to use the vibration drive. The ship rocketed forward at a moderate pace as he considered solemnly what he could do.

CHAPTER XV

Council of War

IN the disreputable tub which once had been the home of the Terror of Space, the three genuine Futuremen turned away from the space visors that Simon had constructed.

"Holy sun imps!" gasped Otho. "That was some battle!"

"Lucky we didn't get to the Moon any earlier," rumbled Grag, "or we'd have been in the middle of it. There wouldn't have been much left of Ingmann's ship."

They watched the *Comet* dwindle and disappear in space. Then both the robot and the android turned toward the Brain.

"What next, Simon? Do you still want to land on the Moon?"

"Aye." The stalk-eyes lowered, as if the bodiless Brain were nodding. "I've improved this ancient craft somewhat, but it could stand being improved still more. The laboratory contains apparatus I should have."

"What about these fake Futuremen and the *Comet?* Do we let them get away with their act any longer?" demanded the android indignantly. "I've got a reputation to fix up!"

"I think I know where the *Comet* is headed," rasped the Brain. "But we shall discuss that later. First we land on the Moon."

Otho, at the controls, amused himself by landing the ship with the use of only a single hand. As they emerged upon the Moon itself, they were almost overwhelmed by the sudden onslaught of two overjoyed small animals.

"So you've missed me!" grinned the android, as the doughy little meteor-mimic cuddled close. "That second-class imitation of a real man might fool a lot of human beings, but he couldn't fool you."

Grag was making what he fondly imagined were crooning noises at Eek. Simon impatiently cut short his bellowing.

"To the laboratory, quickly. We have no time to waste."

LATER, the disappointed pets regretfully left behind, the three Futuremen were headed out in space once more.

"Where to, Simon?" asked Otho. "Do we follow the *Comet?*"

"Not yet. I'd like to get a look at one of those destroyed space ships."

Otho nodded. He cruised slowly above the Moon's surface, in the direction in which the ships had crashed. After about an hour, he located the parts of what had been one of the smashed ships, scattered over a large lunar crater. He landed again, and hastily donning a space suit, accompanied Grag and Simon toward the scene of devastation.

The inside of the ship had obviously burst into flame on being hit, but the crash had released the oxygen into

space, thus extinguishing the blaze before a great deal of damage had been done. The clothes on several of the men had been little more than scorched. Grag searched their bodies methodically, coming finally across a certificate of appointment, which the ship's captain had borne. He passed it silently to Simon.

The Brain held the sheet of parchment in his tractor beams, while his stalked lens-eyes took in the contents. "The dead captain was appointed to command a ship owned by Hartley Brooks," he rasped finally.

"Then Brooks is the one who instigated this attack?" demanded Otho.

"Apparently. But we had better make sure. Let us find another wrecked ship."

Several hours later, there could no longer be any doubt. Metal food containers that bore the name of one of the financier's enterprises made it clear that the unfortunate space fleet had been owned and controlled by Hartley Brooks.

"I don't understand!" exclaimed Grag in bewilderment. "Why should Brooks want to harm the Futuremen?"

To Simon's mind there came an image—Curt Newton speaking to Joan, and Hartley Brooks pausing nearby to fumble uncertainly in his pockets. He must have been listening to their conversation. The financier had been interested in Curt's activity at that time, and the one thing then uppermost in Curt's mind had been the building of the new planet.

The Brain explained his thoughts briefly to the others. "Brooks must have been the one responsible for that explosion on Baldur," he added. "And doubtless there'll be other attacks later."

"We ought to stop them," declared Grag anxiously. "Or before they're finished, they'll ruin the *Comet*."

"Excellent idea, Grag. As the first move toward stopping them, we'll follow the *Comet* on to Thor."

"Thor?" rumbled Grag incredulously. "Why, in the name of Saturn would those fakers be interested in that?"

"Because one of them is not a faker. It isn't clear to me yet, but Hartley Brooks would not hire a poor tool."

Grag shook his metal head helplessly. "I don't get it."

"I hate to go along with Grag, but neither do I," admitted Otho.

There was a touch of impatience in the Brain's voice. "You saw what happened to the attacking ships. How do you think they were blasted?"

"With the defenses you and Curt contrived. A child could have done it," said Otho. "You just get them in the space visor globes, swivel the cannon around until the images of the ships are centered in the cross-hairs, and press a button."

"Very simple," agreed the Brain ironically. "And who tells you which button to press? And why would Hartley Brooks' tools fire on their own confederates?"

OTHO looked a little more thoughtful. "I see what you mean, Simon. But after all, these fakers must have studied us carefully before they attempted their imposture. They might have visited the Moon-laboratory previously."

"Possibly. But a year's time would have been insufficient for the average stranger to learn how to enter the laboratory without destroying it, and how to operate the different mechanisms. There's more to all this than meets the eye. Remember, you were there but a few moments ago. Did you see any signs of damage?"

"By the Great Dipper, no!" roared Grag. "Simon, you're right!"

"If one of that bunch isn't a faker, he must be Curt," observed Otho. "And if he could handle the defenses, then his mind can't have been affected." The

Coming Next Issue: CAPTAIN FUTURE in RED SUN OF DANGER

slanting green eyes narrowed suddenly. "Little space-devils, I think I've got it! Listen, Simon. Suppose, after that explosion on Baldur, Curt is hurt but still conscious. He knows that some one has tried to kill the Futuremen, and, except for him, has apparently succeeded. And off in the distance, he sees a space-ship heading toward Baldur to check up.

"He stumbles toward the *Comet,* hoping to fight off the men Brooks has sent. On the way he runs into Loring, who's been attracted by the noise of the explosion, and has no objection to earning the gratitude of the famous Captain Future. The *Comet* takes off—but Curt isn't in condition to conduct a battle alone, and Loring doesn't know how to handle the ship properly. So the *Comet* puts on speed and escapes.

"Curt thinks we're dead. But it'll be a terrific blow to Brooks if he makes the latter believe we're still alive. So he rigs up these fakers—and Brooks falls for the bait, tries to attack, and is beaten off, this time leaving evidence that will eventually convict him."

Grag's photoelectric eyes seemed to gleam. "You've got it, Otho! Next thing, Curt heads for Thor because he knows that the interplanetary government is already at work on the new planet, and he wants to get the heavy core ready."

"All of which means," said Otho, "that we've been misjudging those fakers. They've merely been doing as Curt wanted them to do. We'll go up to him, and make ourselves known—"

"We shall land on Thor unobserved," rasped the Brain coldly. "Your theory is a pretty one, Otho, but it goes far beyond the evidence, and there are many flaws in it. The one fact of which we can be certain is that the real Captain Future must be with Loring. We do not know who he is. And I do not intend to put myself in Loring's hands on the basis of your guesswork."

The chastened android smiled sheepishly. "All right, Simon, we'll do as you say. But I thought I had a wonderful theory!"

"You stretched it a little too far, my rubbery friend," rumbled Grag. "Stick to the facts—in case you ever learn any!"

"Why, you refugee from a scrap heap, you were the first one to agree I was right! And talking about sticking to facts, who figured out why Curt was heading for Thor? You did! As if you could ever hope to understand what was going on in his mind!"

"It was really Simon who figured that out," said Grag modestly. "I just put into words what he was thinking."

The Brain had moved on silent tractor beams away from them. He knew that the problem of handling the false Futuremen, of making use of them to deceive Brooks, and yet of not letting them carry the deception too far, would be a difficult one. But if Curt were really with them, there was a powerful ally in the enemy's camp.

A few moments later, they were back in the ship once more. The *Comet* might reach Thor ahead of them, but unless Curt made use of the vibration-drive, the pursuers would not be far behind.

With the aid of a new fuel mixture that Simon had secured from the laboratory, they could count on attaining twice the maximum acceleration the ship had ever reached previously.

Otho was at the controls once more, the vessel heading for Thor, when suddenly the brake rockets roared. The Brain's stalk-eyes turned inquiringly to Otho.

"Planet Patrol ship coming toward us, Simon," exclaimed the android. "Probably heard news of what took place, and happened to be close enough to investigate."

Less than an hour later they lay alongside the Planet Patrol vessel and waited while two officers come aboard. Otho's green eyes almost popped out of his head. "By all the sun-imps!" he gasped. "It's Joan and Ezra!"

Otho at least could speak. Joan and Ezra, as the Futuremen quickly observed, were so astounded they were unable to utter a word.

CHAPTER XVI

The Butterflies Who Chased Men

THE *Comet* had felt the grip of Thor's gravity many thousands of miles away, just as if the tiny planetoid were one of the Sun's larger satellites. Blackbeard brought the tear-drop-shaped vessel down for a landing, and without bothering to slip into a space-suit, stepped out upon its surface. Loring and the latter's companions followed him uneasily.

"There's good air here!" exclaimed Loring. "I didn't know that."

Blackbeard nodded. "Thor is only ten miles in diameter, but it has no trouble holding the atmosphere it stole."

"Stole?" It was the pretended robot who asked the question.

"From some other stellar body. The oxygen is of the ordinary type, or else we wouldn't be able to breathe it. But the molecules of the planetoid itself are of the heavy kind, totally alien to our physical make-up. You obviously didn't read the scientific reports made public upon the discovery of Thor."

The surface of the planetoid was surprisingly flat, as if the great weight of each particle of ground had furthered the process of leveling off. Like Phobos and Deimos, satellites of Mars, Thor had a curvature so great that the eye could easily detect it. With no clouds to hamper them, they could see the horizon, less than a mile away in each direction. Numerous small gray bushes were the only break in the monotony of the reddish landscape.

A hundred yards or so away from them, a tiny object sprang into the air, and settled rapidly down again.

"Animal life," remarked the gloomy, white-faced pseudo-android.

Several others of the tiny objects leaped up closer at hand.

"They're butterflies!" exclaimed Loring.

"I've seen their kind on Jupiter," observed the Jovian.

Blackbeard was staring at the insect-like creatures uneasily.

"I wasn't expecting this," he said. "We'd better return to the ship."

The pretended robot looked at him with puzzled eyes. "Why? They're no more than a couple of inches long. They can't be dangerous!"

"They have wings, but despite the presence of an atmosphere, they can't fly. That means that they're too heavy to be supported by matter of any ordinary kind. And if their bodies are of heavy matter, we don't want to tangle with them."

ONE of the peculiar insects sprang up unexpectedly a few feet away from them, reached the top of its leap, and then fell toward Blackbeard. He ducked quickly, but not before one of the wings had brushed his shoulder. He sprawled

[*Turn page*]

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Many sufferers relieve nagging backache quickly, once they discover that the real cause of their trouble may be tired kidneys.

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When disorder of kidney function permits poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it ma ycause nagging backache, rhepmatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. They give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills.

to the ground as if hurled by a giant hand.

The others were running in panic back toward the *Comet,* with the dangerous insects hurtling after them. Blackbeard picked his bruised body off from the ground, which was as hard and resistant as the finest tempered stellite. He swept around the cloud of butterflies, which seemed to have increased with each step, and cut into the group of fleeing men close to Loring. A second after the door clanged behind them, they could hear the thud of a heavy body against the hull of the *Comet.*

Loring was pale. "Why did we ever come to this God-forsaken place, anyway?" he growled savagely.

"To make a spectroscopic examination of its matter," returned Blackbeard coolly. "If we're going to make use of the stuff, we'll have to learn its internal structure."

Outside, the butterflies were continuing to beat against the vessel, and they could feel the slight vibration of the hull at each blow. "They'll break through," muttered Loring.

Blackbeard shook his head. "The *Comet* was built to withstand the impact of hundred-ton projectiles. We're safe so long as we stay inside. But we'll have to figure out a way of defending ourselves."

"What about our proton-pistols?" demanded the Jovian.

"Try hitting a butterfly with a proton-ray," countered the pretended android, "and see how far you get."

Blackbeard nodded. "I think the answer lies in a wide-angled force ray that won't kill, but will have enough power to knock them backward. I can build one that works on the same principle as the force barrier that protected the Moon-laboratory."

"That'll mean that we stay in here for another week?"

"No more than a day. I can adapt a proton-pistol."

Actually, it was no more than a few hours before Blackbeard finished his work. The tall, bearded man held up a proton pistol whose muzzle now flared curiously outward. Into the butt had been fitted several tiny transformers and rectifiers needed to change the energy of a thin current of excited protons into the broad band of a force buffer.

"That should do the job. Want to come along with me and try it?"

Loring shook his head. "One experience with those insects is enough."

"I suppose there's no use asking Grag or Otho. But it *would* be convenient if one of them were to come along and handle the spectroscope, while I used the gun."

"They're busy. You'd better go alone."

PRESENTLY Blackbeard was outside the ship. There were none of the leaping insects nearby, but nevertheless he set up his instruments and worked cautiously, not knowing when they might spring into sight. It was strange to feel a strong breeze against his face, to see fleecy clouds scudding past overhead, and yet to detect not the slightest sign of motion in the small bushes that covered the ground. Composed of the incredibly dense matter of Thor, they were immovable by the force of an ordinary hurricane.

Small shadows crept through the bushes near at hand, and Blackbeard realized that there were other forms of life present beside the butterflies.

Afer a time, as he had just about finished his observations, one of the butterfly-creatures leaped up, off to one side. As though this were a signal, others began to spring up near him. But they did not come too close for comfort, and at a rustling from the bushes, seemed to flee.

The rustling sound, he noticed, came from what appeared at first to be a lizard about a a foot long. Closer investigation, however, revealed that the creature was more like an insect, with six jointed legs, and compound many-faceted eyes that sparkled like jewels. It was ludicrously like a giant grasshopper.

It was creeping toward him, and Blackbeard, making a rough calculation of the weight of the creature—somewhere in the neighborhood of a thou-

sand tons—gave it a wide berth. But his very avoidance of it had the effect of arousing its curiosity. It pursued him with short, rapid leaps, barely skimming the ground.

Blackbeard raised his doctored proton-gun, and pulled the trigger. The small body turned a somersault in the air as the powerful force-field drove it back, then came to rest, and stared at him as before. He fired again, and this time, though still unharmed, the creature had had enough. It turned, and fled.

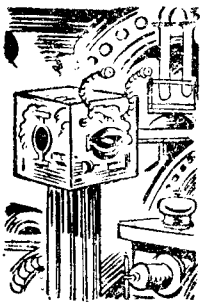
Blackbeard began to assemble the instruments with which he had been working. As he turned his head, however, he had a shock that sent his hand groping again for the weapon he had just used. A few feet away, regarding him with curiosity, was another and much larger hopper insect. Almost three feet in height, its twisted legs made it resemble one of the bushes dotting the planetoid's surface. Only the brilliant compound eyes revealed that it was no plant.

The two forelegs rubbed against each other so rapidly that they seemed to blur. A high voice, so shrill that it was almost inaudible, reached Blackbead's ears.

"Hello, hello!"

CHAPTER XVII

Reunion on Baldur



ABOARD the ship which they had borrowed from the Terror of Space, the Futuremen faced Joan and Ezra. After the first shock of the meeting, the two members of the Planet Patrol had recovered rapidly from their surprise, and quick explanations had ensued.

"So the others are impostors," murmured Ezra. "That makes clear a great deal that was puzzling me. But what about Curt himself?"

"Simon thinks that Curt is actually aboard the *Comet*," said Grag.

"The disaster to the attacking ships leaves no doubt," rasped the Brain.

"If he retains his scientific knowledge, then it can't be the man who calls himself Captain Future. He must be an impostor, too," said Joan. "That leaves only one person—Blackbeard. That's who it is, and I should have known it!"

She described briefly how she had met him aboard the pirate ship. As he listened to the story of what had happened then and later, Simon's lens-eyes seemed to glitter. He did not notice Joan's flush.

"There can be no doubt about it, lass. That would explain why he appared familiar. As for the change in him, there's an obvious explanation for that—he's lost his memory. Remember, that same explosion killed Otho, and pinned Grag down so that he couldn't move. When Curt awoke, his mind dazed, there was no one to remind him of who he really was. Later, when he had partially recovered his wits, your suspicions of him might have made him fear he was really a criminal. Hence his refusal to talk about himself."

"Can he be brought back to his old self?" demanded Ezra.

"I think so. But first we must remove him from the *Comet*. It may be difficult. Remember that he is working for Loring, and with his memory of his past life gone, probably thinks he owes his loyalty to the man."

Grag moved his mighty metal limbs. "I don't see why there should be any difficulty. We'll follow the *Comet* to Thor, Simon, wait till we get him alone, and I'll grab him. He won't be expecting trouble. Even if he did, there isn't a man alive who could break out of my grip."

Otho grinned. "Curt did it once. Remember, you big hunk of junkyard on wheels?"

"That," replied Grag, "was when he pretended to be a Sverd, that time we went after Gorma Hass, and he used atomic motors. This time, he'll be just an ordinary man. I can handle him."

"You should be able to," agreed Simon. He turned to Joan and Ezra. "You had better come along with us. Those impostors will undoubtedly see us as we land on Thor, and there's less chance of our frightening them if we're not with a Patrol vessel."

Joan and Ezra nodded. A few moments later, they had radioed their decision to their own ship, and were heading for Thor.

THEY saw the *Comet* for a brief moment before Otho brought their vessel down on the planetoid of heavy matter. The Brain was busy in his makeshift laboratory. Beyond suggesting to the others that they had better not stir from the ship until he permitted them, he took no immediate interest in his surroundings.

The android and the robot objected restlessly. They had been confined for long periods of time on previous occasions, but not because of fear. The atmosphere here was breathable, large animals were absent, and they had proton-guns. Moreover, they were not as susceptible to danger as Joan and Ezra. Grag had superhuman strength, Otho had unmatched speed and agility. What harm could there be in stepping outside for a moment?

Shortly afterward, they were outside.

"We'll be careful," observed Otho. "We'll show Simon we're not reckless fools."

Grag nodded ponderously. "And we may learn something useful. After all, the way to find out things is to look for them, not just remain cooped up waiting for information to come to you."

A small insect leaped into the air ahead of them. Grag's eyes passed over it carelessly. "A butterfly. I don't suppose Simon was afraid of danger from that."

"I'm not sure. Remember, if all these creatures are of heavy matter—"

"A butterfly may be something for you to worry over, Otho, but not for a man who's constructed of steel instead of rubber. Some day, my plastic friend, I'll tell you exactly how I compare in muscular strength with the ordinary person. And then you'll understand—"

One of Grag's metal legs brushed against a low bush, and he halted, to stare at it in bewilderment. The bush had remained immovable, but his leg rebounded, and there was a visible scratch in the metal.

The next moment one of the flitting insects struck him full on the chest.

Grag went over backward and landed on the ground with a loud metallic clang. Otho ducked lithely as one of the insects leaped at him. From hiding places on the ground and in the bushes a veritable cloud of the tiny creatures sprang into the air. A dazed look on his face, Grag rose slowly as Otho shouted to him.

"Get up and run, you bragging junk-heap!"

"But they've cut off our way back to the ship!"

"Then run away from the ship! We can't stay here!"

Grag obeyed sullenly, and soon the cloud was strung out behind them. "How far do you think we'll have to go?" he demanded.

"Maybe all around this little world, and thus back to the ship. It wouldn't take us long," yelled Otho. "And you can keep me entertained by telling me how strong you are—before you get yourself knocked over by another butterfly!"

After that, they ran for a time in silence. Some of the insects lost interest and dropped out of the race, but others joined in to take their places. The robot groaned. "I've bumped my leg again. It's twisted this time."

"You can always get another leg. Keep on going."

Leaping unexpectedly from one side, one of the insects sailed past the lithe Otho and crashed into Grag. The robot struck the ground once more, and Otho paused angrily.

"I'll give you a hand. Quick!"

"My leg is ruined this time, Otho. I can't run. But you can. Save yourself."

"We're sticking together," returned the android. He reached down with a strong hand to help pull the robot to

FUTURIA, the PLANET of WONDER

Despite a Few Unwelcome Immigrants, Such as Jovian Fire-Men and Carnivorous Plants, the Futuremen's Strange World Still Remains the Ideal Place to Live!

THE planet created by the Futuremen is the only one in the System that contains a place where normal humanoid beings are accustomed to walk upside down. The Institute of Pure and Applied Gravitation, covering several square miles of ground, has for years conducted experiments on the effect of variable gravity on plant life, and one of its Rare Plant Departments is maintained under reverse gravity.

Once inside, of course, a visitor soon becomes accustomed to seeing top and bottom interchanged, and soon loses any idea that he is walking on his head. But as seen from the outside, the entire group of buildings and greenhouses presents a weird appearance.

Only the plant life bears its familiar aspect —and this is the one thing that is really abnormal. Grown under natural gravity, it has been transplanted here in the usual Earth fashion, and then subjected to reversed gravity.

Plants Grow Huge

The appearance of the plants is thus affected amazingly. With gravity pulling them upwards, they grow to many times their usual height. These experiments have already led to valuable discoveries of hitherto unsuspect functions of plant cells.

The Upside-Down Institute, as it is called, is but one of the many wonders of Futurian life. The transportation system is another.

Futuria is the one planet that maintains practically free lateral and vertical transportation for all inhabitants. The costs are paid by taxes on special magnetic clothing sold only by the government. A man wearing this clothing need only step into the proper lane, at certain designated station, and be whisked away at a speed close to a hundred miles an hour.

As seen from below, he has all the appearance of flying, and the Futurian skies, full of soaring men, women, and children, never fail to intrigue visitors.

Eases Land Shortage

The new planet has had a great effect on System economic life. Five years after completion of its core, it was ready to receive immigrants.

But even before that, the news of its creation had spread panic among land speculators, and eased the land shortage. The Interplanetary Government could complete its landscaping at leisure, while the Futuremen went on to other tasks.

Futuria's orbit is an ellipse, averaging about 160,000,000 miles from the sun. By treating the planet as a huge space-vessel, and giving it the proper acceleration from time to time, its motion can be easily controlled.

The use of gravity screens prevents it from disturbing the stable orbits of Mars and Earth.

Futuria itself is smaller than Earth, but has much more available living space. It's surface is mostly dry land. Only two small artificial oceans have been created to serve as planetary reservoirs, and from these, a network of canals radiate over the entire surface.

However, the planet does not show all the regularities of design some government officials hoped it would.

Planet Still Shrinks

The reason lies below the surface. Though previously packed down under high pressure, the materials used in its construction have undergone further shrinkage that is still continuing. Great folds in the surface have formed the beginnings of mountain ranges, wide-spread depressions indicate the beds of new, natural oceans. Already the Rising Hills promise to put the Himalayas of Earth in the shade, and the Vanishing Lake has a water level a thousand feet below that of the neighboring dry land . . . when it has a water level at all. It dries up during the summer, to reappear during the fall.

In addition to the expected inhabitants, Futuria has had a great many unwanted immigrants.

These have been smuggled in on unfumigated space ships, in a gigantic System-wide racket that has only recently been broken up by the Planet Patrol.

Serpent-Men Under Control

As a result, one large area is in the hands of Martian Serpent Men, a semi-humanoid

his feet. At that moment the cloud of insects began to disappear.

Otho's quick eyes saw most of them vanish together, as if a giant invisible hand had stretched through the air to push them away. The hand hurled back a pair here, a trio there, and finally the few scattered creatures that still remained.

A TALL bearded man was approaching them, a curiously altered proton-pistol in his hand. Walking beside him was an insect almost three feet in height, a grasshopper thing that was weirdly human in its attitude. The giant compound eyes took in the two synthetic creatures, and twiglike forelegs rubbed together.

"Hello, hello!"

"By the sea-monsters of Saturn!" gasped Otho. "That grasshopper is talking!"

Grag got slowly to his feet again. He was in a bad temper. He had disregarded the Brain's warning and had a badly twisted leg to show for it, while Otho, despite his inferior strength, was unharmed. He could imagine the android's jeers as he straightened the bent leg into a properly functioning piece once more.

He limped forward belligerently. "Hello, yourself," he rumbled. "And if you try any more tricks I'll use my proton-pistol. Unlike those butterflies, you aren't too small to hit."

He was reaching for the proton-pistol when Otho put a restraining hand on his arm.

"Wait a minute, Grag. Don't you recognize the man we came here to get? This is Curt."

"Little fishes of Venus!" rumbled the robot. "I had forgotten how different he'd look!"

"We're lucky to run into him alone." Otho turned to face Blackbeard. "You'd better come with us, Chief. We know you've forgotten who you are, but Simon will fix that."

Blackbeard gazed quizzically at the eager pair. "I suppose you two pretend to be genuine Futuremen," he remarked.

"Those other fellows," declared Grag, "are a couple of frauds."

"I'm sure of that. But I'm still a little doubtful as to whether you are."

"Holy sun-imps," exclaimed Otho, "they don't really resemble us, do they, Chief? You ought to be able to tell us apart at a glance."

"Even if you don't remember that you're Curt Newton," added Grag, "you've seen us enough not to mistake us for those phonies."

Blackbeard's face wore a blank look. "I'm Curt Newton?"

"I know you've forgotten about it, but as Otho said, Simon will fix that." The robot glanced uneasily at another butterfly that sprang into the air not far away, and turned to Otho. "We should be getting back to the ship, Otho, instead of talking so much."

"Well, take him, and let's go."

Grag reached forward. A second later the same invisible hand which had brushed away the butterflies hurled him to the ground. Otho started for Curt, then thought better of it, and drew back.

Grag tried to rise to his feet, his bad leg twisting under him. Otho was grinning.

"I thought you were stronger than he was," the android jeered.

"Perhaps we had better discuss this a little more before I accompany you," suggested Blackbeard mildly. "You two are acting exactly like those impostors. So far you've given no evidence that you're the genuine Futuremen."

"Then perhaps this will convince you," rasped an unexpected voice.

They all looked up to see the new figure that had made its appearance. Overhead, the Brain was gliding along noiselessly on his traction beams. He reached them as Grag got back on his feet.

"This is getting monotonous," Grag complained.

"So you overruled my suggestion about remaining in the ship," grated Simon at the shamefaced robot and android.

"I'm sorry, Simon," said Otho meekly. "We thought—"

"I know exactly what you thought."

The Brain faced Blackbeard once more. "Curt, lad, you don't know how happy we are to find you! You'll come with us to our ship?"

"I'm still waiting for this creature that calls itself Grag to persuade me," returned Blackbeard dryly.

"Very well," agreed Simon. "Grag, pick him up."

THE next moment Grag disappeared. Then Blackbeard felt himself lifted into the air by invisible metal hands, the proton-pistol removed from his hand.

"By the devils of space," he gasped, "what's going on?"

"This should convince you that we are the genuine Futuremen," observed Simon. "I've used a device which you yourself invented to screen Grag from view. Come peaceably now, Curt. Jean and Ezra are waiting to talk to you."

"Your argument is irresistible," capitulated Blackbeard. "I'll go with you."

A brief time later Blackbeard was inside their ship. Joan kissed him warmly, and then blushed. Ezra shook his hand warmly, and slapped his back to hide the emotion that was overpowering him. Through it all, the puzzled look on Curt's face did not disappear.

"Now, lad, we're going to bring back your past," said Simon.

Curt looked dubious. "I'm beginning to wonder whether that's possible. Ever since I awoke on Baldur to find my oxygen trickling away and my memory gone, I've been trying to find out who I am. I thought for a time that the memory of my previous life would come back to me of itself."

He laughed harshly. "Well, it hasn't. I don't remember anything that happened to me as Captain Future. So far as I know, I'm still Blackbeard."

"But the *Comet,* the Moon-laboratory! Weren't those familiar to you?"

Blackbeard nodded. "They were, but the knowledge didn't seem part of me. I knew them as I'd know the distance from the Sun to the Earth, as I'd know the diameter of the Moon— as objective scientific facts that had no personal relation to myself."

The Brain spoke slowly. "I can change that, lad. And I think I had better do it before you return to the *Comet,* so that you'll be able to meet those scoundrels with all your wits about you. It will require a delicate operation."

"But, Simon!" protested Joan. "It would take Curt weeks to recover! He'd be unable to return to the *Comet,* and they'd miss him."

"No, Joan, it will take but a few moments for the operation itself, and no period of recovery will be necessary." Simon's stalk-eyes swivelled around to face Blackbeard. "Do you trust my skill, lad?"

The bearded man smiled. "I may have forgotten who I am, but I remember a few things I've heard about what the Brain can do. I'm ready if you are."

It was at this moment that there came from outside the ship a shrill piping sound. "Hello, hello!"

"Jumping Jovians!" exclaimed Otho. "It must be that insect-man! He's followed us here."

"Hello, hello!"

"That appears to be the only word he knows," muttered Grag.

"It isn't," replied Curt. "I think he has a fairly good grasp of English."

Grag stared. "That grasshopper? What does he say?"

"I don't know. I think that you, Grag, should be able to understand him better than any one else. Let's go outside and have a little conversation."

"No harm in that," agreed Simon. "Meanwhile, I'll collect the instruments I need."

OUTSIDE the ship, the insect-man was rubbing his forelegs together again, this time without seeming to produce any sound. But a look of alertness and close attention became apparent in Grag.

"Don't tell me," cried Otho, "that you've got better ears than we have!"

"Undoubtedly," rumbled Grag. "I don't know why, but I can get every word!"

"Our friend here," explained Blackbeard, "produces sounds in the ultra-

sonic range. By dint of considerable effort, he can manage to say, 'Hello,' in a sufficiently low tone for us to hear him. But he can't carry on much of a conversation that way."

"Simon and your father built Grag," added Ezra, "so that he could detect sounds above the usual audible frequency."

"Just a minute," said Grag. "This is interesting."

The role of translator was something new for the robot, and he was making the most of it. He listened carefully for a time, interposed a few words, waited for the reply, and then turned to the others.

"His name is Arnn, and he is of a race called Ormi. All the insect-like creatures on this little world are related, having evolved from the same original animals. That indicates that they've had no contact with other worlds throughout their history—until recently. Arnn says that a short time ago a space ship landed on Thor."

"Not so short a time by our standards," observed Ezra. "Thor was discovered by Glenn Cass ten years ago."

"The men on the ship," continued Grag, "were the first creatures made of light matter that the Ormi had ever seen. Several were killed by the small insects, which also made their way into the ship itself, and accidentally ruined the engines. The ship could no longer take off."

The old marshal's voice trembled with eagerness. "So that's what happened to Cass! He radioed the news of his discovery into space, and it was picked up by a passenger liner. But nothing more was ever heard of him, even though the Planet Patrol kept up the search for a year."

"Arnn says that he and his race protected the men when they learned how ill-adapted the visitors were to this world. And by contact with the newcomers, they gradually learned the language, although the strangers could never understand them too well.

"One of the men was a scientist who was more interested in studying the matter of which Thor was made than in saving his own life."

"That would have been Cass himself," interposed Ezra.

"From him," went on Grag, "they learned that Thor and all the creatures living upon it were doomed. A study of its orbit revealed it to be not the usual ellipse, but a slowly narrowing spiral. Thor is gradually approaching the Sun. Eventually, for some reason that Arnn did not understand, this will cause the entire planetoid to disintegrate or plunge into the sun."

Blackbeard nodded.

"Arnn wants to know if we strangers have come to save him and his race," concluded Grag.

"In a way, we have," replied Blackbeard slowly. "The oxygen on Thor is of light matter, so it would seem that the Ormi are not oxygen breathers. How are they affected by heat and cold?"

Grag listened to the reply, then translated. "Arnn recognizes the words but doesn't know what these things are."

"Good enough. That indicates they are not affected."

"What became of Cass and the others?" demanded Joan.

Arnn spoke rapidly. They could hear only a syllable or two of his shrill reply. Grag explained.

"Eventually they used up the food they had brought with them and they starved. In the course of time their ship was crushed by the lizard-creatures, and few traces of it remain."

"It was the inevitable end," mused Blackbeard.

HE LOOKED up to see Simon approaching eagerly.

"Ready now, lad. We'd better get into the ship again."

Arnn's terrific weight would have tak-

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en him through the bottom of their vessel, and he seemed to understand that fact, for he made no attempt to join them inside. Otho was the last one to enter, and as he moved forward, he looked up, drawn by a whistling sound in the air. A bright streak was flashing across the sky, to disappear behind the horizon. Another spaceship! At this rate the tiny planetoid would soon be well populated.

The Brain was not surprised to hear the news. "It was to be expected, Otho, that Brooks would make another attempt to kill Curt and the people he thinks are the Futuremen. There are two factions to this mystery. I do not know what Brooks intends to do now, although I think I shall soon. But first we must restore Curt's memory."

The others were tense. Ezra's hand trembled as he raised it to his mouth with a chew of *batab,* the Venusian substitute for tobacco. Joan's eyes were moist. Even Grag and Otho showed by their silence and the unusual solemnity of their manner how greatly they were affected. Only Curt himself seemed to be unconcerned.

"We'll have to save those Ormi, Simon," he observed, "as well as the new planet. I think the simplest thing would be to remove them to Pluto, where the Sun's ultra-violet would have little effect. We could remove a small part of Thor along with them, so that they'd have an island of their own matter, which we must anchor firmly to the surface."

"That sounds like the way out," agreed Simon. "But never mind them now, lad. The one I'm concerned with is yourself. Sit here."

Curt lay back in the chair which Simon designated. The next moment, the low humming of a hypnotic projector became audible. Curt's eyes closed slowly, a faint trace of a smile appeared on his face, then vanished. He was asleep.

The others watched breathlessly as the Brain hovered in the air above him.

"Cut off the machine, Otho. Hand me my first instruments, Grag."

The two comrades moved wordlessly in swift, silent obedience.

CHAPTER XVIII

Plans for Failure

IT was the first time in his life that Hartley Brooks could remember being desperate. His plans to rid himself of the Futuremen had failed, his most trusted lieutenant was dead, and soon the Planet Patrol would be on his trail. He had repeated to himself again and again that he must act rapidly—without being able to decide what action he should take. Only his inability to think of anything better had led him to follow the Futuremen to Thor.

It had been easy enough to trail the *Comet,* and to learn that still another ship was interested in the doings of the Futuremen. These newcomers into the picture puzzled Brooks, but he did not allow them to divert him from his objective. He must get rid of Captain Future! Now that strong-arm methods had failed, he would try his one other resource.

He had brought along with him both money and weapons. He knew there was no hope of bribing or intimidating either Curt Newton or the Futuremen, but he was not so sure about their companion. From what he had heard of Loring, the latter had an eye that glistened at the sight of money. A strange companion for the Futuremen, but it was not for Brooks to marvel at the fact. His business was to take advantage of it.

If, in the end, Loring should prove to be unexpectedly honest, then—Brooks shrugged—he would be forced to use his atom-pistol. He must take the Futuremen by surprise, and get away after killing them. If he failed in this final desperate attempt it made no difference what would happen to him. He was ruined either way.

As his fleet space yacht closed in on Thor he could see the glistening hull

of the *Comet*. He spoke to his pilot, and the latter braked, and began to prepare for landing.

The Futuremen were waiting for him. Brooks approached the *Comet* stiffly, rigid with an inner tenseness that his manner did not show. Both the robot and the android were staring as if doubting their eyes, and the shifty-eyed Loring was open-mouthed.

They were even more dumbfounded than he would have expected, and for a moment the shadow of doubt flitted through the financier's mind. From all that he had heard of them, the Futuremen, should have been more difficult to surprise. He would have thought they were overrated, if he had not remembered the fate of Kars Virson, and those ten ships.

"I am Hartley Brooks," he announced unnecessarily. "I'd like to speak to Captain Future."

Loring swallowed hard. "You can't. Curt and the Brain are busy with an important experiment."

"Future busy with an experiment? Excellent. So you're dropping that pretense about his mind being affected. All the more reason why he'd be willing to talk to me."

Loring shook his head stubbornly. "He isn't leaving the *Comet*. And you are not permitted to enter it."

Brooks shrugged. "I've made a long journey just to see him, but if he isn't anxious to talk, there's no help for it. Perhaps, however, I could speak to you instead?"

"Not alone." There was fear in Loring's eyes. "Grag and Otho accompany me everyplace. You'll have to speak in front of them."

THE financier's expression became puzzled. Of all the things he might have expected from the two synthetic Futuremen, the last was that they would be degraded to the position of bodyguards for the worthless Loring. Something in this setup was wrong, all wrong.

He shrugged again. "You leave me no choice. I came here to discuss a matter of vital importance—the building of this new planet. My position is simple. I don't want the job completed."

From the landing port of the *Comet* a husky red-haired figure emerged.

"Captain Future!" exclaimed Brooks. "What a surprise! I was told you weren't anxious to receive visitors!"

"Curt!" Loring's voice was choking with repressed rage. If not for the presence of the financier, he would have overwhelmed the unfortunate actor with his anger. "You can't leave your experiments now."

"What experiments?" asked Hro Zan. "I'm tired of just sitting inside that ship. Even if there's danger out here, I want some fresh air for a change."

Brooks was gazing at him intently. "So it's true after all," he reflected. "He is mentally ill. And yet from the way he operated those defenses on the Moon—"

"Mr. Brooks, perhaps you'll take my word for it that Captain Future doesn't want to see visitors," growled Loring anxiously. "He isn't well."

Brooks was silent. As Loring watched him uneasily, he turned to gaze at the android and the robot, then back to the tall red-haired figure. He recalled what the miner named Ingmann had done to Otho on Mars. A strange light of understanding began to grow in the financier's eyes.

"By the demon of Neptune!" he rasped out. "So that explains it! You're impostors, every one of you."

The Jovian clanked forward menacingly at a signal from Loring.

"You're not going to leave Thor with that story," be growled, his voice no longer resembling that of Grag.

A sardonic smile twisted the financier's face. "We've been fools, all of us. If you'd come to me long before, I'd have made a lucrative deal with you. And I'd have saved myself plenty of trouble. Kars Virson would be alive, and ten of my best spaceships would not have been blasted out of existence. And if I had guessed—as I should have—I'd have come to you first."

He stared at Loring again, and shook

his head regretfully. "You fooled me too well for your own good, Loring. I wouldn't have remained blind if I'd had the opportunity before of studying you at close quarters. Your Captain Future looks imposing, but even a Curt Newton out of his mind would display more intelligence than this man does."

Hro Zan glowered. "I don't have to take insults from *you,*" he muttered.

"And your robot and android, upon close examination, are a little too human —and a little too much devoted to the interests of Edward Loring instead of Captain Future. I should have known when you entered the council hall, at the time the Board of Governors met on Mars."

Brooks began to pace up and down. "Poor Kars! He did his job well, after all, destroying the Futuremen as I ordered him to, but he failed to destroy the *Comet.*"

Loring nodded. "I found the *Comet* on Baldur, not far from Future's body. That gave me the idea of the whole masquerade."

"And a very unfortunate idea it was for me." Brooks said, smiling coldly. Now that he had learned the Futuremen were really dead, he could appreciate the joke on himself. "However, I think I may yet turn it to my advantage. But how did you fakers manage to destroy my ships on the Moon?"

"Those defenses were automatic," Loring said.

"I told you before," growled the Jovian, "that you're not leaving this place."

"I think I can change your minds on that point," said Hartley Brooks.

The small butterfly-insects were beginning to leap into the air again, and Loring suggested nervously:

"Perhaps we had better talk inside. These small creatures are dangerous."

LORING led the way. Once inside the *Comet,* with the doors locked, the financier gazed about with interest. "You've inherited an excellent ship, Loring. I have none the equal of it. I rather envy you."

"Never mind that. What's your proposition?"

Brooks smiled. "Ah, yes. Well, I may as well start off by telling you that I can reward you with more money than you can ever pick up playing a lone hand—provided you play the game as I direct. I want you to go ahead with that planet-building project."

"You know that we can't finish the job as Future would have done."

"Precisely. But act as if you could. Continue to fool the public about the identity of your assistants, but somewhat better than you've fooled me. And take over the direction of the work, with technical assistance if necessary, so as not to reveal your own ignorance."

That would be a job for Blackbeard. Loring nodded absently.

"At the critical moment, of course, I want you to botch things up. I want this project to be so resounding a failure, that the echoes of it will last for years."

"That will be easy. I'll simply put my imitation Captain Future in charge." Loring indicated Hro Zan.

"You will receive the first installment on our contract when we reach Mars. The second will come after the project has failed. If you do a good job, we may be able to get together on a lot of things later."

The eyes of Loring and the two pretended Futuremen were glittering with greed. Only the false Captain Future was sullen and uninterested. His pride had been hurt again. Some day he would show these contemptuous people that he was not to be sneered at.

Loring glanced at the intelligent mask of a face that hid so much stupidity behind it.

"Once his usefulness is finished, the fool will have to be put out of the way," he thought. "He's dangerous. He's just stupid enough to talk."

He had no suspicion that Brooks, too, was thinking identically the same thing about him. On the impostors, Brooks wasted little thought. They would cause him no trouble whatever.

As for his own looming difficulties with the Planet Patrol, his mind was

already turning over various plans that offered a way out. In the first place, of course, the Planet Patrol would be faced with the very real difficulty of proving that he had been personally responsible for the attack on the Moon.

If matters should reach such a state suppose he were to make known the fact that the passengers on the *Comet* were impostors. Suppose he were to claim that he had suspected this fact long before, had sent his men to the Moon to investigate, had been painfully surprised on learning that the impostors had opened fire, and his own men, against his orders, returned the fire. Yes, there was little doubt that things were shaping up beautifully for Hartley Brooks.

There was a pleased smile on his face as he shook hands with Loring to seal their bargain.

CHAPTER XIX

And Plans for Success

THE Brain was hovering in the air above Curt's unconscious body. As Grag and Otho handed him the instruments he called for, he seized them with invisible tractor beams, so that they too seemed to float above Curt with a will of their own.

A small metal rod glowed dully, with the faintest of reddish lights. Simon directed its beams downward, and Curt's skull gradually became transparent, every vein and artery, every section of the brain standing out as clearly as if this were an anatomist's model instead of a living human being. They could see the arteries throbbing as the blood pulsed through them.

"Next, Otho."

Otho handed up a small sphere with a pointed knob projecting from its surface. The Brain's tractor beams held it a few inches above Curt's skull. A thin shower of sparks sprang from the projecting point, and penetrated beneath the skull. Curt's brain seemed to be on fire. But the placid expression of his face remained unchanged.

Otho handed over still another instrument. And now Simon began to trace a slow path through the cerebral hemisphere, a path so fine and narrow, that only the robot and the android among the watchers could perceive it. No human hand could have possessed the necessary steadiness, no normal human brain could have possessed the knowledge to guide the hand.

But Simon, of whom nothing remained of humanness but the brain itself, had been unequalled in his knowledge of the brains of others. It was he who had first sketched the enormously complicated synthetic brains of Otho and Grag. Only his deep understanding of the nature of mental processes had enabled him to do so. And he had lost nothing of this understanding.

Ever so slowly, he followed the gray twisting paths that determined the life and understanding of a human being. So carefully did he move that before long both Joan and Ezra felt exhausted from the sheer effort of concentrating on what he was doing. But Simon, no longer affected by the weaknesses of ordinary human beings, was beyond fatigue.

He was reknitting mental connections that had been snapped by the shock Curt Newton had suffered on Baldur. If gaps were not to remain in Curt's memory, he must overlook nothing. The stalked lens-eyes followed the thin glowing path he was tracing with an intensity that not even he had ever shown previously.

Eventually, this process too came to an end. From Simon's manner, the others could tell that he was now relaxing. He spoke again to Otho. "The bulb."

Otho passed over a narrow bulb with a metal filament inside. The filament gleamed with a fierce white incandescence that had the effect of seeming to extinguish the fire in Curt's brain. Now the skull became opaque again, and the brain faded slowly from view.

Simon switched the hypnotic ray on

again, this time in reverse. Curt sat up slowly after a moment, opening his eyes.

He blinked. "Hello, I seem to have been asleep!" Then he grinned. "I remember now! Simon, you're a wonder! I even remember all that has happened since I became Blackbeard."

"Curt, you're yourself again!" Joan threw her arms about him delightedly, and he responded.

"Tell us what happened, chief," urged Grag.

"Sure. Back on Baldur, I noticed this fellow, Loring, in the space visors. . . ."

They all listened to Captain Future's story intently.

MARSHAL Ezra Gurney had been staring in delight. "It's marvellous, Simon, even for you! I was wondering how you were going to avoid a slow period of recovery. You avoided all physical operation by not piercing the skull."

"There's no time for congratulating ourselves," rasped Simon sharply, his old unemotional self once more. "I won't restore Curt's physical appearance yet, although eventually there'll be no difficulty about that. For the present, he must return to the *Comet* as Blackbeard."

"I think it would be advisable," decided Curt, "to substitute Grag, Otho and yourself for the impostors."

"That may be rather difficult," murmured Ezra doubtfully. "Loring isn't a fool, and you'll have trouble trying to make the substitution under his nose."

"Not if I have your help and Joan's," returned Curt. "Here's what I plan to do. . . ."

Not long afterward Loring, inside the *Comet,* looked out to see Blackbeard returning with his spectroscopic apparatus. So the man's altered proton-gun had really been able to protect him. Loring was impressed despite himself.

Brooks had blasted off some time before in his own ship, and Loring, absorbed in what he and the financier had agreed to do, was not conscious of the length of time that had elapsed since Blackbeard had set out.

"So your weapon was effective?" he greeted Blackbeard.

"It was against those insects. I don't think it will be against the Planet Patrol."

Loring's eyebrows went up.

"They're here on the other side, in a disguised ship," added Blackbeard. "They're a little suspicious about what happened on the Moon. I'm just warning you to be ready for them."

"Thanks. We've got nothing to hide."

Inside the ship, Blackbeard looked about. Hro Zan, bored as usual, was snoring in his bunk. The two pretended Futuremen were playing cards. Blackbeard's lip curled. To think that these two should consider themselves passable imitations of Grag and Otho!

He put a whistle to his lips, and blew a shrill ultra-sonic note that only the genuine Grag's ears could detect. A few moments later, as Joan and Ezra made their appearance, he heard Loring's amazed voice.

"The Planet Patrol! This is an unexpected honor!"

"I'd like to speak to Curt Newton," began Joan abruptly.

As she had expected, Loring shook his head. "I'm sorry, but you know his condition, Captain Randall."

"I know that the Futuremen have always spoken for themselves, and need no interpreter to explain their thoughts," she snapped. "You have no status here, Mr. Loring, that gives you the right to interfere."

Loring swallowed hard. An angry retort trembled on his lips, but he repressed it. It was better to have no trouble with the Planet Patrol. Let her speak to that fool, Hro Zan, and much good it would do her.

Joan entered the *Comet,* to find the man who posed as Curt Newton already aroused at the sound of a woman's voice.

"Curt, darling!" exclaimed Joan.

Hro Zan blinked. This was the one person who appreciated him, and he was not slow to take advantage of the fact. He kissed Joan before she could avoid him.

"Curt, what's wrong with you?"

"Nothing much." Hro Zan sought for a suitable answer, failed to find it. Loring had not expected this interview, and had therefore been unable to rehearse him for it. Hro Zan let his own impulses guide him. "I'm just not being treated right," he complained.

"You poor dear!"

From then on, Hro Zan would have paid no attention to an earthquake. At last, some one who sympathized with him!

MEANWHILE Ezra was arguing hotly with Loring at the entrance port about what had happened on the Moon, with Loring denying that he or the pretended Futuremen had been present. Loring scarcely noticed the genuine Grag and Otho as they stepped by him.

"I didn't know you two were outside," was all he said.

"You were busy talking and didn't notice us step out, boss," came Grag's rumble. "Some of the planets here reminded me of Jupiter, and I wanted to make sure."

"I thought I'd go with him," said Otho, in his character as the *pretended* Otho, alias Shane.

Inside the *Comet*, the two imposters looked up in amazement at hearing what seemed to be their own voices. As they rose to their feet, Blackbeard faced them.

"Just a minute, boys."

"What? Say," growled the Jovian, "do you see what I see, Shane?"

At sight of the genuine Grag and Otho the jaws of their doubles dropped.

The struggle was over before it really started. Otho's fist landed on Shane's jaw, and the man was unconscious before he hit the ground. And Grag's metal hand quickly covered his imitator's mouth to choke off any cry for help. Hro Zan, pouring out his troubles to Joan, noticed nothing.

"Now I'll help Ezra keep Loring busy," said Blackbeard. "Carry these two characters out, and deliver them to Simon. He'll show you where to stow them away. Then, when Joan and Ezra return to the Ingmann ship, you two come back here, and bring Simon with you."

Thus, it was that when the *Comet* blasted off, leaving the planetoid of heavy matter behind, once more the real Futuremen manned the tear-drop-shaped ship, fitting into their accustomed places. And Loring, as Blackbeard knew, had no suspicion of what had happened.

CHAPTER XX

Showdown at Planet's Core

WEEKS had passed, and the new planet, Futuria, was near completion. A hollow space ten miles in diameter had been left at the very center for Thor to occupy, but only a small tubular corridor leading from the surface had been preserved. Now, as the *Comet* descended slowly down this corridor, Hro Zan spoke uneasily.

"I hope this thing isn't dangerous."

It was a remark as much out of character as possible for a man who was pretending to be Captain Future. Joan, who heard it, raised an eyebrow. Brooks, who stood some distance away, shrugged. It no longer mattered whether Hro Zan gave the show away or not. Joan and Ezra, whom the Planet Patrol had for reasons of its own insisted on sending along, were in no position to force any change in his plans. For once, thought the financier, he was in absolute control of the situation. And any fool could see that nobody was going to get a ten-mile-thick planetoid through this small shaft.

Blackbeard approached the financier respectfully. Not a muscle of his face betrayed how thoroughly he understood what was ging on.

"If you'd care to listen, Mr. Brooks, I'm ready to explain what we intend to do."

Grag, passing nearby, was saved by the expressionless metal of his face from the need of repressing a grin. Mr. Brooks would receive a scientific explanation. He would have no idea of *all* the Futuremen intended to do.

Brooks nodded curtly. "Go ahead."

"The outer surface of the planet has been built up," explained Blackbeard, "of light elements formed from the energy of space by the machine the Futuremen brought back from their quest beyond the System, and from a small amount of imported heavier elements. The core is to be filled with the heavy matter of Thor."

There was an air of quiet authority about the man that impressed Hartley Brooks despite himself. He was actually talking as if the plan were going to be carried out.

"However," went on Blackbeard, "there is a difficulty. If Thor were to be brought here directly, its gravitational attraction would tear Futuria apart. We sought another method of transporting it, and finally found one.

"Our studies on the planetoid revealed that this heavy matter, ordinarily stable, can be transformed explosively, under suitable conditions, into vast amounts of energy."

"By means of illumination with ultraviolet light," put in Brooks.

"Yes, Mr. Brooks. The transformation can be slowed down somewhat, and brought under control by the proper choice of wave-lengths, but it remains nevertheless potentially dangerous."

The financier nodded. He was counting on that danger, as he was also counting on the dozen extra men he had forced Loring into taking along on the *Comet*, just to make sure that nothing went wrong.

"However, I think that everything will take place smoothly here. Government officials, working under our instructions, have erected suitable apparatus on Thor, and will transform the entire planetoid into energy as we have directed, on receipt of our signal. The more difficult part of the process, the recreation of matter from the energy, we shall handle ourselves. You see that we have prepared the apparatus."

BROOKS gazed at a small squat tower built into the center of the *Comet*, baffling by its apparent simplicity. This was no maze of tubes and electrical apparatus such as he had expected. The tower was transparent, apparently constructed of some plastic material that Blackbeard himself had invented. From the very top, a flexible glass-like tube ended in a flaring nozzle.

"The energy will be retransformed into heavy matter at an incredible rate as it flows from that nozzle. The order of potentials involved is much higher than in the case of cosmic rays, and curiously enough, with this increased potential, the penetrating power of the energy is lost, so that we need not fear stray radiations. The heavy matter will be deposited on the inside of the ordinary matter of Futuria, and the core built up quickly. We shall leave the corridor open until the last, to assure ourselves of a safe exit."

Blackbeard spoke so confidently that Brooks was shaken.

"What of the living creatures on Thor?" he asked.

"They have already been transported unharmed to Pluto. Preliminary experiments on that point with the butterfly-type insects have reassured us. The Interplanetary Government, as you know, is insistent that no harm be done to the fauna of the different System bodies, and we were able to convince them rather easily. Shielded from the Sun's light, the Thorians will be safer than ever."

As the *Comet* approached the center of the new-built planet, the gravity had been slowly diminishing. Now, as they reached the hollow centre, it disappeared altogether, to be replaced, at a nod from Blackbeard to Otho, by the artificial gravity of the *Comet*.

They traveled slowly across the dark void, lit only by the illumination from the tear-drop-shaped vessel. The *Comet* nosed into the opposite side, started to drift back.

"Steady."

A tiny rocket blast held the ship in position. The tower that would spray the heavy energy of Thor into place swung on a specially built platform to the outside of the ship. Blackbeard studied a chronometer, then spoke to Otho. "Signal the men outside. Make sure we're synchronized."

Otho touched a button, and a red light glowed on the panel board. Ten seconds later another red light glowed. Five more seconds, and he threw a lever.

Heavy matter began to spray out upon the inner side of the planet. It shot out, as Blackbeard had predicted, at an incredible rate, thousands of times more rapidly than water could have flowed.

Brooks and Loring stared through special visors, constructed for the purpose of enabling those within the ship to see what was happening. The whole interior of the planet had suddenly burst into brilliant illumination. But strangely enough, except for a slight hiss from the nozzle, the entire process was silent.

They could see the beam of light from the nozzle strike against the curving wall and deposit the huge masses of new matter. As the core grew rapidly larger, the walls began to buckle from the terrific gravitational effect. But wherever there was a sign of weakening, another deposit of heavy matter was skillfully built up at the right spot to correct the strain.

"We're reaching the critical stage," spoke Blackbeard slowly. "As I have told Mr. Loring previously, from the time the hollow is one-tenth filled, the matter, if reconverted suddenly into energy, would suffice to blow the entire planet to pieces. It is possible that the fragments would travel with sufficient force to affect Mars or Earth. But because there would be an interval of warning, of some ten or fifteen seconds, during which the reaction would auto-accelerate, we ourselves, who appear to be in the greatest danger, would be unaffected. In those few seconds, we could attain a speed that would enable us to streak out through the corridor as rapidly as the explosion wave. We might be tossed around slightly, but I am sure that we would withstand the shock.

"However, unless Grag and Otho slip up, as I do not expect them to do, the contingency I have mentioned will not occur. And at present, everything is going well."

LORING and Brooks interchanged glances. They had discussed this possibility beforehand. Let the planet blow up just as it was nearing completion, and Captain Future's reputation would be ruined forever. The disastrous loss of life involved, the terrific expenditure of time and money wasted, would never be forgotten in the history of the System.

And the Futuremen had their orders. Given the signal from Loring, both Shane and Vens would slip up. The *Comet* would streak for the outside of the planet, and the great venture of Futuria would be a thing of the past.

Despite himself, the financier was tense.

He licked his lips nervously. "It looks past the tenth-full stage to me."

"Just about," replied Blackbeard noncommittally.

Brooks caught Loring's eye and nodded slowly. The shifty-eyed man swallowed hard. Despite Blackbeard's explanation, he still felt that he would be in danger during the explosion to follow. But there was no help for it now. He raised a trembling forefinger, so that neither Otho nor Grag could miss the gesture.

Blackbeard smiled and did not move.

The seconds ticked by. Brooks' eyebrows went up angrily.

"Well, Loring?" he demanded.

"Otho!" snapped Loring.

"Yes, Mr. Loring?"

"You remember what I told you! Act!"

Blackbeard chuckled. "There's no use building up Mr. Brooks' hopes any longer. You may as well let him know that there will be no explosion." He laughed as he saw the growing confusion and alarm in the eyes of the two men.

"You idiot—" Brooks spoke savagely

to Loring. "You assured me this man would fail!"

Loring shrank back with a cry of terror. The Brain had risen from the deserted portion of the ship, where he had lain apparently motionless for so long. Now he hovered in the air, his stalk-eyes coldly examining both the terrified little man and the enraged financier.

"We happen to be the genuine Futuremen, Mr. Brooks," said Blackbeard quietly. "Loring's confederates are in prison—all but this actor named Hro Zan. My real name, by the way, is Curt Newton."

The financier's face went deathly pale. So Loring, after all, had played him for a fool! His mind a welter of confused and desperate thoughts, he found it impossible to grasp clearly what had happened. He knew only that now was the critical moment, the moment he had so long awaited—and that failure, disgrace and ruin stared him in the face if he did not act.

He saw his empire crashing about him, saw himself standing trial before a grim Interplanetary jury, saw himself condemned to Cerberus and the society of the System's worst criminals for life.

"You double-crosser," he said hoarsely, and his atom-beam caught Loring full in the chest.

The little man's scream died away in a choking gurgle as Brooks turned quickly to the Futuremen, who had been prepared for any move against themselves, but not for this.

Otho plunged forward and threw the murderous financier against the wall of the ship so hard that he lay in stunned silence.

It was at this moment that the dozen men Brooks had planted on board, summoned by Loring's shriek, came plunging into the center of the ship.

Blackbeard, about to relinquish the controls he had been handling, suddenly went pale, as a voice rang out of the radio communicator nearby him.

"Calling the *Comet!* Power out of control! Voltage rising rapidly, and danger of an explosion inside! Prepare for quick escape!"

AT THE sound of the voice, Brooks' men stopped momentarily.

"We've got to get out of here," one of them cried.

Blackbeard was working rapidly at the controls of the matter-transformer. Flight he knew was out of the question. It would mean a giving up of the project, a defeat just as certain as if Brooks had had things his own way.

He spoke rapidly into his own communicator.

"You must have got a few beams of ultra-violet of the wrong wave-length into your reaction rays. Cut out your ultra-violet altogether! Switch on your light absorbers and keep them on!"

The heavy matter which had been building up outside the vessel had ceased to form. Then that which had been deposited began to disappear.

A bewildered voice spoke from the communicator. "Voltage decreasing out here! We don't know how you did it, but thanks anyway, *Comet!*"

"I simply sent a reverse current back to you! Next time be more careful!"

Brooks was rising slowly to his feet. He saw the Futuremen waiting tensely on one side of the ship, saw Hro Zan along with Joan and Ezra standing near Blackbeard, saw his own men waiting like frightened children to learn what would happen.

"Get them now!" he shouted. "Here's your chance!"

The men surged forward once more. Atom-beams lanced forward toward Joan, Ezra and Blackbeard.

But the expected victims did not fall. "We've been ready for you, Mr. Brooks," said Blackbeard grimly. "We are wearing invisible atom-shields."

At that Brooks lost his head finally and completely. He threw himself straight at the apparatus Blackbeard had been handling. He knew that death was certain for him, but if he could wreck the apparatus death would come to Blackbeard, to the other Futuremen, to every one aboard the ship.

Both Grag and Otho were too far away to stop him, and Blackbeard, not

daring to relinquish the controls, felt his heart pound suddenly against his chest. This looked like the end, after all. He had guarded against any direct attack against himself or the others, but he had not counted on an insane suicidal attempt.

A fraction of a second later, Brooks was reeling aside, a cry of despair on his lips. It was Hro Zan who had unexpected stopped him. He had hurled himself into the financier's path, and been thrown to one side, to have his chest seared by an atom-gun triggered by one of Brooks' bewildered men. But he had stopped the madman.

Blackbeard noticed the Brain gliding toward him, and knew that they had won. Even as he left the apparatus he had been handling, the Brain's tractor beams took over.

Blackbeard plunged low, caught Brooks around the knees, and threw him back. An atom-ray from one of the financier's own men passed across his face, cutting off his scream of pain and terror.

The man who had killed him threw his gun forward. "If you're really Captain Future, and you've got a shield against this gun, we may just as well surrender. Come on, boys. No use keeping up the fight, especially after the rat who brought us into this tried to kill us all."

"Pick up the guns, Otho," ordered Blackbeard briefly. Then he turned to Hro Zan.

The actor was not yet dead, but he was going rapidly.

"They always said I didn't know how to play the role," he gasped. "They said I was a fool. But I wasn't so bad, was I?" His glazed eyes sought Joan's.

She shook her head, biting her lips. "You were wonderful!"

"I did as well as Future himself would have done. Strange that he should have been aboard all the time . . . I'd have used him as a model if I'd known. Now all there's left for me is an exit . . . and I always knew . . . how . . . to make . . . them . . ."

His head dropped forward.

Otho had gathered the discarded weapons. Now he herded the men into the rear of the ship again, this time as prisoners.

With Blackbeard once more at the controls, the planet's core continued to grow. They watched in awe as Thor took shape once more inside the new planet. Hours later, the task completed without further incident, and only a small empty space left near the corridor, the *Comet* streaked for the surface.

TWO days—and Curt Newton was himself again. The Brain's uncanny surgery had removed the ugly scars from his face. Only his hair remained black, and under the influence of an antidote which the Brain had applied to counteract the effect of dynatomite gases, that too would soon resume its natural red color.

Joan gazed at him and marveled. "I prefer you this way," she asserted. "Not that you weren't handsome before, in an ugly sort of way—but I do like a clean-shaven face!"

Curt kissed her. "In that case," he said sternly, "you have a great deal of explaining to do. I hear, from reliable witnesses, that you were practically in love with this man Blackbeard!"

"Not exactly." Joan's face was demure. "But there were certain things about him that pleased me."

"Such as?"

Joan began to explain, and Grag snorted. For once, Otho, squirming in sympathy, shared his feelings. There were times when human beings indulged in queer conversations. And for their part, the two synthetic comrades would rather face the dangers of Thor over again, than listen to them!

Further Exploits of Curt Newton in RED SUN OF DANGER,
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