

CAPTAIN FUTURE

MAN OF TOMORROW

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FALL
ISSUE

A THRILLING
PUBLICATION

FEATURING

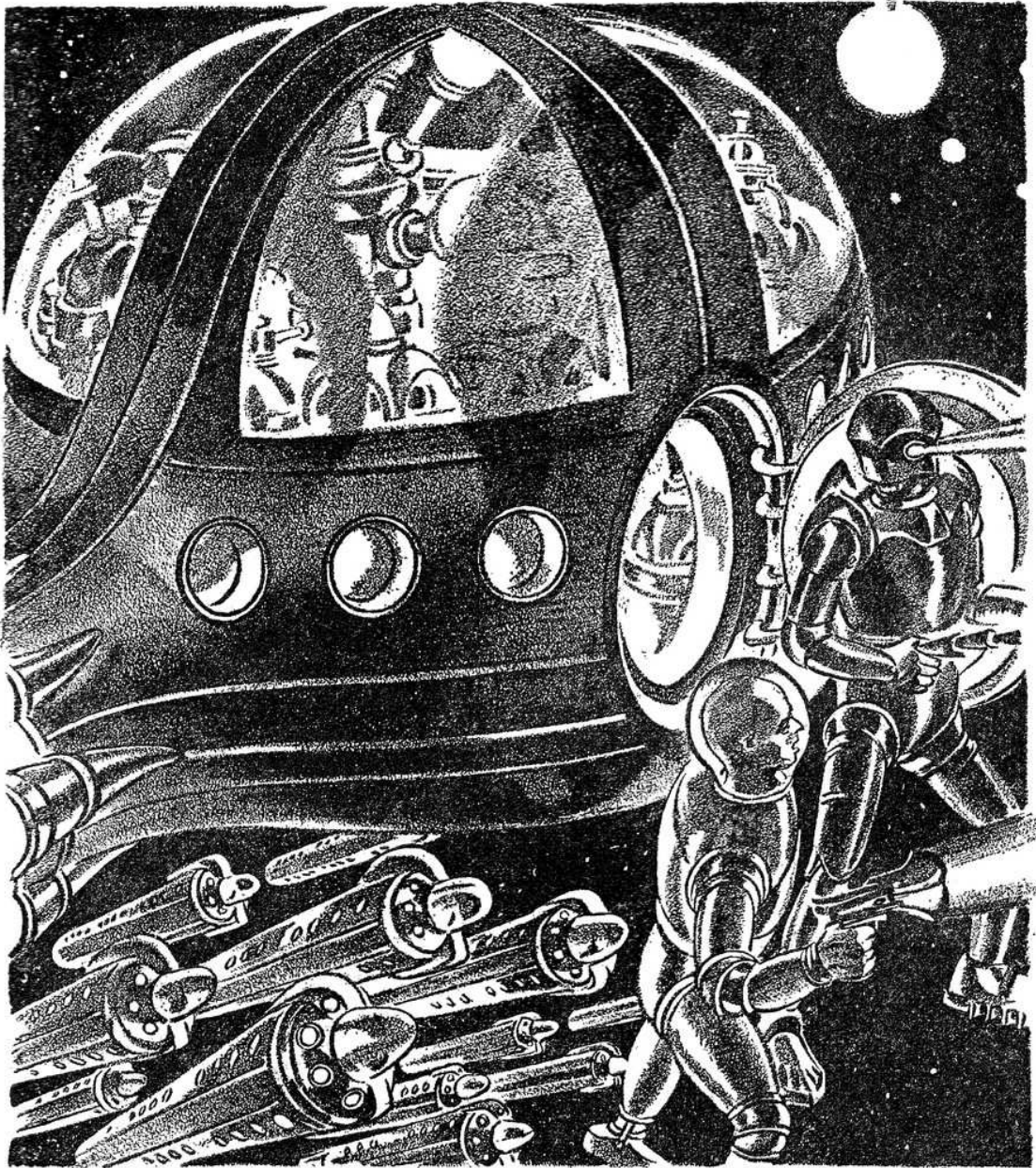
THE
LOST
WORLD
OF TIME

A Complete
Book-Length
Scientifiction Novel
By EDMOND
HAMILTON



THE LOST WORLD OF TIME

The LOST WORLD



Captain Future, Otho and Grag leaped across the gap

By **EDMOND HAMILTON**

Author of "Star Trail to Glory," "The Magician of Mars," etc.

CHAPTER I

Mystery Asteroid

THE asteroid swung dark and lonely on its predestined path through space, a tiny world of brooding mystery and silence. It was but one of the countless asteroids, meteor swarms and other interplane-

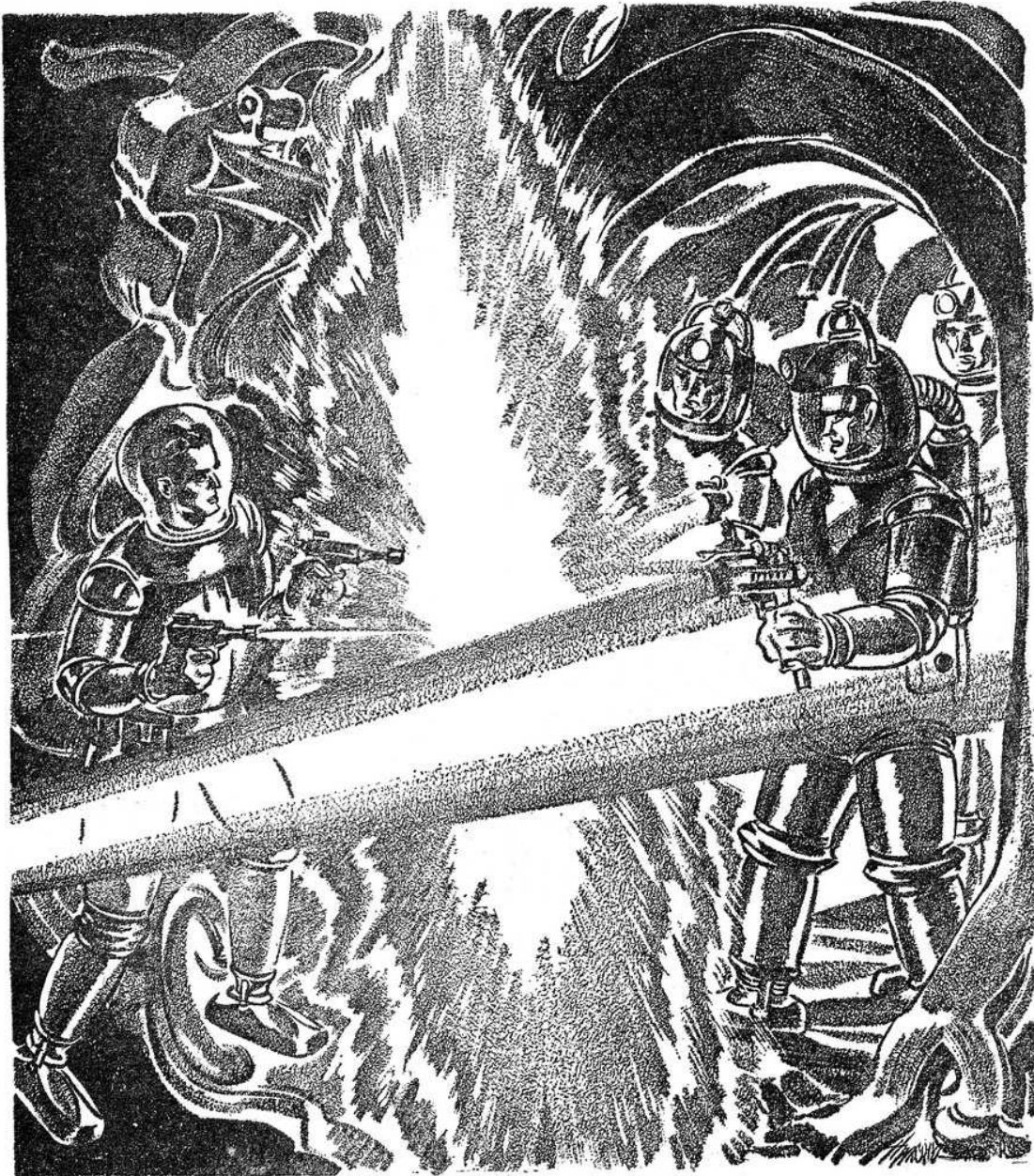
tary debris that form a great band between the orbits of Mars and Jupiter. A dense little world with a thin envelope of air, it was clad with a thick jungle of flat, fronded green trees and shrubs.

Many-legged asteroid rats scurried to and fro in the jungle and flame-birds cut soaring, phosphorescent trails amid the fronds. Now and

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of TIME

*A Complete Amazing
Book-Length Novel*



into the wreck firing their proton pistols (Chap. XIX)

The Futuremen Race Into the Past to Answer a Cry for Help That Has Traveled Across a Hundred Million Years!

again a tentative breeze stirred the fronds to leathery rustling. Then resumed the long, heavy silences of an unpeopled world. . . .

But tonight there was a new, alien sound, coming from the meteor-blazoned sky. It was the high, droning hum of rocket-tubes.

The drone grew louder. Out of the sky sank a battered Kalber space ship,

its keel-tubes flaming as it dropped to a landing in a rocky clearing of the jungle. After it came another rusty Kalber. The doors of the two ships opened. Men emerged, their voices echoing thinly through the night of the miniature world. The rodents and creepers of the jungle shrank away. The flame-birds fled in fright.

There were eleven men, a roughly

dressed, hardy-looking crew. Among them were red Martians, a tall, stringy, blue Saturnian, a gray-skinned, peak-headed Neptunian, a tanned, eager boy of Earth, and a couple of squat, green Jovians. They were meteor miners, prospectors who scoured the countless asteroids and meteor swarms of the Zone in search of rare and valuable metals. That their expedition had gone well so far was evidenced by their cheerfulness.

"This is it — Asteroid two-twenty-one," declared the brawny Jovian who was the leader of the party. "It's never been prospected yet, as far as I know. We may find a rich bed of titanium or tellurium here."

"We already got enough for a year's spree on any planet," the tall, cadaverous Saturnian snickered. "It's the best trip we've made yet."

"Break out an atomic glower and get it going," ordered the Jovian captain. "We'll camp in the open tonight. I'm sick of ship's air."

The men brought out the flat, disklike machine and set it up on the rocks near their ships. It gave off a steady flame of atomic fire that beat back the gathering chill of night.

THE warm light flickered off the grotesque fronded trees around the clearing, glinted off the battered hulls of the two Kalbers and set flame-birds flying farther away with startled squawks. It glowed cheerily on the faces of the motley group of adventurers as they sprawled in its radiance, eating flat cakes of Jovian bread and chunks of thawed Saturnian beef, washed down by flasks of strong Venusian wine. "Pretty good going for your first space trip, eh, Melton?" the Neptunian asked the eager, brown-faced Earth youth beside him. "You've already got a small fortune in your share of the metals in those holds."

Brad Melton nodded.

"It isn't the money as much as the adventure of it. All my life I wanted to be a spaceman. I was afraid I'd never get off Earth, never see other planets."

When he had finished eating, Melton strolled around the clearing. He stared wonderingly at the dark, brooding jungle, the flame-birds and the incredible meteor-blazing sky. Then he noticed something about the black rocks underfoot that made him bend down and examine it closely.

"Look at this rock!" he cried. "Part of it was carved by someone. It must be the wreck of a wall or building, maybe a city!"

"Sure, kid, there's ancient carved rocks and queer bits of metal on lots of these asteroids," answered the Jovian casually. He turned to the old Martian who was planetologist and assayer for the party. "You scientists think there was people on them once, don't you?"

"Yes, in a way," answered the Martian. "But it must have been very long ago. Nobody's ever found any really worthwhile remains."

Brad Melton continued to poke curiously around the crumbling rocks at the edge of the clearing.

After a moment he shouted excitedly again.

"Say, there's something queer here. It felt as if I stepped into an invisible beam of some kind. It made me feel as though I were hearing someone talk to me."

The Jovian leader laughed deprecatingly.

"You get all kinds of weird feelings on these little worlds, Melton. Some of 'em are plenty weird, like the one they call Circe. I'll never forget how a bunch of us landed on it and found the crew of a freighter that had been wrecked there. They weren't even men any more. The chemical in the air of that cursed asteroid had transformed 'em into beasts such as you never saw —"

His deep voice continued relating the

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tale, while the motley group around the flaring atomic glower listened with great interest. None of them noticed that Brad Melton was acting queerly out in the shadows. Too busy to pay attention to the story, the young Earthman was moving about experimentally, trying to rediscover a certain spot. Suddenly he stopped.

Had they been watching, they would have seen a strange, listening expression upon his face. For a long time he stood there in a queerly rigid, listening attitude.

"So we left the poor devils on Circe and reported 'em as dead when we got back to Mars," the Jovian captain finished. "I guess it would have been better for them if they'd been dead. They sure couldn't have enjoyed being alive."

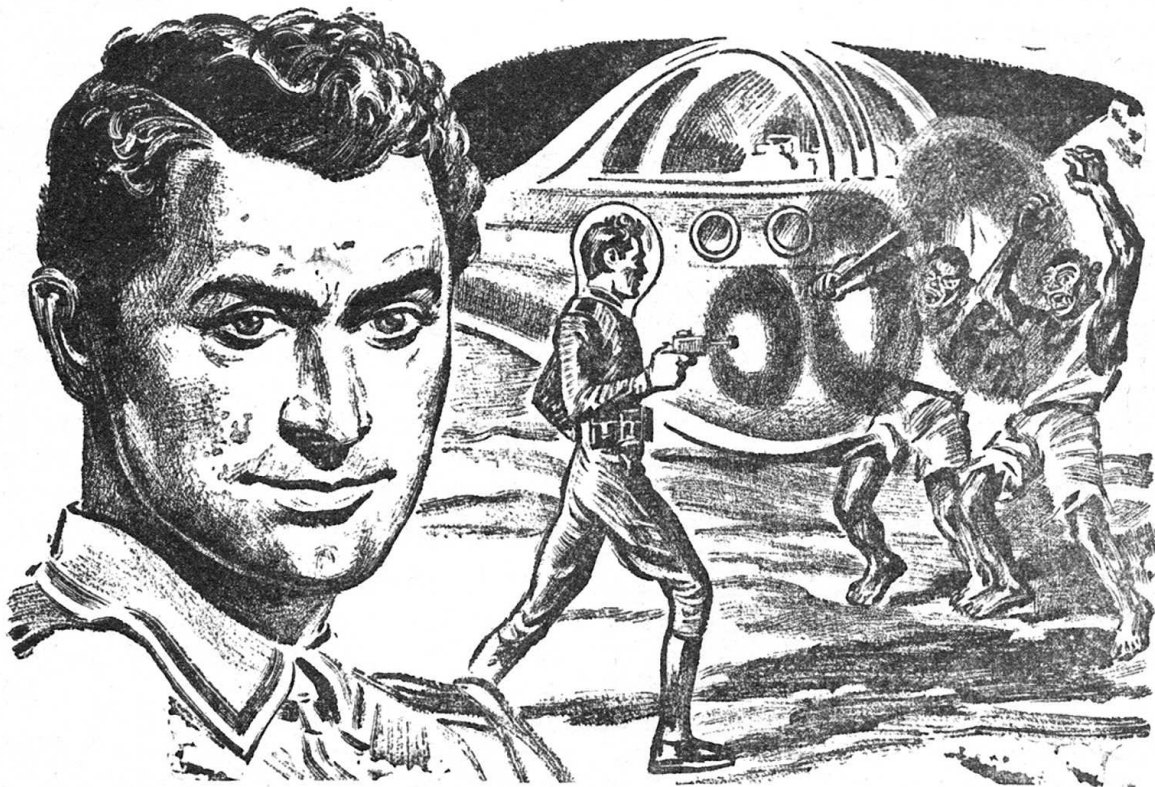
There was a brief silence and then the gray Neptunian shivered.

was pale and he seemed laboring under intense excitement. He sat down and stared into the atomic flame, his lean fingers twisting and untwisting, his blue eyes wide and strange. He seemed inwardly debating something that had enormously upset him.

The others glanced away and talked on, matching tales of faraway worlds and moons, of adventure on the shoreless sea of Neptune, prospecting the lightless caves of Uranus, mining on the terrible Hot Side of Mercury, or hazardous searches amid the jagged planetoids of Saturn's Rings.

BRAD MELTON abruptly turned to the old Martian scientist.

"Nilga, you know a lot about science. Tell me this. Is there anybody living who's ever found the secret of crossing time?"



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"That's a nice bedtime story," he muttered. "These little worlds give me the creeps."

They looked up as Brad Melton came back to the light. The youth's tanned face

The Martian turned and stared at him in surprise.

"You mean time-traveling? Whatever put that in your head, Melton?"

"I just got to wondering," Melton

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evaded. His whole bearing was anxious and taut as he insisted; "Has anybody ever discovered the secret?"

The old red scientist shook his head.

"Why, no. There's no one who's solved that problem, though plenty of scientists have worked on it in the last hundred years. You see, Melton, the scientists of the System have known for a long time that time-traveling is theoretically possible. Time, you know, is simply the fourth dimension of matter, the four being length, breadth, thickness and duration. Theoretically we should be able to find a way to move along the time dimension, but actually nobody's ever succeeded in doing it. That is, unless—"

"Unless what?" Brad Melton asked quickly. "Do you mean that maybe somebody has done it?"

"Well, there are people who say that Captain Future knows the secret of time-traveling, but perhaps that's just a story. After all, they tell so many stories about Captain Future that the truth is bound to get stretched now and then."

"Captain Future?" the young Earthman repeated, his eyes alight with awe. "Of course! Why didn't I think of him? If anybody alive would know that secret, he, the greatest scientist in the System, would be that one."

"I doubt it," the old Martian said skeptically. "Oh, I know all the wonderful things that Future and those strange comrades of his, the Futuremen, have done. They've achieved plenty of scientific miracles, but time-traveling? No, I can't believe that even Future has solved that."

"But he might have," persisted Brad Melton hopefully. "Maybe he solved the problem without telling the System about it."

"It's possible," granted the old scientist. "Nobody does know half the things he's done in that laboratory-home of his on Earth's Moon. But time-traveling, I'm

afraid, would stump even Captain Future."

The Jovian captain threw away his rial cigarette and yawned.

"I'm turning in, boys. We'll get up early tomorrow and start prospecting." Soon the whole group, with one exception, lay around the glowing heater.

Swathed in their synthewool blankets, they were sleeping the carefree slumber of interplanetary adventurers who take no thought for the morrow.

Brad Melton was the exception. He sat gazing into the atomic flame, his eyes wide and absorbed, his face intense with concentration. His inner excitement seemed to come finally to a crescendo. He rose to his feet with nervous resolution.

"I'm going to do it!" he whispered. "I may be crazy. I ought to ignore it all, but I can't. That faraway voice, pleading — the life or death of all those people — I've got to do it!"

With silent, quick steps he moved toward one of the space ships and began his stealthy preparations.

THE sleeping meteor miners were awakened by a sudden staccato roar. They sat up bewilderedly, rubbing their eyes. A trail of rocket-fire curved toward the sky. One of the ships was gone.

"What in the name of all the devils of Jupiter!" swore their leader angrily. "Who took that ship?"

"Young Melton," was the answer. "He must have gone crazy." "Maybe he's gone off with all our metal!"

"If he has, I'll never trust my judgment of human nature again," bellowed the Jovian. "No, he didn't take the metal. See?"

The small, heavy sacks of tantalum, tellurium and other metals lay on the ground. Pinned to one sack was a note.

I'm leaving half my share of metal to pay for the ship I'm taking. If you had heard it, you wouldn't have ignored that cry for help, either. I'm going to the one man in the System who can answer it.

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"Why, he must be space-struck to run away like this!" exclaimed the Jovian. "He was acting queerly last night," commented the old Martian. "He kept talking about hearing voices and then about time-traveling."

The men looked uneasily around the dark, brooding jungle. "Something here drove him off his orbit," muttered the Neptunian superstitiously. "This is another of those bad asteroids you talked about." "Let's get out of here before we begin to hear voices and go crazy, too!" demanded the Saturnian excitedly.

There was a general chorus of approval. These men were not easily frightened, but they sensed something alien and possibly menacing about this brooding, lonely planetoid, something that might drive them to madness.

"All right, we'll go," growled the Jovian. "Don't see any trace of metals here, anyway. Load up, boys. We'll have to carry on in one ship now. I doubt if we'll ever see young Melton again." He shook his head. "All the same, I'd like to know what it was on this cursed little world that drove him out of his mind."

CHAPTER II

Citadel of Science

EARTH bulked in the sky like a huge green disk, filling half the heavens. It cast a strange, soft-green radiance upon the wild and rugged surface of the Moon.

Savage, hostile and unutterably forbidding stretched the lunar landscape. Here was no air or sound, no wind or water. Eternally changeless plains of barren rock stretched toward mighty mountain ranges whose uneroded peaks menaced the sky like bared fangs. Giant craters ringed by circular walls of immense altitude frowned like blind eyes.

Upon the floor of the crater Tycho was a spot where there was movement and life. Three highly different individuals were engaged upon an engrossing activity. One of them, a tall young Earthman in a light space-suit and helmet, held a heavy metal bat in his hands and was facing one of his two companions.

"Thought I'd miss that last one, did you?" he jeered. "If that's the best you can do, you're sunk."

His space-suit embodied an audio-phone of short radius through which they were able to hear him. He swung the metal bat on his shoulder, waiting.

"Come on!" he invited. "This time I'll knock that ball clear to the wall of the crater."

Curtis Newton, the young Earthman planeteer famous the length and breadth of the System as Captain Future grinned to himself as he waited. He made a striking picture, tall, lithe and broad-shouldered even in his space-suit. Through his transparent glassite helmet, the green Earthglow lighted his mop of tousled red hair, his space-tanned, handsome face and clear, keen gray eyes.

He and his two comrades were playing rocket-ball, a game that was popular throughout the nine worlds, yet this was perhaps the strangest place in which it had ever been played. To Curt, though, it did not seem strange. The Moon was home to him. Near them in the crater floor was a big glassite window, beneath which lay the cavern chambers of his comfortable dwelling and marvelous scientific laboratories.

"Come on, Grag!" he challenged. "Let's have the pitch."

Grag had been fingering the controls of the rocket-ball. Now he prepared to let it go.

"This one'll get you sure, Chief," he boomed. "Here goes!"

Grag made an outlandish figure as he prepared to pitch the ball, for Grag was

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not a man. He was a metal robot. His massive metal body towered seven feet high. His great, jointed arms and legs hinted the strength that was unmatched in the whole System. His bulbous metal head swiveled on a neck-joint and from it shone his bright photo-electric eyes.

Grag did not throw the ball. He simply released it and it shot toward Captain Future of its own accord. The ball was powered by a tiny rocket-motor which enabled it to maintain a swift, free flight.

But it did not fly straight toward Curt. Its controls could be set by the pitcher for any desired course of flight. The only requisite was that the ball must actually cross the batter's plate. It sped toward Curt in a spiral, cork-screw path. It performed bewildering involutions, dipped almost to the ground and then zoomed like a streak of light across the plate.

Crack!

Curt's keen eyes had not erred in judgment. His bat met the rocket-ball and knocked it far off through the airless void. Laughing triumphantly, Curt started running around the circular base path. Six times he circled it before the catcher caught up with the ball and Sung it to Grag.

"Six more points for me," said Curt. "That puts me even with Otho. You're way behind, Grag."

The catcher advanced.

"Let me pitch, Grag," he proposed. "I'll send a ball over that the Chief won't even be able to see."

"No, I'm doing the pitching," Grag boomed angrily. "You get back to your place, Otho."

OTHO, the catcher, wore a space-suit like Curt's, but he was a much different figure, for Otho, like Grag, was not human either. He was a synthetic man, an android. His body, though human in appearance, had been constructed of artificial tissues. His head was hairless, the

skin pure-white, with no brows or lashes. Slanted and green, sparkling with reckless deviltry, were Otho's eyes. He was the swiftest and most deft of all beings in the System and had the greatest propensity for getting into trouble. Even from his position as catcher, he was able to field and tag out the runner.

"With your pitching, he'll run up a score of a million against us!" Otho complained.

"You tend to your catching, my rubbery friend," Grag ordered majestically. "Watch me this time."

He set the controls of the rocket-ball and let it go again. It darted away to the left, then came in across the plate at a wide angle. Curt's bat slammed it unmercifully. As the ball shot high in the air, he started racing around the base path. But this time Otho fooled him. The android made an unbelievable leap of forty feet into the air and caught the speeding ball.

"That puts you out, Chief!" Grag boomed triumphantly. "It's my turn at bat now."

"Swell catch, Otho," Curt complimented. "I didn't think even you could leap that high."

"It was nothing," Otho answered in a tone of weary disdain. "You just watch my pitching put Grag out in a hurry." Curt grinned as he took up the catcher's position. A game of rocket-ball with these two Futuremen was a perpetual row, he told himself, yet he had to do something to keep from getting bored.

For weeks he had been getting more and more restless. In the past, when he had felt that way, he had set out on a jaunt in the Comet, to explore the previously unknown south polar ice wastes of Pluto, or to visit his friends, the queer Thought Masters on Neptune's moon, or some similar half-purposeless trip. Now he no longer was satisfied with that. He knew the System's nine worlds, thirty-one



moons and countless asteroids so well that there was little new about them to attract him.

Something new was what he wanted. He had been getting increasingly weary of the old and known, had felt a constant yearning of his adventurous spirit toward new frontiers of the Universe, new and unsuspected worlds. Other men might find a trip to one of the farther planets a wildly thrilling experience, but Curt Newton had been roaming those worlds since boyhood. He had, in fact, never seen Earth until he was almost mature.

The story of Curt's birth and boyhood was the strangest saga in the System's history. A generation ago, his parents had fled to the Moon to protect their scientific

discoveries from an unscrupulous man named Victor Corvo. With them had come Simon Wright, the brain who lived in a box, but who had once been a living man. They had built their combination laboratory and home under Tycho. Here their experiments had created Grag, the robot, and Otho, the android. And here, soon after Curt Newton's birth, Corvo killed his parents and was in turn killed by the Brain, robot and android.

The three unhuman, superhuman beings had reared and educated young Curtis. Their combined instruction had made him not only the most skillful planeteer in space, but also the System's greatest scientist. For some time, Curt had devoted his immense abilities to a war

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against the criminals of the System. In that war against crime he had been given the name of Captain Future.

NOW Curt's crusade to eradicate completely all interplanetary criminals seemed to have achieved its goal. His epic struggle against Ul Quorn, the Magician of Mars, had finished off the last law breaker of major importance. He had no interest in smaller fry that the Planet Police could handle and the weeks of inaction had been making him restless. He had spent those weeks mostly in the deep scientific researches he loved, but now he was tired even of those. His adventure-loving soul felt a blind urge for new worlds to chart.

"Hang it, the trouble with me is that I don't know when I'm well off!" he told himself impatiently, trying to dismiss the oppressive feeling.

Otho had been elaborately setting the control of the rocket-ball and now was ready to release it.

"Here it comes, Grag," he warned. "This is my special double-reverse-bob-and-weave ball."

"Let it come," offered the big robot. "I'll murder it!"

Otho released the rocket-ball. It shot forward in bewilderingly erratic flight, but Grag's bat smacked it and knocked it whizzing. The robot started lumbering around the base path, his metal limbs clanking. Otho, however, made another superhuman leap and grabbed the ball.

"You're out!" he crowed, darting forward to pick up the bat.

"Wait a minute!" Curt Newton called. "Let me take a look at your gravitation equalizer, Otho."

Otho started to put up objections, but Curt grabbed him and examined the flat case strapped to his belt — the equalizer whose aura of force made its wearer's weight the same on any world.

"Just as I thought," Curt said

witheringly. "You've set your equalizer to make you weigh only ten pounds. No wonder you could jump high enough to make those catches."

"Why, that's a dirty foul!" raged Grag. "Let me at that hunk of rubber. I'll wipe up the Moon with him!"

"Aw, it was only a joke," Otho said sheepishly. "I just did it for a laugh. Go on back to bat and quit your howling."

But Grag was still furious as he picked up the bat and again faced Otho. The android let the ball go again. Grag, now thoroughly enraged, swung with all the force of his mighty metal arms. A resounding crack followed and the rocket-ball whizzed upward. This time it didn't come down.

"Devils of space, Grag's knocked the ball clear off the Moon!" Otho exclaimed in dismay.

Curt laughed. The low surface gravity of the Moon had not been able to retain the ball against the robot's tremendous blow.

"That gives Grag the game," Curt said. "He can run around the bases a thousand times, if he wants to, but I'll concede it to him."

"I'll get another ball and we'll see who takes the next game," declared Otho angrily.

The android started toward the flight of steps that led down through the lunar rock to the airlock entrance of the underground Moon-home. He stopped.

"Here comes Simon and in a hurry."

Out of the Moon-home had emerged an astonishing figure. It was the third Futureman, Simon Wright.

Simon had once been a brilliant, aging scientist of Earth. When he was on the point of death, Curt Newton's father had surgically removed the living brain and installed it in a special serum-case.

That case was of transparent metal, containing the serum and pumps and purifiers that kept the brain alive. In the

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front of the case were Simon's glass lens-eyes, mounted on flexible stalks, and the aperture of his mechanical speech apparatus. From his case the Brain could shoot magnetic beams, which he was able to use as substitute hands to wield tools or instruments, or upon which he could glide swiftly through space in any direction.

THE Brain rarely showed emotion. His icy, bodiless mentality, so utterly absorbed in scientific research, was ordinarily aloof to all disturbance. But now, as his strange form glided swiftly toward them on his flashing traction beams, his metallic voice came with a sharp, urgent note.

"Lad, the automatic sura-warning just sounded!" he called to Curt Newton. "A ship is approaching the Moon!"

Instantly Captain Future's face hardened.

"It must be someone with an unfriendly purpose," the Brain continued in his rasping, metallic voice. "Only an enemy would try to come here. Everyone in the System knows that this is forbidden territory."

"We'll wait and see who these visitors are," Curt said quietly. "Get behind those rocks and make no move until I give the order."

Swiftly, with the efficiency characteristic of the supreme cooperation among the Futuremen in times of emergency, they melted from sight behind a clump of jagged, towering rocks. There Curt waited with them, loosening his proton pistol in its holster.

They soon glimpsed a flash of rocket-flame up in the starry sky. A ship was coming straight down to Tycho crater, firing its brake-blasts.

"A five-man Kalber cruiser," muttered Otho. "There can't be many in it. If it's an attack, it's a queer one."

"Shall I unmask our hidden proton cannon and blast it?" Grag asked. "Not yet," Curt said, keenly eying the descending craft.

It came to a rather unskilful landing near the glassite window of the Moon-home. The ship's door opened and a man in a space-suit climbed out. He was a young Earthman whose thin, brown face showed uncertainty and apprehension in his transparent helmet. He looked doubtfully toward the window.

"Looks more scared than anything else," Grag muttered, "but it may be a trap. There may be others in that ship."

"I'll soon see," Curt said.

CHAPTER III

The Cry from the Past

FROM his belt, Future took a flat, disklike device. He turned the switch on it. An aura of radiant force enveloped him. He began to disappear. This was one of the scientific wizard's most precious weapons. The little mechanism could make him invisible for a few minutes, by giving his body a charge of force that caused all light to be refracted around it.

Wholly invisible and in total darkness, Curt silently stepped past the young Earthman and into the youth's ship. Long training enabled him to move as confidently by hearing as by sight. He listened inside the ship. There was no one in it.

He went back to the newcomer. Standing in front of him for a few moments, Captain Future began to become visible again as the effect wore off. First he was a cloudy shape, then rapidly became completely visible.

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The young Earthman started back with a terrified cry as he saw Curt materialize before him. He shrank even more when Grag, Otho and Simon emerged from their concealment. With awe in his eyes, he faced Curt Newton and the weird trio of Futuremen.

"Who are you and what are you doing here?" Curt demanded. "Speak quickly! You know that I permit no one to land here without permission."

"I know!" exclaimed the young Earthman hastily. "But I had to come and ask your help. My name's Brad Melton."

"If you wanted to ask my help, why didn't you send your request to the System President?"

"This fellow's a spy of some kind!" Otho hissed ominously.

"No one would have believed my story," Melton answered. "I don't know whether even you will believe it, but I had to come to you. Captain Future, it's not help for myself that I want. I'm bringing a message from people who do need help and need it terribly, a whole race that's faced with an awful choice between ghastly tragedy or total destruction."

Curt Newton's gray eyes narrowed unbelievably.

"What are you talking about? Where are these people you speak of?" Melton gulped. "They're a hundred million years in the past."

Captain Future stared suspiciously at the young Earthman.

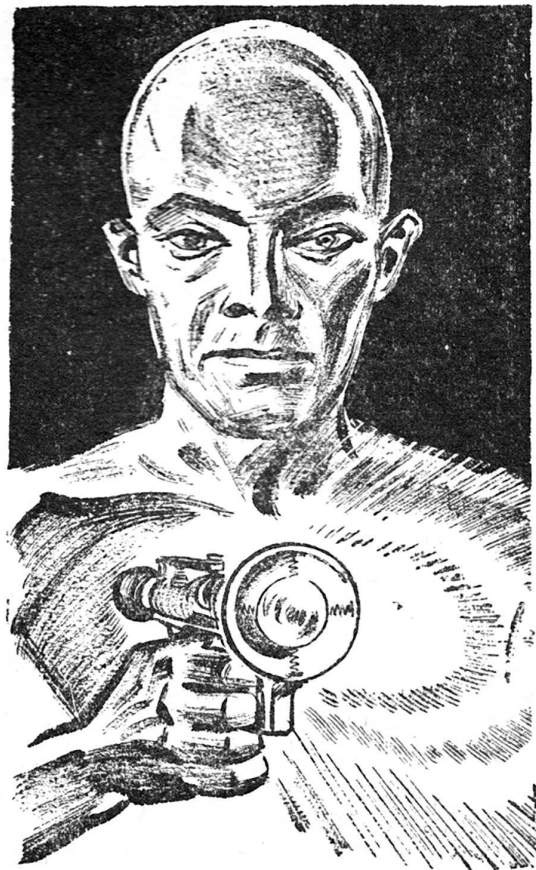
"Naturally you can't expect me to accept that without some substantiating evidence. How could people a hundred million years in the past communicate with you?"

Melton's eyes wavered.

"I don't know how they did it," he confessed.

"You don't know?" exploded Otho. "Fiends of Pluto, is this a crazy joke? If it is—"

"Wait, Otho," said Curt Newton. His



OTHO

gray eyes swung back to the excited face of the young Earthman. "We can discuss this more freely down in the laboratory. Come along, Melton."

Curt's tall figure led the way toward the sunken steps nearby. The Brain glided along beside him and Brad Melton followed, between lithe Otho and clanking Grag. They descended through an airlock into the great main laboratory that lay beneath the window in the crater floor.

Melton looked around wonderingly. He realized that he was lucky to be one of the few outsiders ever to enter this legendary place.

This big, bright room carved out of the solid rock was a place to stir wonder. It was a laboratory, the finest in the System. Tail generators, transformers, atomic converters, synthesizers and furnaces loomed around the walls. Squat, massive electro-telescopes bulked big and shining. The rest of the equipment Melton could

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not identify. That was not remarkable, for no other scientists but the Futuremen had ever seen special instruments such as those Curt and the Brain were always developing.

CURT NEWTON took off his helmet and tossed it aside. Two tame animals came ambling up and inspected it. One of the pets was a "meteor-mimic," a fat, little, white beast who suddenly changed himself into an exact replica of the helmet, the cells of his body magically taking new shape by the strange camouflage faculty of this species. The other pet was a moon-pup, a sharp-nosed, beady-eyed little gray beast, a non-breathing species that ingested minerals and metals for its nutrition.

Curt Newton's sharp voice recalled Brad Melton from his fascinated inspection of the place.

"You said you were bringing a message from a people who needed help — a people of the past. How did you get that message?"

"We meteor miners had landed on Asteroid Two twenty-one," Brad Melton explained stumbingly. "There were old, ruined stones there. Poking around them, I stepped into what seemed to be an invisible beam. When I stood in that beam, I seemed to hear a voice speaking inside my brain."

"Oh, so that was it!" snorted Otho skeptically. "Well, the liquor you meteor miners drink would make anybody hear voices."

"It wasn't like anything I'd ever experienced before," Melton hurried on. "It was a mental voice, speaking the same message over and over. It said that it was the voice of Darmur, scientist of Katain."

"Katain?" exclaimed Captain Future, startled.

"You've heard the name?" Melton asked wonderingly.

Curt nodded noncommittally, though

now there was a gleam in his yes. "Yes, I've heard of it. What did the mental voice say?"

"I can't remember all of it," Melton admitted in confusion. "This Darmur said he was speaking through time along some kind of beam. He was calling future ages for help, he said, because his world was doomed and his people must either perish or meet some unknown tragic fate. He pleaded that if anyone heard him who had solved the secret of crossing time, that that person should come back to aid him.

"I couldn't help but believe it was a real cry for help. I once heard a scientist say that a world had met doom in that part of the System a hundred million years ago. And that appeal was so agonized, I wanted to do something to answer it. Old Nilga told me that Captain Future was the only man who might know the secret of time-travel, so I came to tell you...."

Melton's voice trailed off. He was aware now how wildly incredible was the story that he had brought. He half-expected Captain Future to break into laughter at the tale, but the tall, gray-eyed young planeteer was not laughing. Curt Newton's lips were compressed with inner excitement. There was burning interest in his eyes as he looked at the Brain.

"You heard, Simon? A call from Katain! It could be real. Even though the Katainians hadn't discovered the time-thrust principle, they might have, learned how to send an electro-mental message upon an achronic carrier beam back along their world line!"

Brad Melton understood nothing of this, but the Brain seemed to comprehend. The glass lens-eyes of Simon Wright met Curt's gaze.

"Yes, lad, it's possible," came the slow, rasping voice of the Brain. "And yet —"

OTHO had been growing more and more bewildered.

"Say, Chief, what's all this about?" he

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complained brashly. "What is this place, Katain?"

"Katain," Curt answered, "was the tenth planet of our Solar System, with an orbit between Mars and Jupiter. A hundred million years ago, the world Katain exploded. Its fragments are the materials of the Asteroid Zone."

"Holy sun-imps!" ejaculated Otho. "You mean that this message Melton heard may have been a real one, coming from the time when Katain still existed?"

"That's the idea," Curt replied thoughtfully. "A cry from the past, a desperate appeal for help from the people of a doomed world." He turned abruptly. "Simon, I'm going to investigate this. I intend to visit that asteroid with Melton and hear the thing for myself."

"And if that cry from the past is real?" the Brain asked. "What can we do about it?"

"You remember our time-thrust experiments of two years ago," Curt replied.

"We may not be entirely helpless."

Otho's green eyes flashed excitedly.

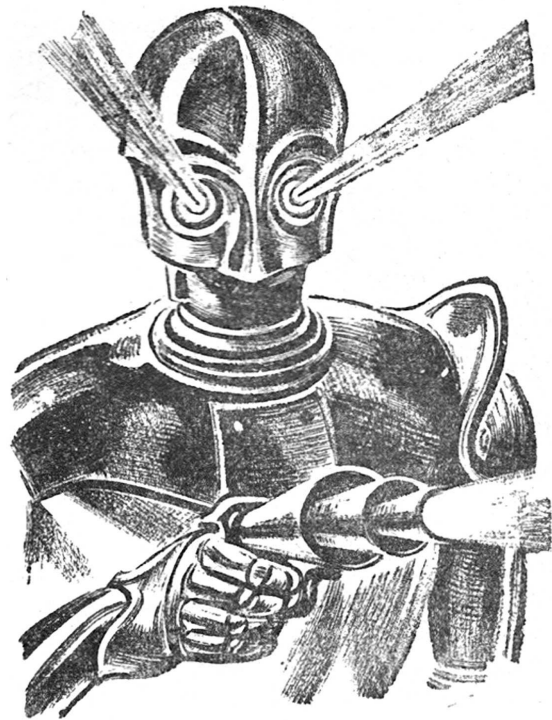
"The machine you used to project little creatures across time? Jumping imps of Jupiter! Do you mean that maybe we could go back across time to —"

"To Katain?" Curt finished for him. "I don't know, Otho. If this message is real, a people far back across the time dimension need help. Since we know their world was destroyed, we know their peril at least was real. The message would merely substantiate it."

Into his gray eyes had come a glimmer of high excitement, as though he looked beyond them to beckoning, luring horizons of the unknown.

"If we could take help back to those people, it would be an adventure such as even we have never had! New worlds, a new universe —"

"You're forgetting something, lad," the Brain's rasping voice cut in. "The



GRAG

experimental time-thruster we built would send only living creatures back along the time dimension. It wouldn't send inanimate matter. If we tried to go back, we'd be stranded without tools or instruments."

"No, Simon, I figured out how the time-thrust principle could be altered to affect inanimate matter, also."

"But how could you project yourselves across time?" Brad Melton blurted. "I know time is supposed to be the fourth dimension of matter, but you can't move around in it the way you can in the other three dimensions."

"That," Curt told him, "is because time is not a static, dimension like the other three, but a dynamic one, a dimension that constantly flows in one direction. The time dimension can remotely be compared with a river. A river has length, breadth and thickness, which remain the same, yet the waters of the river are constantly flowing in one direction."

"But you could use a powerful pump to force a small part of those waters back up the flowing river. Similarly my time-thruster projects a powerful extra-

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electromagnetic force that drives matter up the river of the time dimension, back into the past. Come along. We're going out to the asteroid where you heard the time message. I want to hear it for myself."

Brad Melton dazedly accompanied Curt and Otho into a passage that led through the solid lunar rock to a large chamber. It was the hangar of a small, stubby- looking space ship of unfamiliar design. With a gasp of awe he realized that this was the Comet, super-swift ship of the Futuremen!

Otho took the controls. The doors overhead slid automatically aside and the little craft screamed up into the starry heavens.

IN what seemed to Melton an unbelievably short time, they were threading the meteor swarms of the Asteroid Zone.

When Asteroid 221 came into sight, the young Earthman nervously directed their landing.

The rocky clearing was sunlit now and empty of life. Melton led the way across it. Curt's gray eyes were keenly inspecting the rocks underfoot.

"This is the place," whispered Melton, stopping and pointing. "I heard it when I stepped on that flat rock."

Curt unhesitatingly stepped forward, the other two following. They saw nothing unusual, but Curt felt the shock of invisible, tingling force. He knew that he had entered the path of a powerful, unseen beam. Then, strong in his mind came the alien mental sound of a voice he had never heard before.

"I, Darmur, scientist of the world Katain, speak this message across the ages to come. My thought is being transmitted as an electrical vibration upon an achronic carrier beam which I am projecting forward along the time dimension. Thus, in every age to come, whoever steps into the path of the carrier beam will hear me.

"You who hear me, listen to my plea! Our world, Katain, the fifth planet from the Sun, is approaching its doom. Within a few months it will be shattered to fragments. Nothing can stop that. It must and will happen. And when it happens, all my people of Katain will either be destroyed — or a worse tragedy will happen to them.

"Our science is not great enough to enable us to escape the dreadful dilemma that confronts us. But it may be that in future ages there will be a science greater than ours, one able even to solve the secret of physical time-travel, which we have never been able to accomplish. If you who hear me possess such scientific knowledge and power, I beg you to come back across time to doomed Katain. Use your greater science to rescue us from the awful choice of disasters that confront us! The eternal gratitude of an entire race will be yours, if you can succor us in this terrible hour."

The mental voice came to an end. Captain Future stepped out of the beam and so did Otho and young Brad Melton. Melton stared earnestly at the wizard of science. "You heard?" he whispered. "It was no illusion of mine, was it?"

"It's real," Curt Newton replied soberly. "A cry from time, from the remote past of the System, for help. A plea transmitted into the only place where there might be the help they needed — into the future."

Curt had been powerfully affected by that tragic, desperate cry from a doomed world, cast out into the un-guessable night of time!

Time, as Curt well knew, was but a dimension. That doomed world of a hundred million years ago had as much reality as any world of today and it was calling — across time for help against cosmic disaster.

"But what did that Katainian mean when he said his people were faced with destruction or worse?" Otho asked puzzledly.

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"I don't know," Curt admitted. "There's a lot that's mysterious about it. But one thing is sure. Far back across the time dimension, those people faced a ghastly dilemma."

CHAPTER IV

The Second Moon

CAPTAIN FUTURE was silent and thoughtful as the Comet roared back across the solar spaces toward the Moon. Melton watched him wonderingly.

When they entered the Moon-laboratory, they found Simon Wright and Grag working with a complicated machine that consisted of a truncated metal cone, mounted on quartz disks and connected to cyc-generators.

"Thought I'd try out that new principle of yours on our experimental time-thruster model, lad," explained the Brain. "What did you learn on that asteroid?"

"The message is real, Simon," Curt answered.

He repeated, word for word, the cry across time of Darmur, the long-dead scientist of ancient Katain. There was a pregnant silence when he finished. "Well, lad?" Simon asked at last. Curt's gray eyes were earnest. "Simon, a great race is facing supreme disaster, back there across the time dimension. Their world is doomed. Nothing can save it. We know that, for we know Katain did explode. But its people may be saved from the peril confronting them. We have the scientific ability to go back there, Perhaps we even possess enough powers to help them. Our duty is to answer that frantic cry from the past."

"Aye, Curtis," the Brain agreed. "I knew you would see it so. But this will be the most dangerous adventure we've ever undertaken. We'll be going back to a

wholly unfamiliar System, to perils we can't possibly anticipate."

"We'll meet them as they come," Curt stated. His eyes were gleaming with eagerness. "We'll fit up the Comet with a bigger time-thruster, one powerful enough to affect the whole ship and everything it contains, and go back in it. Young Melton can guard our laboratory here while we're gone."

"And we four will blaze across the time dimension to new worlds, a new universe!" Otho cried. "Now you're talking, Chief! At last we're going to do something different. Ho for the past!"

The Comet lay ready in its underground hangar, poised for history's first journey to the past. The compact ship's inertron sides shone dully in the blue glow of krypton light that filled the hangar as the Futuremen hurried back and forth with last-minute preparations.

Crowding the main cabin of the ship was the huge time-thruster, the construction of which had taken most of the weeks that had passed. Its heavy quartz disks and the massive metal thrust-cone mounted upon them hardly left room to pass. Heavy cables led from it back to the eye room, for the massive cyclotrons and motor generators were to furnish power that would force every atom in the ship to back up against the unchanging flow of time.

Incredibly audacious, even to the Futuremen, seemed their coming expedition into the past. Yet all of them were bent heart and soul upon the mission they were undertaking. They were anxious to help the ancient people of a doomed planet, to make a bold attempt to bring scientific assistance to a race that must have perished long ago.

Mystery cloaked the desperate situation of Katain. Darmur's time message had told little, except that his people faced some ghastly, tragic choice of fates, due to the coming death of their world. Nevertheless

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the bitter urgency of the Katanian's call through time rang in their minds. It was that agonized cry that had spurred on the haste with which Curt Newton and his comrades had worked on the building of the big, enigmatic machine that was to hurl them back across the ages.

CURT came out of the ship. Brad Melton was watching the activity with wide, wondering eyes.

"We're about ready to take off," Captain Future told the young Earthman. "Sure you understand everything you need to know to guard this place?"

Melton nodded his head eagerly.

"I'll know how to deal with anyone who happens to come prowling around the Moon, from what you've shown me." His eyes glowed with unashamed hero-worship. "Being left here to guard your home and laboratory — gosh, it's a great honor, Captain Future!"

Otho came up with a heavy block of copper in his arms. "Thought I'd take this along," he said. "We might need it, Chief." "Good idea," Curt agreed. "I see Grag's bringing Eek."

Otho turned sharply and cursed. The giant robot was stalking toward the Comet with the little, sharp-nosed moon-pup in his arms.

"You're not going to take that blasted pest along with us, are you?" Otho demanded fiercely.

"Why not?" Grag argued. "Eek's too Sensitive to be left here. He'd die of loneliness, the poor little fellow."

"Poor little fellow?" repeated Otho, glaring disgustedly at the beady-eyed moon-pup. "Like as not, he'll try to eat up everything that's made of metal in the ship. You can't take him! You don't see me dragging along my pet, do you?"

"Where is Oog, anyway?" Curt asked. "I haven't seen him lately."

"Why, he's sleeping —" Otho began. He stopped, his face growing red. An

amazing thing had happened when Curt pronounced the name "Oog." The block of copper that Otho had been taking to the ship suddenly shifted shape. With a bewildering protean flow of outline, it metamorphosed into a fat, doughy white animal — Otho's meteor-mimic pet.

"Why, there's Oog!" Grag bellowed in outrage. "You dirty, double-crossing son of a test-tube, you tried to smuggle Oog aboard, disguised as that copper block, and yet you wanted me to leave poor little Eek behind!"

"Cut your rockets and take both of the blasted mutts!" Captain Future rapped out, at the point of losing his temper. "Maybe we'll be lucky enough to lose 'em both somewhere in the past. I certainly hope so!"

Simon Wright glided out of the ship, moving toward them silently on his traction beams. He poised with his lidless lens-eyes fixed unblinkingly on Curt's face. "All ready, lad," he reported. "We might as well get started."

Curt turned to the young meteor miner.

"I'm trusting you to guard things here for us while we're gone, Melton. I've explained everything necessary to you."

"I still can't understand how you will be able to move along the time dimension," Melton said hesitatingly. "You said your time-thruster used an extra-electromagnetic force that pressed atoms back along time. But how?"

"It's simple enough," Curt assured him. "The orbital speed of the electrons inside an atom is what controls its movement along the time dimension. When the electron orbital speed is normal, the matter flows down the time river at a normal rate. Accelerate the electronic orbit speed and you accelerate its movement down the time dimension, directly into the future. Reverse the orbit and you force that atom back up the time flow, into the past. Is that clear?"

"Sure — clear as the inside of a dark

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nebula," muttered Grag. "It gives me a headache, just trying to figure it out."

"As though that iron skull of yours could ache," scoffed Otho. "It's simple enough, you buckethead. There's a double inverse equation involved —"

"Get the devil into the ship and stop showing off what you don't know about mathematics," Captain Future ordered. "Start up the eyes for the take-off."

SIMON WRIGHT glided, calmly into the Comet after the other two Futuremen. Curt lingered to give a sober last warning to Brad Melton.

"We expect to return safely, but we're going back into unfamiliar worlds, unguessable dangers. We may not come back. If we don't return in three months, call Earth and notify the System President. There are powers and secrets in this laboratory that would be a menace to the nine worlds in the hands of anyone but the System Government."

A few minutes later the Comet rose sharply from its underground hangar and darted steeply upward from the wild, Earthlit lunar surface.

Otho had the space-stick. Grag had checked the massive eyes. He now came clanking forward to the main cabin, where Curt and Simon were giving the bulky time-thruster a final inspection.

Curt, glancing out a window at the huge green sphere of Earth, laughed softly. "I was just thinking how mad Ezra Gurney and Joan Randall are going to be when they learn that we went off on this jaunt without them."

"Aye, lad," the Brain rasped. "But we're already too crowded in here, with this machine, to accommodate any more."

"And it would be too dangerous a trip for Joan," Curt added soberly. "I feel better, knowing she's safely out of it."

"We're a third of the way from the Moon to Earth," called Otho a little later. "Is that far enough?"

"Plenty," said Curt! "Hold her steady."

The Comet came to a halt in space, hanging in the black vacuum between the silvery moon and the great globe of Earth.

"Why did we have to come way out here before starting back across the time dimension?" Grag asked puzzledly.

"You ought to know that," Curt reproved. "When we come to rest a hundred million years in the past, we want to do so at a point where no matter exists. If we appeared where there was already matter, there'd be an explosion of jammed atoms that would annihilate us. So we'll reappear in empty space between Moon and Earth."

As he bent toward the complicated switchboard of the time-thruster, he added over his shoulder:

"This thruster projects us back across the time dimension along the world lines of the Moon and Earth, so we'll be sure to appear between the two worlds as we are now. Then, having reached the past, we'll speed to Katain by ordinary space-flight."

For long minutes, Curt Newton manipulated the rheostats and dials of the time-thruster. The guide-beams that would keep the ship following the world lines of Moon and Earth as it forced its way back up the time dimension must be accurately set. The gage that measured their progress along the time dimension in years must be rechecked.

Curt finally straightened, mopping his brow.

"All ready," he declared. "We'll turn off the time-thruster when it has driven us 100,014, 336 years into the past. That should bring us almost exactly to the time when Darmur sent out his time message from Katain."

Otho looked skeptical. "How do you know when he sent it out?"

"His message said Katain would be destroyed in a few months," Curt said. "Well, modern astronomers know the date when Katain was shattered. They've

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calculated it back to the year by the effect of the planet's explosion upon the movements of the other planets. Just to be certain, we're going a little before that date, You and I had better get our space-suits on, Otho. The thruster force might just chance to blow out a plate of the ship by a freak of unequal pressure on its atoms." They donned the suits. Neither Grag nor the Brain required such protection, since neither of them needed to breathe.

"All right," Curt said finally. "Here we go. Lord knows how a force like this will affect us physically. Hold tight, all of you."

HE opened the burnished handle that sent the power of the throbbing cyclotrons and motor generators into the time-thruster. The quartz disks beneath the great metal cone began to glow rosily, then luridly and finally with white brilliance. A shimmering, unreal radiance gathered on the metal cone and sprayed out through the whole ship. Curt felt a shuddering shock of force through his whole body, accompanied by a queer dizziness.

"Why, this isn't as bad as I'd feared!" he exclaimed.

He spoke too soon, as he discovered a moment later. The sensation of forces rending apart his bodily atoms increased by the second. His dizziness deepened to a staggering vertigo that made him reel with nausea. Through blurring eyes he saw that the others, too, were affected. This tremendous extra-electromagnetic force that was pressing every atom in them and in the ship, forcing those atoms faster and faster back along the time dimension flow, was now asserting its full effects.

"Demons of space!" choked Otho from the pilot chair. "Look out —"

Curt raised his head and peered drunkenly through a window. Space had gone crazy! The Moon was now hurtling

around Earth like a racing ship, in reverse direction. Earth and the other distant planets were racing backward on their orbits around the Sun, almost as fast. Looking out into the Solar System as they sped back into its past, Curt saw comets that screamed in backward from space and cut around the Sun like bolts of lightning. And the mad backward race of the planets in their orbits was becoming ever more swift.

"Hang on!" he muttered thickly to the others, shaking his head in a vain effort to clear it. "This is liable to become even worse."

The cone had become a thing of blinding light that dazzled their eyes. Their legs could not support them and they slumped to the floor. Now the whole of outside space was a mere blur, a featureless gray immensity, so quickly were they speeding back across the centuries.

Curt Newton wondered sickly if their living bodies would not be burst asunder by the awful pressure on every atom. Had he, in the confidence of scientific mastery, at last made too audacious a challenge to the blind, colossal forces of nature?

Living flesh could not stand this ordeal indefinitely, he knew. Every atom in them was being buffeted by such forces as men had never felt before. He felt his brain darkening beneath the crushing force. He mustn't give way to it, he told himself. He must remain conscious to turn off the time-drive when they had reached the past age they desired. His blurring eyes clung to the dial. One needle was crawling back across figures that represented millions of years.

"We're nearly there!" he called hoarsely to the others. "I'm going to slow down." His hand unsteadily moved the burnished control of the thruster. Streaks of light — racing planets — began to appear again in dim space. They were slowing down more and more. The needle of the time gage

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moved more slowly across the figures. Captain Future watched it tautly, fighting against the crushing pressure inside his brain.

"We're there!" he muttered and shut off the time-thruster completely. He felt the pressure upon his body relaxing and he began to recover his balance. He stumbled to a window. "We've made it! We've come more than a hundred million years into the past, to the time when Katain — Otho!"

Out there in space, a massive sphere of rock fully five hundred miles in diameter was rushing straight toward the Comet. It was turning slowly as it boomed down on them. And it was here, partway between Earth and Moon, where there should have been nothing at all. It was Earth's second Moon!

CHAPTER V

Futuremen in the Past

AS the unexpected monster loomed across the whole sky before them, rushing upon their floating ship, Captain Future felt a stab of agonized self-reproach. He had been too sure of himself. He had not stopped to think that in this remote time Earth might have had two moons.

Otho, in the pilot chair, had seen that onrushing monster at the moment that Curt shouted. No human pilot — not even Curt himself, the greatest of all spacemen — could have been quick enough to save them in that instant. Only the android, whose reflexes and reactions were swifter than any human beings, could have flung over the space-stick and jammed in the cyc-pedal as swiftly as Otho did.

A bursting roar from the cyclotrons, a scream of tortured lateral and stern rocket-tubes, and the Comet executed a mad hairpin loop in the very face of the

revolving, onrushing satellite.

Crash!

The shock hurled them about like dolls, as jagged rock pinnacles grazed and tore the metal of the ship like paper. Air puffed out.

Curt found himself staggering up after a moment. There was a dead silence. The cyclotrons had stopped.

The whole rear part of the Comet's keel had been ripped out by the grazing contact with a pinnacle of that whirling second satellite. The cycs were smashed and useless. The second moon itself had boomed, on into space, following its orbit.

But the ship of the Futuremen, a helpless wreck, was gliding in a long, ominous spiral toward the great sphere of Earth. They were falling. Here in the wild, remote past, they were doomed to crash in destruction on Earth...

No panic reigned in the wrecked Comet. Sudden and crushing as had been the disaster, the intrepid adventurers remained unappalled. The Futuremen had seen the face of danger before this and had learned not to flinch at the sight.

Curt Newton first assured himself that the others were unhurt. The pilot chair had cushioned the shock for Otho. Simon Wright, poised in midair, had been unaffected. Grag had been flung against the wall, but the massive metal body of the robot had not suffered harm.

Curt's voice seemed loud in the abrupt silence, though he spoke calmly.

"I think the cyclotrons are wrecked. Help me check them, Otho. Simon, you might figure out how long we have before we'll crash on Earth."

His cool, indomitable courage was no more than his undismayed comrades expected from their leader.

Otho followed him back to the cyc-room. A great hole had been torn in its floor. Two of the nine cyclotrons had been ripped completely away and three others were badly damaged. The fuel feed-lines

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were snapped, as were the power-lines. Worst of all, the greater part of the stern rocket-tubes had been crumpled.

Curt's heart sank as he surveyed the damage; but his face was calm as he clambered back into the cabin with Otho. Though the wrecked ship seemed to be floating silently in space, he knew it was falling ever more rapidly.

The Brain was finishing his mental calculations. Grag, who had been searching frantically through the cabin, uttered a cry of relief as he found Eek and Oog, snuggled terrifiedly together in a corner.

"It's all right, everyone!" Grag called out loudly. "Eek is safe." Otho uttered a snort of disgust.

"Listen to that buckethead! Here we are, a hundred million years in the past, our ship wrecked, plunging toward Earth, but everything's all right. Eek is safe!"

"It's my fault that we're in this mess," Curt said bitterly. "I should have taken the possibility of a second satellite into account."

"Devils of space, how were you to know that Earth had two Moons back in this time?" Otho cried. "No one could have guessed that."

SIMON looked up, his glass lens-eyes inscrutable.

"We have some six hours, lad, before we fall to Earth. We'll strike with a speed that will obliterate us, unless we can somehow break our fall."

"The stern rocket-tubes are hopeless," Curt stated. "It'll take days to repair them. Our only chance is to repair the power-lines to the bow rockets and use those jets to make a nose-on landing."

"A nose-on landing at the velocity we'll have will be something," muttered Otho, "Oh, well, it'll be a great stunt — if we are able to do it."

They flung themselves into the laborious work of repairing the snapped

fuel feed and power-lines. With spare sections of tubing and small atomic welders, the Futuremen toiled in taut silence as their ship fell.

Curt had no time to think of the ominous consequences of this unforeseen disaster. Their urgent expedition to Katain was likely to be ended by the coming crash. Even if they landed safely on Earth, they would be hopelessly marooned until they could secure metals and materials to repair their wrecked ship. They would be marooned in time, as well as in space, for the time-thruster could not operate without the power of all nine cycs.

Panting, Curt finally straightened.

"That's all we can do now," he said. "It'll at least give us the use of the bow rockets."

They went forward with him to the control room. He took the pilot chair and tested the remaining cycs. Their throbbing was almost inaudible.

"Landing on those weakened cycs will be safe as smacking a Jovian moon-bear in the teeth," declared Otho. "If they blow—"

"We won't use them until we're actually about to crash," Curt interrupted. "That ought to be in a little more than an hour."

Now that they had a chance to look out into space, awe possessed the Futuremen. "A different Solar System," muttered Simon Wright, "The System of time's dawn."

Curt Newton felt as though they had been transported to a strange universe, so changed was almost every feature of the worlds they had known. The little second Moon, which was now far above and beyond them, was not the only different celestial feature. The familiar, farther Moon of their own time was equally strange. It had none of the giant craters they were used to seeing, but was a smooth, blank, shining sphere.

Sweeping space with the electro-telescopes, the Futuremen perceived that Mars shone in the sky a brilliant green,

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instead of its usual somber red. Jupiter had eleven moons, not of the ten they knew, and the vast red spot of its Fire Sea was missing. Most startling of all, the great Rings of Saturn had not been formed and there were twelve moons around that planet, instead of ten.

Curt fixed the telescope upon a blob of white light that lay inside the orbit of Jupiter, not far across the sky from that mighty world. The white blob was accompanied by a smaller speck.

"That's Katain, the world whose people we came back to help!" he exclaimed. "It has a moon. It's a small world, no larger than Mars!"

A thrill touched the Futuremen as they looked upon the legendary tenth planet, following its course between the paths of Mars and Jupiter. Curt's emotions were strongly stirred.

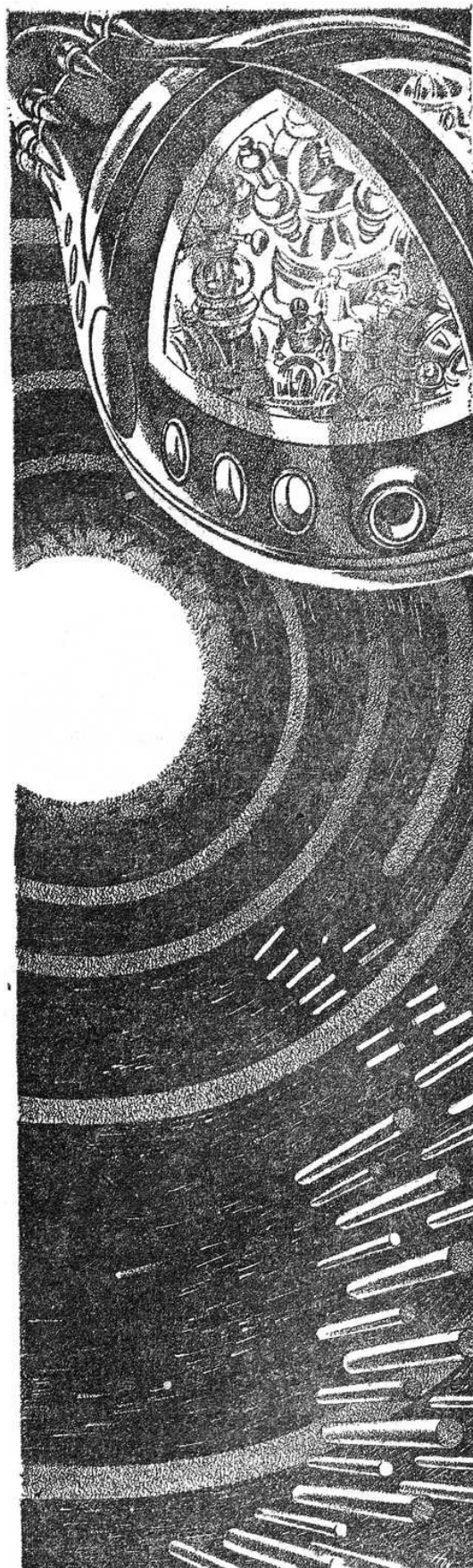
"In this time, that world is near its doom. Somewhere on it is the scientist Darmur, who called to us across time for help, and his whole people, facing disaster." "We'll be lucky if we ever reach it," Otho predicted gloomily. "Look down below us."

EARTH was a gigantic convex bowl beneath them now. The brilliant light of the two Moons illuminated most of it, for they were gliding down toward its night-shadowed half. Clear in the silvery light showed the outlines of its continents, but they were bafflingly unfamiliar.

There was a great, sprawling continent where North America should have been. Asia was an enormous island. And South America, Africa and Australia were all connected, a giant crescent of land whose tips touched the Antarctic continent. No ice-fields were visible anywhere.

"Of all ages, this is the last in which I'd choose to be cast away on Earth," muttered Curt. "The age of the giant reptiles, the Mesozoic."

A faint screaming began as the falling



"Screaming moon-devils," yelled Grag, "there's a fleet of great ships coming." (Chap. XVIII)

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Comet entered the thin outer atmosphere. Grag and Otho strapped hastily into recoil chairs beside Curt, holding their scared pets tightly in their laps.

"You could leave the ship and glide down safely on your own beams, Simon," Curt suggested. "There's no use in your sharing the chance with us."

The Brain's glass lens-eyes almost showed his disdain.

"I shall remain with the ship," he rasped coldly. "Kindly stop talking nonsense." Curt tensely estimated the distance and speed as the Comet screamed lower toward the moonlit Earth. They were going to crash in the western part of the great northern continent, he perceived.

The cyclotrons started throbbing weakly as he closed the switch. He grasped the throttles of the bow rockets, his foot poised on the cyc-pedal. Now he could clearly descry a wild, forbidding landscape of reedy marshes and lagoons, stretching toward rolling country that was blanketed by thick jungle. Active volcanoes there flung up a red, smoky glare.

The crippled ship screamed lower and lower. It was a moment to daunt the most fearless of spacemen, Curt's tanned face wore a mirthless grin as his fingers gripped the throttles.

They flashed down over the watery marshes. The jungle rushed up at them with nightmare speed. The blasting roar of atomic flame shook the ship as Curt fired all the bow rockets together. The battered Comet bucked and spun wildly in mid-air from the impact, its strained metal beams creaking ominously.

Tumbling over and over, hurtling toward the moonlit jungle, the ship seemed utterly out of control. But Captain Future was firing the bow tubes at precisely the right moment in the ship's spin, each time checking their fall by a new smashing impact of power.

Suddenly he sensed the roar and flash

of an explosion somewhere in the rear of the ship. He heard Otho yell shrilly:

"Another cyc has blown!"

Towering trees seemed to leap up at them in the moonlight. Curt jammed down the cyc-pedal and yanked open all the bow tube throttles. The impact smashed them deep in the recoil chairs, then was followed by a splintering crash and finally a heavier shock.

The Comet had landed in the jungle and now lay tilted on its side.

BRUISED and shaken, Curt looked around. The others were unhurt. "We made it!" Grag boomed triumphantly.

"By the Sun, that was the greatest piloting you ever did, Chief!" cried Otho warmly.

Reaction made Curt tremble involuntarily as he got out of the pilot chair and looked back through the interior of the ship.

"More than half our cycs wrecked, the tubes almost torn away, the time-thruster temporarily useless," he said unhappily. "Somewhere on this wild world we've got to find metal for repairs, before we can go on to Katain."

He and Otho removed their space-suits. Grag pried open the jammed airlock door by main strength. They stepped out of the ship breathing air that was hot, steamy and rank with the smell of rotting vegetation.

The Comet lay at the end of a long, moonlit lane it had gouged for itself from the Mesozoic jungle. Around them towered stiff, grotesque palms and conifers and more familiar hardwood trees, a great mass of ferns, club-mosses and trailing vines. The ground underfoot was deep with cushioning mold. Had the Futuremen ever expected to visit the Earth of a hundred million years ago. They would not have anticipated crashing in a steaming jungle that was illuminated by two Moons.

A buzzing, droning sound came from

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winged insects like big dragon-flies, flitting through the silver-barred jungle. From the great marshes to the west they heard the distant sound of sucking footsteps. And from the north a blood-chilling, hissing scream suddenly tore through the night.

"Sounds as if there'd be good hunting here," commented Otho.

"There will be," Curt answered grimly, "and we'll be the hunted ones, if we're not careful. We're in the time of the mightiest animals that ever walked this planet — the giant saurians of the reptile age. When day comes, we'll start prospecting for metal. We must get tungsten and chromium and a half-dozen other metals to synthesize inertron for new tubes and cyc parts. It'll take days, at the best, to do all that, but it mustn't take us an hour longer than necessary. We've got to get on to Katin."

"Eek will help us find metals," Grag put in proudly. "He can sense them a long way off. See, he's looking for some now."

Eek had cautiously emerged from the ship. Finding nothing alarming in sight, he was sauntering along the raw furrow in the jungle, searching with his queer senses for some edible bit of metal or mineral.

A black shape suddenly obscured the two Moons. There was a swish of flapping wings. Down from the night sky flashed a great, batlike creature. A horny beak seized Eek and started to rise with him.

"Pterosaur!" yelled Curt, his proton pistol flashing out.

The creature dropped Eek and, with red eyes glittering and a furious hissing, its snaky head struck at Grag. The beak made no impression on Grag's metal body. The big robot murderously seized the monster, heedless of its threshing wings, wrung its neck and tossed it aside.

"It wanted to carry off Eek and eat him!" Grag cried in outrage.

Otho chuckled. "Eek would make an indigestible dinner, even for a pterosaur." The moon-pup had suffered no real harm from its momentary seizure by the flying reptile. But Eek, never long on courage, was now in a horrible panic, retreating into the Comet at a scrambling run. Grag was starting in after the moon-pup when, through the moonlit night, came a sound that froze them all in their tracks.

It was a long, ululating call in a human voice.

"Suns of Hercules, are we crazy?" gasped Otho. "I thought there weren't supposed to be any people on Earth in this age."

"There aren't supposed to be, but that was a human voice!" exclaimed Captain Future, thunderstruck.

They heard the call repeated. It was answered by the distant, thunderous bellowing of unimaginable creatures.

"They might be human visitors from one of the other planets," Curt said excitedly. "Maybe they're even visitors from Katin itself."

Intent on investigating the mystery, he hastily started forcing a way westward through the jungle. The others rapidly followed.

The jungle was weird in the moonlight. Small lizard-like creatures scuttled in front of them. Once Curt heard a crashing in the brush ahead and held up a warning hand. A great stegosaurus, clearly identifiable by the stiff plates of armor that stood up like hackles on its curved back, passed nearby, nibbling at young branches.

The jungle began to thin. They came to

CHAPTER VI

Unexpected Company

GRAG, with a booming roar of rage, had leaped forward as the pterosaur started to rise with its prey. The robot's upreaching metal hand grasped the tip of the reptile's wing and dragged it down.

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its edge and looked out over a broad strip of moonlit plain, at the vast marshes of waving reeds and gleaming pools. Thunderous bellowing broke loud on their ears.

It came from a half-dozen mountainous beasts that were wading clumsily through the marsh toward the shore. They averaged sixty-five feet in length, with small heads swaying at the ends of monstrously long, snaky necks. Their huge feet sucked noisily in the muck as they ponderously came shoreward.

"Brontosaurus, an advanced development of the earlier Getiosaurs," rasped the Brain. "Being completely herbivorous, they are quite harmless."

From the shore, not far from the Futuremen, came the clear, ululating human call. The eyes of all four turned instantly in that direction.

A girl stood on the shore, holding a long spear. She wore a short sleeveless garment, her arms and legs white in the moonlight, her dark hair flowing down her back. She was facing the oncoming brontosaurus.

"She's right in their path!" Grag exclaimed, horrified.

The girl again uttered the urgent, ululating call. And again, from the oncoming giant reptiles, came a bawling, Earth-shaking answer.

"Fiends of Pluto, she's calling them!" cried Otho.

The weirdness of that fantastic scene held the Futuremen spellbound. It was hard for them to realize that they stood on Earth. The scene before them seemed to belong on some alien planet far across the starry Universe.

THE two brilliant Moons in the sky, casting a silver radiance almost as strong as day, the vast marsh whose edge followed the jungle southward toward a distant group of red-flaring volcanoes, and above all the mountainous, bellowing

brontosaurus clambering out of the marsh in answer to the girl's call — all these made the picture wholly unearthly.

"That girl's no visitor from another planet," said Curt Newton with conviction. "Her dress and the spear indicate that she belongs to some rather primitive people native to Earth."

"But there just weren't any native human being this early in time!" Otho protested baffledly. "No fossils have ever been found —"

"I know, but we can see for ourselves that Earth does have human inhabitants in this Mesozoic age," Curt replied. "A race that's even tamed some of the dinosaurs, Lord knows how."

"It wouldn't be so hard, lad, to domesticate those vegetarian reptiles," answered the Brain. "They're stupid and docile. They'd furnish a great food supply, a sort of reptilian cattle."

That the calling girl was anxious was evidenced by the urgency of her ululating summons and the way in which her white face turned constantly northward, as though in dread. The brontosaurus, too, seemed to sense something. The great reptiles were splashing and slipping in their haste to leave the marsh. Yet it was Otho, with his super-keen senses, who saw the danger before the girl did.

"Something coming down along the marsh-edge from the north!" he whispered, peering tensely. "Something big — Gods of Jupiter, look!"

His horrified whisper became a strangled cry. Curt turned and saw. And Captain Future, who had faced the weirdest monsters of scores of worlds back in his own time, felt the hackles rise on his neck.

It seemed at first only a big, formless shadow that was swiftly advancing in a hopping run along the marsh from the north. Only when it came closer did Curt's dilated eyes make out the twenty-foot-high reptilian body, the two giant legs on

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which it ran in ostrich fashion, the massive skull thrust slightly forward and grinning with great fangs.

"Tyrannosaurus, a flesh-eater!" he shouted. "It's after the brontosaurus. That's why the girl was calling them in. There it goes!"

Things happened with the speed of a meteor's rush in the next few seconds. As Captain Future spoke, the towering tyrannosaurus had rushed forward toward the ungainly brontosaurus, which had just reached shore. A hissing, hideous scream broke from the charging monster. With a hoarse bawling of utter panic, the brontosaurus turned and lumbered away in Earth-shaking flight.

The girl, seeking to turn and flee, was struck by one huge, sweeping tail and knocked from her feet. The tyrannosaurus, charging forward after its fleeing prey, stopped when it reached the girl. Her white body had attracted its wicked, glittering red eyes. Its massive head plunged down toward her —

A flash of white force quickly bored a tiny, seared hole in the tyrannosaurus' scaled breast. Captain Future had snatched out his proton pistol as he saw the girl fall. Stung by the burning beam, the tyrannosaurus whirled swiftly on its mighty limbs. Curt kept the beam boring into its scaled breast.

"Grag, Otho — use your rays on the same spot!" Curt yelled as the Futuremen came rushing after him.

Three brilliant proton beams tore into the towering horror's breast, enlarging the charred hole in its scales, yet the creature was not fatally wounded. The seat of its reptilian life was tiny, difficult to find, compared with its great body.

IT charged forward with ground-quaking rush, directly toward Otho. With an agility no human being could have matched, Otho sprang out of its path.

"Its eye!" Curt shouted desperately.

"We can't kill it through that armor. Use your beams on its left eye!"

He shot as he spoke, driving his proton beam toward the glittering red eye of the looming monster. With a heart-stopping bellow of rage and pain, the tyrannosaurus whirled again. Full in its path now was the girl, who had regained her feet and was darting away. One huge paw was held out to grab her as it charged.

Swifter than thought, the Brain flashed forward. With a thrust of his traction beams he sent the girl staggering aside an instant before the great paw descended.

"The eye — our only chance!" Curt yelled.

Three beams began driving into the blinded eye. The tyrannosaurus' wild rush slowed down. The monster rocked and swayed above them. Then it toppled and crashed into the swamp, splashing up a geyser of mud and water.

The proton beams had finally pierced through eye and bone to the creature's tiny brain. Yet even now, as it lay there, its mighty heart was throbbing audibly and its great jaws mechanically closing and unclosing.

The Futuremen looked at each other a little wildly. They had seen death a hundred million years before they were born.

Curt turned to look for the girl, half-expecting to find that she had fled. But she was still there, eying him and his comrades in silent awe. She was young and pretty, even by the standards of his own time, with dark hair and eyes and a supple, shapely figure revealed by the sleeveless, short, white, skin tunic she wore. Around her neck was a necklace of uncut green stones. The spear she carried was long and tipped with stone.

Curt could guess how alien and impressive they must appear to her dilated eyes. A man whose clothing and weapons were completely strange, the bodiless Brain, the lithe, unhuman android, and the

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great metal robot.

"She's a highly advanced human type," came the Brain's rasping voice. "But here in the Mesozoic age! This means that Pithecanthropus and Neanderthal had no connection with the real human stock, but were lower orders. The anthropologists have been completely wrong."

"To you, Simon, a pretty girl's nothing but an interesting problem in anthropology," Curt chuckled.

The girl's wide, dark eyes clung longest to Captain Future's tanned face.

"*Nyrala di athak Koom?*" she asked in a tense, undeniably feminine voice. "That's no language I ever heard before," declared Otho. "I suppose she's asking you who's the handsome fellow with the green eyes."

The girl, puzzled by their failure to answer, pointed up into the starry sky, making a queer, quick gesture.

"*Nyrala di Koom?*"

"Looks like she's asking if we came from the sky," Curt guessed. "Maybe she saw the Comet falling." He nodded smilingly, pointing up at the stars. "Yes, that's where we came from, all right. From space — and from time, too, for that matter."

He knew the girl could not understand his words, but he saw an expression of utter awe and reverence appear on her pretty features.

"*Di Koom!*" she breathed, her eyes shining.

THE girl began a rapid-fire chatter, pointing to the dead tyrannosaurus, then to herself, finally along the southern shore of the marsh, where the scared brontosaurus had stopped and were quietly grazing. Curt listened intently, watching her every gesture. He turned to his comrades when she was finished.

"I don't understand any of her words, but I can get a part of what she means by her gestures. Her name is Ahla, she says,

and I gather that the village of her people is not far south. She wants us to go back there with her. I think we ought to go. We may be able to learn from her people where the nearest deposits of the metals we need are located."

"Maybe she's figuring they can feed us to those pet dinosaurs of theirs," suggested Grag suspiciously.

"Nonsense, she's fallen hard for me and wants me to meet her folks," scoffed Otho. "Can't you see the way she's been eying me?"

"Sure, she never saw a rubber man before," Grag retorted.

The girl, Ahla, chattering excitedly in the incomprehensible tongue to Captain Future, led the way along the marsh. They followed, approaching the huge brontosaurus. The Futuremen could not help feeling a certain trepidation at going so close to the mountainous beasts, but Ahla confidently walked right up to them, uttering the ululating cry and pricking their massive legs with the tip of her long spear.

The brontosaurus docilely fell in behind the girl and the Futuremen, following them along the shore. Their heavy tread shook the ground and their forward-craning, snaky necks were high above the Futuremen.

"Don't crowd us!" Otho exclaimed nervously to the gigantic brutes behind them. "There's no hurry."

Captain Future felt an intense curiosity about this unsuspected people of the Mesozoic. What had been their origin? Why had later man never dreamt that human beings existed in this early age?

They came into sight of a village, consisting of several scores of thatched huts on high ground above the marsh. It was surrounded by a high, thick wall of massive, roughly hewn stone blocks. There was but one narrow gate.

"They'd need such a wall to protect them from the carnivorous dinosaurs,"

explained the Brain.

Curt described behind the walled village a corral-like enclosure of great area, surrounded by a similar wall. In this corral the huge, dark shapes of a number of brontosaurus moved ponderously in the moonlight. Ahla's gigantic reptilian charges lumbered toward the corral. Curt glimpsed men opening an immense gate of wooden bars to admit the creatures. There was a bellowing from the enclosure.

"So that little place is their cattle pen," remarked Otho. "Grag, how'd you like to be a cowboy here?"

"Here come your girl-friend's folks," the robot said mockingly. "How'd you like prehistoric in-laws?"

CHAPTER VII

Star Worshipers

THEY had followed Ahla through the gate of the village wall, a gate wide enough to admit only one man at a time and far too narrow to permit any of the huge carnivorous surians to enter. The moonlit village of thatch huts was aroused by Ahla's cry. Men and women who had been inside the huts, or gathered around cooking fires outside them, came running forward in a disorderly horde.

"Stand still and let Ahla do the talking," Curt ordered the Futuremen. "I don't think we'll have any trouble with these people."

The Earthmen before them were a primitive crowd. All wore short tunics of soft white hide that Curt guessed to be snakeskin. The men had snatched up stone-tipped spears and throwing knives. Physically they were a handsome people, with alert, intelligent faces.

They stared in the deepest awe at Curt and the three Futuremen. Ahla was explaining at a great rate, her dark eyes flashing with excitement. Curt heard her

repeat the word "Koom" and point toward the starry sky. A sigh of emotion went up from the crowd. The awe in their faces increased.

A massive-faced warrior who appeared to be leader of the tribe stepped toward Curt. He, too, pointed into the northern sky, making a quick, reverent gesture such as they had seen Ahla use. "Rata di Koom?" he asked. "Sure, we came from the sky," Curt answered, pointing at the sky and nodding vigorously, "if that's what you mean."

A shout of excitement came from the crowd before him.

"What are they all so excited about?" Otho demanded puzzledly. "They seem to have a tremendous superstitious interest in the stars."

"Do you notice," rasped the Brain, "that when they make that gesture at the sky, they always point to the star, Deneb? I wonder why."

"I can't understand it myself," Curt admitted. "Some primitive star-worship, I guess, centering on that particular one." He looked around. "We'll have to stay here until we can learn their language and find out where the nearest metal ores are. Then we can repair the Comet and go on to Katain."

The chief, whose name they learned was Kor, ceremoniously allotted a big hut to Captain Future and his companions. Presently Ahla and other girls brought wooden platters of smoking food, meat and boiled wild grain.

Grag never ate. His mechanical body required only an occasional charge of fuel to maintain its atomic energy. Nor did Simon need nutrition, though sometimes the Brain used stimulating vibrations as refreshment. But Curt was hungry and so was Otho. The android, who could eat ordinary food, though he preferred synthetic chemical nutrition, looking dubiously at the slabs of roasted meat.

"I suppose this is brontosaurus steak," he

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said experimentally, biting into it. "Say, it isn't bad at that! Hope they didn't kill a whole brontosaurus for us, though."

"Not likely," replied Curt, grinning. "I imagine they need to butcher only one of the brontosaurs a month to keep this whole village in meat."

He and Otho slept that night on grass pallets in the dark hut. Grag, who did not need sleep, stood watch. The Brain, who required but short rest periods, brooded in one of his trance-like reveries the problems that were certain to face them.

Next morning they found a crowd of the primitives waiting outside to greet them. Breakfast of the same food was brought them. As he ate, Curt heard the brontosaurs in the nearby corral being herded out to the marshes for the day's grazing. He sat in the sunlight with Kor and Ahla after the meal, working hard to learn the language of these strange people. Captain Future's long experience with strange races had given him a knack with languages. His task was made more easy by the fact that the tongue of these primitives used many forms and words that approximated those of far later ages. By evening, he and the Futuremen could speak it in halting fashion, using gestures when they lacked the words.

HIS first question to Kor was about metal-bearing ores. When the chief finally understood, he nodded.

"There are many such rocks as you describe, back in the jungle near the Place of the Old Ones."

"The Place of the Old Ones?" Curt asked keenly.

"It is where we go to worship the sacred star, Koom," explained the chief, making that reverent gesture toward the star, Deneb.

"Kor, why do your people worship that star?"

The chief looked blank. "Because it is

sacred. We have always worshiped Koom, as our fathers did."

"Mystery here," Curt said in English to the three Futuremen. "Why should they worship the star, Deneb? They don't even know themselves."

"But I thought that you four came from Koom, the sacred star," Kor was asking. "Ahla said that you did."

"Ahla misunderstood us," Captain Future replied quickly. "We came from the sky in our ship, but not from Koom. We came from the future."

Kor could not comprehend the idea of time-traveling, nor could Ahla. They still seemed to think the Futuremen must be from the sacred star.

"You are not like the other men we have seen come from the sky in roaring ships," Kor insisted, glancing at Grag, Otho and Simon.

"What other ships?" Curt demanded quickly. "Where did they come from?" Kor waved vaguely toward the sky.

"From up there. They are men like ourselves, though they have roaring ships and strange weapons. Several times we have seen them land and go away. We kept hidden, lest they attack us."

"Hear that?" Curt exclaimed. "Other space ships have touched Earth in the mesozoic! Maybe they came from Katain. We know from Darmur's time message that the Katainians must have a well developed science."

Curt was burning with eagerness to get on to that doomed world whose people had called desperately across time for help.

"The shattering of Katain might occur before we can even get there," he said anxiously. "Our leap back across time, accurately as we tried to gage it, might still be in error by weeks or months. Theoretically we should be right in the period when Darmur sent out his plea for help, but we may be much later than that."



Kor promised to lead them the next morning to the place of metal-bearing rocks. The tribesmen were apparently too well acquainted with the dinosaurs' habits to go that far from the protected village by night.

The dawn of the next day saw Kor and Ahla and a dozen stout warriors leading the Futuremen through the jungle eastward. They followed well beaten game trails through the dense primeval forest. Twice they glimpsed or heard great brutes crashing through the palms and vines. Once it was a herd of stegosaurus, the next a single specimen of the dreaded tyrannosaurs.

The procession wound toward the low hills eastward and finally debouched from the jungle into a large, clear space. It was a vast ruin of white stone. Shattered alabaster pillars and arches lay strewn about cracked white paving that had been gouged and split by immense forces.

"Holy sun-imps!" yelled Otho. "There was a city here once, but these primitives never built it!"

Curt was amazed.

"This place has been a ruin for ages, but its builders had a high order of science. Look, Simon, that isn't natural stone. It's a synthetic marble."

"Aye, lad," agreed the Brain, his lens-

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eyes surveying the scene with intense scientific curiosity. "This place has been wrecked by glacial action. You can see the gouge-marks and striations clearly."

"I get it now!" Curt exclaimed. "This place was destroyed by the great glaciation that swept across most of Earth in the late Paleozoic age. And I'm betting that these primitive people are the descendants of a few survivors, retrograded to savagery from their former civilized state."

"It looks like it," the Brain admitted. "But that means there was a human race — an intelligent, civilized one — on Earth still farther back, in the Paleozoic!"

"This is the Place of the Old Ones," the chief Kor stated, solemnly gazing across the ruin. "It is here that we come to worship the sacred star. The rocks you wish are not far from this place."

Kor and Ahla led the way past the brooding ruin, up and over the grassy slopes of the low hills. They came upon a great, deep rock declivity, partly filled by silt and glacial detritus. One glance around its shelving rock walls told Captain Future its story.

"This was a quarry in the far past," he said. "The people of that dead city once got metal ores from here." He made a quick examination of the outcrops of rock. "There's ore of almost every kind we need here — tungsten, chromium, magnesium, as well as veins of uranium-bearing minerals. We'll rig up a little atomic smelter here and work out the metal we need to repair the Comet. Before long we'll be able to go on to Katatin."

The Futuremen immediately began the urgent task. From the crippled Comet they brought equipment, which they set up at the ancient quarry, constructing a small, improvised, but highly efficient atomic smelter.

Then the real labor began. Kor's tribesmen, eager to help the strange beings they still stoutly believed were from the

sacred star, toiled to quarry out masses of the metal-bearing rock. Otho and Grag ran the smelter, pouring from it a constant flow of pure molten metal.

The ingots, when cool, were carried by other tribesmen to the Comet. There Curt Newton and the Brain worked tirelessly at the job of repairing the riven hull, casting new cyc parts, assembling new cyclotrons to replace those damaged by their disastrous collision with the second Moon. Curt drove them and himself almost feverishly, day and night, for his mind was far out in the System, on the doomed world he had resolved to help.

By the sixth morning, the repairs to the Comet were almost finished. Curt and Grag were fitting the last new rocket-tubes, while Kor's tribesmen watched.

"Otho, go back to the quarry and bring the last of those smelter parts," Curt told the android. "We'll soon be ready to take off."

Otho departed and with him went Ahla. The girl of the past seemed to have developed a strong admiration for Otho and had been his constant companion.

Less than an hour had passed when Curt heard a familiar, yet utterly startling distant sound — the roar of a space ships' rocket-tubes! He, Grag and Simon hastily emerged from the Comet. Kor's tribesmen were shouting and pointing excitedly toward the east, in apparent fear. A long, pencil-like craft was sinking toward the low hills there.

"One of the space ships Kor told us about that visit Earth occasionally!" Grag boomed. "Chief, maybe they're Katatinians!"

"And maybe they're enemies," Curt warned, staring eastward. "They're landing up near the quarry, where Otho and Ahla are. I don't like it. Come on and finish the Comet. We've got to get up there at once!"

They worked with furious haste to install the last rocket-tubes. Before they had finished, however, they heard a distant

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roar and saw the strange pencil-like black craft take off again and vanish quickly in the sky.

"Hurry!" Curt cried, his apprehension growing. "There's something queer about their leaving so soon."

The last big rocket-tube was hastily fused on. Curt fairly leaped to the control room and started the massive cycs throbbing loudly. The Comet bounded upward on the flame-blast of its keel tubes, then screamed low across the jungle toward the hills. Gigantic dinosaurs bolted in mad panic through the forest underneath them as they passed.

Curt landed deftly in the ancient quarry. As they raced out and peered frantically around, his heart sank. Neither Otho nor the girl was here—Ahla's spear lay on the ground, broken, and there were other signs of struggle.

"Whoever was in that space ship has killed or captured Otho and Ahla!" shouted Grag furiously.

CHAPTER VIII

Planets of the Past

OTHO gayly hummed an old future space song as he and the girl Ahla made their way through the jungle to the ancient quarry. The adventuresome android was always most cheerful when he had new scenes about him, and this Earth of the Mesozoic age was certainly a strange new world. Dense towered the jungle about them, a mass of mixed palms, conifers, giant club-mosses, lianas and big ferns. Swarms of weird insects hummed in the shade, and featherless birds hopped amid the higher branches.

He and Ahla were following one of the broad game trails toward the hills. Ahla's dark, pretty face suddenly expressed alarm as they heard a faint thudding sound

ahead. She drew Otho off the trail into a fern-clump.

"Make no sound or movement!" she whispered. "The Horned Ones come." "What are they?" breathed Otho. "I don't — Demons of Mercury!"

The oath was wrung from him by a group of triceratops coming along the trail. They were huge beasts, like the rhinoceros of later ages, but larger and equipped with three great horns and a ruff of neck-armor. Not until long after they had lumbered by, shaking the ground, did Ahla and Otho again start on.

"Some playmates you have around here!" Otho told the girl. "Wish I could take one back to our own time. What a sensation that would make! Otho, the time-hunter — he brings 'em back alive from the Mesozoic!" Ahla looked at him admiringly.

"Could you really capture a Horned One single-handed?"

"Sure, it'd be easy," boasted Otho. "First I'd pull their horns out, so they couldn't hurt me, and then I'd choke 'em to insensibility."

"I'd like to see you do that," declared Ahla soberly.

"Aw, it would be too easy," deprecated Otho. "What I'd really like to meet on this trail is a tyrannosaur."

"Why do you cross your fingers?" Ahla asked curiously.

"That's just an old custom in my time," Otho rejoined, flushing.

Otho had developed a strong liking for this lovely primitive girl. To her, he wasn't the freak that people in his own age usually thought him because he was an artificial man. She considered him something of a superman. Underneath all his scoffing and reckless deviltry, there were depths of loneliness in Otho's strange soul. Far more than simple-minded Grag, he brooded on the difference between himself and other men. Ahla's frank admiration had struck a chord of eager

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response from him.

They reached the crest of the low hills in which was the ancient quarry. Otho turned for a moment to look back. He could see far across the waving jungle, to the western marshes in which the domesticated brontosaurus of the tribesmen were splashing and browsing. Beyond the marshes was the distant glint of blue sea. To the south, big volcanoes smoked lazily.

He and the girl descended into the quarry and Otho deftly began disassembling the parts of the atomic smelter for easier carrying. He meant to take only the heart of the mechanism back to the Comet for possible future use.

"A ship comes!" Ahla gasped suddenly, pointing upward.

Otho heard the startling sound of a space ships' rocket-tubes. A black, pencil-shaped craft was dropping toward them from the blue heavens.

"We must hide!" Ahla cried, grasping his wrist frightenedly. "No one knows who comes in the strange ships, or what their errand is."

"We can't get out of the quarry in time," Otho said calmly. "And, anyway, I think it must be Katinians in that ship. I want to talk to them."

AHLA was pale with dread, but she made no move to leave him. As he had said, they could not in any case have got out of the deep quarry in time, for the pencil-shaped black craft was already thundering down into the quarry with all brake tubes blasting. It came to rest a hundred yards from them.

A dozen queer-looking men emerged hastily. They were white-skinned, dark haired, much like Ahla's people, but they were taller, thinner and bonier. They wore silken white jackets and trousers and carried implements that looked like power-tools for excavation. Each man, Otho saw, wore on his back a cumbersome apparatus of coils and batteries. The

android's scientifically trained eyes fathomed instantly that the apparatus was a crude form of gravitation equalizer.

"So they're from a planet of different size and gravitation than this," Otho mused. "Katin's a much smaller world. That must be where they're from."

As the newcomers glimpsed Otho and Ahla, a cry of wonder went up from them. Then they slowly advanced on the android and the girl. Cautiously the tall leader of the strangers surveyed Otho. He appeared to find the android far more puzzling than Ahla.

"Who are you?" he demanded, speaking in a tongue strongly similar to that of Ahla's people. "You are not one of the savage natives of this world."

Otho had learned Ahla's language well. Though this newcomer spoke in slightly different phrases and some words were different, the android could get the drift without too much trouble.

"I come from the far future," he announced. "Are you from Katin?"

"From Katin?" repeated the leader. His brows drew together in a frown of suspicion. "Why do you ask? Are you friends or enemies of Katin?"

"We're friends of Katin, of course," Otho replied emphatically.

He was totally unprepared for what followed. Hardly had the words left his lips when there was a harsh cry from the leader of the strangers.

"Seize them!"

The tall white men leaped forward. Before the astounded Otho could get his proton pistol out, he was borne down by a rush of charging men. His fists flailed with unhuman speed, sending his attackers tumbling. But others had got behind and were holding him. Despite his most furious writhings, he was pinned by a score of hands until tough thongs of leather were brought from the space ship and tied around his ankles and wrists.

Then the spluttering android was jerked

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to his feet. He saw that Ahla had been similarly seized and bound.

"By the flat-faced devils of Saturn, this is a swell way to treat a fellow who's come from the future to help you cursed Katinians!" he raged.

"Be silent, spy!" growled the towering captain of Otho's captors. "You

Katinians are our deadly enemies, as well you know."

"Colliding comets!" swore Otho. "What kind of mess have I got into?" Another of the tall strangers had come out of the ship. An older man, he looked at the two prisoners and then turned to the towering captain. "Who are these people, Grako?"

"Spies of Katin, Lord Thoh," the hulking captain answered deferentially. "They seem to be disguised, but they admitted they were friends of Katin, though the man tried to tell us he came from the future."

Grako burst into laughter at the preposterousness of the idea, but Thoh, the elderly man, did not laugh. He glared at Otho.

"How many of you Katinians are on this planet?" he demanded. "What did that devil Zikal send you here for?"

"Zikal?" repeated Otho, mystified. "I never heard of him."

THOH smiled thinly. "I suppose Zikal didn't send you out to spy on us of the fourth world, did he?"

"The fourth world? Why, that's Mars! You mean that you men are Martians? You can't be. Martians are a red-skinned people." Then Otho had a new thought. "Blazing meteors, I see now! Back in this past age, you Martians haven't yet developed protective pigmentation."

"So you persist in this crazy assertion that you came from future time," stated old Thoh contemptuously.

"Of course I do!" the android fumed. "Can't you see I'm not a man like you? As for the girl, it should be obvious that she's

just a primitive."

"Disguises. The spies of Zikal are clever."

One of the white Martians who had been looking around the ancient quarry excitedly interrupted the questioning.

"Lord Thoh, there are signs that many men have been digging out metal ores here recently."

Thoh's sharp eyes showed alarm.

"There must be many other Katinians here, then! The primitive natives of this world wouldn't dig the ores. Back into the ship! We're getting out of here at once. This may be a Katinian ambush."

"But what about the tungsten and chromium ores we stopped here to secure?" objected Grako.

"We can go past the second planet on the way home and pick up the ore there. Hurry! Out of here at once!"

Swearing and struggling against his bonds, Otho was unceremoniously hauled into the ship and dumped with Ahla in a small cabin. Two Martians placed on guard over them, armed with a form of gas gun.

Grako shouted orders through the ship. Doors slammed, machinery droned. With a deafening roar of rockets, the craft jerked skyward.

"Why in the name of my paternal test-tube didn't I keep my mouth shut?" Otho muttered angrily. "I had to go bragging that I was a friend of Katin, never dreaming that these fiends could be anything but Katinians. This is a devil of a reception for a fellow who's come back a hundred million years."

Ahla, sitting bound and helpless beside him, smiled bravely, though her face was pale with dread.

"You'll find a way to save us," she whispered confidently.

The ship roared on at full blast. Looking through the small window of the cabin, Otho perceived that they were already out in space.

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The Martian guards were running through the gardens firing the gas guns at the Futuremen
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The Sun lay on the left, somewhat behind them. Ahead gleamed the bright, White blob of Venus. Far beyond it, to the right, shone the brilliant green spark that was the Mars of this far age of the past.

Otho saw there were net sacks of metal-bearing ores loaded in this cabin. It was clear that the Martians had been on a prospecting cruise to bring back metals that must be scarce on their own planet.

Grako came back to see that the guards were on the alert.

"Why are you and the Katainians enemies?" Otho asked politely.

"As though you didn't know," spy!" Grako's eyes glittered hatred. "We know all about your plans to destroy our people."

"Then you know more than I do," Otho retorted. "Why would the Katainians want to destroy you Martians when they face doom themselves? Are you all crazy back in this time?"

Grako slammed the door without deigning to reply. Otho and Ahla were left to the care of the guards as the ship throbbed on.

"Where will they take us, Otho?" asked Ahla.

"To their world," he grumbled gloomily. Then her pale, terrified face stirred his sympathy. "Don't be frightened, Ahla. I know this seems terrible to you, being carried off into the sky, but space ships are old stuff to me. I hardly expected to find them here in the past, though."

MANY hours later, the Martian ship swung down through the vast, cloudy atmosphere of Venus. They dropped mile after mile through dense gray water vapor and finally flew low over the surface of the second world. Otho whistled in amazement as he looked through the cabin window at the Venus of a hundred million years ago.

The vast swamps that were the most characteristic feature of Venus in his own

time were not to be seen. There was a broad fringe of marsh around the shoreline of the continent below, but inland the ground was high and firm, consisting of parklike plains dotted by glades of tall trees.

The Martian ship landed in an inland ravine. The rock sides showed evidence of having been excavated in the past. Through the window, Otho saw the Martians using power-tools to dig masses of rock from the ledges. He guessed that the Martians knew this place well and that they had often secured needed metals from here and from Earth.

Soon the ores had been loaded and the ship started up again. As they soared above the marshy coastline, Otho glimpsed stone ruins that projected here and there from the tidal swamps. He could also make out other dimly visible structures, completely covered by the sea.

"So there's a ruined civilization here, as well as on Earth," he thought. "And on Mars and Katain appear to be flourishing civilizations. Imps of Pluto, who'd have thought all these worlds had civilized people in the past? And how come the language of Mars is the same as that of Earth?"

He worried these puzzling questions as the ship swung out of the immense cloudy atmosphere of Venus and headed through starry space toward the distant green spark of Mars. Finally he had to give it up. Ahla was sleeping with her dark head pillowed on his shoulder. He racked his brain for some means of escape, but there

was no chance of that, with two alert Martian guards watching them every minute. He finally drifted off into sleep himself.

When he awoke, he guessed it was considerably later. The hours dragged on and still the ship throbbed along through the void. When at last the blast of braking rockets indicated that they were nearing their destination, Otho's curiosity was

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thoroughly aroused. He had seen Earth and Venus of this remote day. Now he was to look at ancient Mars.

He was disappointed. The ship swung down toward the night side of the planet and he could make out little, except many beds of lights that he knew must be populous cities, and great oceans tossing in the starlight. Oceans on Mars!

As the ship slanted down into the atmosphere of the planet, it brought into view in the cabin window a field of stars that included the star Deneb. Ahla made her usual reverent gesture toward it. To Otho's amazement, the Martian guards did, too.

"Do you Martians also worship Deneb — I mean Koom?" he exclaimed. "Of course, spy," rasped a guard. "All men worship the Sacred Star." "Why do you think that star's sacred?"

The guard scowled. "Because it is sacred, of course."

"They don't know why they worship Deneb any more than Ahla's people do," Otho thought. "There's a real cosmic mystery behind this."

His speculation was forcibly diverted. The ship sank on its flaming keel tubes. Looming stone walls rose around them — the walls of a landing court inside some massive building.

THE two prisoners were hauled roughly out of the ship.

"Put them with the other hostages," old Thoh ordered Grako.

Otho and Ahla were dragged through a door, down dark passages and stairs to a row of underground dungeons. A heavy door was unlocked and they were unceremoniously thrust into a dark, musty stone room.

"Your friends in there can untie you, spies," growled the captain. He relocked the door and departed, leaving guards on duty outside. Otho squirmed around. His keen ears had caught the movement of

several figures in the dark room. His eyes dimly made out several men.

Ahla pressed terrifiedly against him. But Otho, remembering what Grako had just said, spoke out boldly.

"You other prisoners, are you Katainians?"

"We are," came a young man's voice. "I am Jhulun of Katain. But who are you? Aren't you and that girl Katainians?"

"No, but we're friends of Katain," Otho replied quickly. "Untie us and I'll tell you the whole story."

Jhulun did not comply at once. His voice was suspicious.

"You may be Katains and yet be our enemies. Are you Zikal's men?" "I don't know who Zikal is," Otho snapped exasperated.

"Do you belong to the Emigration or Invasion parties on Katain?"

"Never heard of either of 'em. I'm from the far future, though I'm getting used to the fact that no one will believe me. The only Katainian I ever heard of is a scientist named Darmur."

"Darmur?" cried Jhulun, "He is my father!"

CHAPTER IX

On the Rocket Trail

CAPTAIN FUTURE felt sharp dismay as he, Grag and the Brain looked at the mute evidence of struggle in the ancient quarry on Earth. The broken spear of Ahla and the scuffed ground told a clear story. "Otho was trapped with Ahla in the quarry when that space ship suddenly landed in it," Curt guessed. "Maybe he thought at first they were Katainians, as we did."

"Katainians wouldn't have captured him when he told them he had come from the future to help them!" burst out Grag.

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"Grag's right, lad," rasped the Brain. "But if they didn't come from Katain, where did they come from? There must be another world in this past age which has developed science and space-travel. But which?"

"We'll never find out by standing here and debating about it," Curt Newton stated striding back to the Comet. "Come on. We'll see if we can't pick up their rocket-trail and overtake them. We've got to get Otho out of this jam before we can go on to Katain."

"And a whole world that desperately needs our help has to wait because that rubber-headed, cocky android went blundering off into trouble!" boomed Grag vehemently as they entered the ship. "It never fails. No matter where we go, that crazy mess of chemicals gums up everything. Next time we go anywhere, he'll either stay at home on the Moon, or I will." Curt took the space-stick and sent the Comet screaming up into the sky at a speed that proved its cys and tubes were all now working perfectly. Captain Future knew they couldn't hope to trail the black ship by sight. It had had a half-hour start and by this time was far out in space. It might be heading in any direction.

But in the Comet was an apparatus that might enable them to pick up the trail. A super-electroscope, devised by Curt and the Brain, its principle hinged on the fact that the rocket-tubes of a space ship left a continuous trail of ions behind them. In an atmosphere the trail was soon dispersed by air currents, but in empty space the ionized particles remained for a long time. Once the electroscope located it, they could follow the enemy ship.

For hour after hour, out in space beyond the limits of Earth's atmosphere, the Comet circled around, vainly searching for the trail. Grag piloted while Curt and the Brain swept space with the powerful concentrating lenses of the electroscope. They followed a methodical

plan, patiently examining one sector after another.

Inwardly Curt was chafing at the delay. It was all they had met with since they had started their time voyage back into this remote age on their mission to aid Katain. A world that had called through time for help urgently needed their scientific assistance, yet they were being hindered from giving it by one mishap after another. They could not think of abandoning Otho to an unknown fate, however.

Finally Simon located the trail. Through the electroscope it showed as a thin streak of shining ions.

"They've headed for Venus, which might be where they came from," Curt said. "Slam on all cys, Grag. Simon and I will watch the trail."

With all the power of its mighty cyclotrons, the Comet plunged through the solar spaces. The second planet swiftly grew in size to a brilliant white disk. They were traveling far faster than could any ordinary ship, Curt knew. Yet the hours of delay in finding the trail made it uncertain that Otho's captors could be overtaken before they reached the cloudy world.

HIS fears were soon realized. As they approached Venus, they had not yet sighted the ship they trailed. The shining stream of ions led down into the vast, cloudy atmosphere of the planet.

"Here's where we lose the trail!" boomed Grag in dismay.

"They must be somewhere on Venus, close beneath this location," Curt persisted. "We'll have to find them."

The Comet dived sharply through the gray, swirling vapors. The ion trail had long ago been dispersed here, of course, but the ship of the Futuremen sank down through mile after mile of the cloudy atmosphere.

"Venus' atmosphere is far thicker and denser than in our own time, lad,"

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commented the Brain. "The planet's hydrosphere has not yet condensed so much into surface water as in our own age."

They emerged at last into the stratum of clear air close to the surface of the planet. Astonished, they looked across a vista of parklike fields and glades, fringed by a belt of marsh near the ocean.

"But where are all the great swamps of Venus?" demanded Grag, staring.

"It's just as I said," reminded the Brain. "The hydrosphere vapors have not yet condensed enough to saturate the planet with water and make it the swampy world we know. The process, though, is steadily going on."

There began again a weary process of search. The Comet circled in widening spirals above the land beneath. Three superhuman pairs of eyes kept peering for the strange black space ship they were hunting. While they saw nothing of the ship, they did notice stone structures and cities, submerged far out in the ocean, or partly concealed by the coastal marshes.

"There's been a civilization here on Venus, too," said the Brain, "just as on Earth. Just as the glaciation on Earth wrecked that civilization, so has it been destroyed here by the steady rise of the waters."

"I can't make it out," complained Grag. "Who'd have dreamt these worlds had great civilizations on them even longer ago than this?"

"There seem to be still greater ruined cities submerged far out in the sea," reported the Brain, who was peering through instruments. "The nearer the ruins are to shore, the smaller they become. It looks as though the steady rise of the water forced the people out of one city after another, bringing about a gradual retrogression of their civilization."

Curt Newton was too concerned with the search for Otho's captors to give this astonishing fact the attention he would

ordinarily have given.

His keen eyes presently descried human figures moving over a field. He sent the Comet diving down toward them. The men appeared to be a hunting party, armed with throwing spears and bows. They were a white-skinned folk of apparently the same stage of primitive culture as the tribesmen on Earth. They bolted in flight the instant they heard and saw the Comet.

"Shall we land and catch some of 'em for questioning?" Grag asked.

"It would be wasting time," Curt said. "They're just primitive descendants of a once-great people. They wouldn't be likely to have any connection with Otho's captors, who must be a fairly civilized people."

"Doesn't look like there are any civilized people on this world," Grag asserted. "The ones who captured Otho couldn't have come from here."

"I'm beginning to think that myself," Curt admitted. His brows knitted together. "Maybe they just stopped here at Venus for some reason and then went on. Let's go out into space and see if we can find their trail."

The Comet roared up through the immense cloudy envelope of the planet and emerged into clear, star-jeweled space. Curt and Simon began once more to sweep space with the powerful electroscope. Again it took weary hours of circling through space before they located a different ion trail than the one they had followed into Venus.

"They did stop at Venus and then go on!" Curt cried. "See? This trail leads out toward Mars."

"Do you think the people who captured Otho and Ahla are Martians?" Grag questioned. Without waiting for an answer, he growled; "What a chase that silly android is leading us!"

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THE Comet shot toward the fourth planet with all cys and tubes throbbing. Captain Future knew that their delay at Venus had again given those they pursued a large lead. He looked worriedly beyond Mars to the distant golden planet, Katain, swinging through space with its little moon, seeming to approach the great white disk of Jupiter.

Katain — doomed member of the solar family, whose cataclysmic end must soon give the System its greatest single tragedy. They must reach that world in time to answer the desperate time plea of its scientist, Darmur!

To Curt, chafing at the delay, it seemed an interminable time before they approached the dull green sphere of Mars. They followed the rocket trail of Otho's captors closely. It was a fresh one and led around the globe of the planet toward its shadowed night side.

Exclamations of wonder came from the Futuremen as they glimpsed the great oceans of Mars, sheening in the starlight, and the countless clusters of lights that betokened the presence of many great cities.

"Seas on Mars?" Grag blurted. "Why, it's crazy! Mars is the desert of the Solar System."

"It is in our time," corrected the Brain. "Eventually the low surface gravity of Mars will permit the molecules of its water envelope to escape, dry up its seas and make it a desert world. But here in the past, the process has not yet gone far."

"It's a crowded world, to judge by the lights of all those cities," marveled Captain Future. "We know there's civilization on Katain. We're seeing it here on Mars. We've seen evidence that it once existed on Venus and Earth. All these worlds, peopled and civilized in some age even before this one — it's almost incredible."

The trail led toward brilliant blinking lights near the shore of one of the great

oceans. The trail descended toward those lights and then was lost as they entered the Martian atmosphere.

"That's a big city below," Curt said. "That's where Otho's captors took him and Ahla, if they're still living. We've got to search that city for them." "Shall I land in the middle of that city?" Grag asked innocently.

"No, of course not!" Curt cried, before the robot could act. "These ancient Martians can't be friendly to strangers, or they wouldn't have grabbed Otho and Ahla. Steer beyond the city and we'll find some place for a secret landing. Then I can spy out the place on foot without being noticed."

With rocket-tubes throttled to a low drone, the Comet passed high above the light of the great Martian city. Finally, after circling a little, they brought it down to a landing on the beach of the ocean, several miles north of the metropolis.

They emerged from the ship into soft, balmy air. The night was illuminated by the two moons. The ocean pounded on the sands around them with a rhythmic sound. It seemed a strangely un-Martian scene.

"I spotted a road leading along the shore toward the city," Curt said. "It's not far away. We'll take a look."

A fat, little, white shape waddled along eagerly after them. It was Oog.

"The blasted little pest seems to miss Otho," boomed Grag. "It wants to hunt for him, I guess, I'll put him back in the ship. He might get us into trouble, he's so much like his master."

AFTER Grag had done so, the three advanced cautiously up the beach and through tall grass toward the highway Captain Future had mentioned. They heard a whizz and roar of passing vehicles and the sound of distant voices as they approached the road. Sinking down in the grass, they peered out.

The road was of white synthetic stone

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and impressively broad. Along it were moving flat, open vehicles that appeared to be powered by gas motors of some type. In the cars were men and women, dark-haired, white-skinned, looking much like the primitive Earth tribesmen, but dressed in silken cloaks and trousers. Other Martians were trudging along the road on foot. Nearly all seemed to be heading toward the city. Their voices came clearly to the Futuremen.

Curt found he could understand the Martians, for they talked a language similar to that of Ahla's tribe.

"I'm tired!" one woman was complaining to a man as they passed the concealed Futuremen. "Can't we rest?"

"It's almost dawn now," the man told her impatiently. "We want to reach Othar before the festival begins, don't we? You can rest later."

Curt made a sign to Grag and Simon and they drew back into the grass. When they had returned to the Comet, Captain Future spoke rapidly.

"Otho and Ahla must be prisoned somewhere in that city, Othar. I'm going in there and find them. Apparently some kind of festival is going on today. I can pass as a Martian, with luck."

"And I'll go with you!" Grag proposed instantly.

"How the devil could you get by?" Curt demanded. "You'd attract a crowd before we'd gone ten paces. You and Simon will have to wait here."

He took a cloak of white synthe-silk which, over his silken gray zipper-suit, fairly well approximated the ancient Martian dress. He stuffed his proton pistol inside his jacket. He also stowed away there a pocket-televisor and certain other instruments that he thought might be useful.

"It'll soon be daylight," he told his comrades. "The Comet will be quickly spotted here on the beach, so you'll have to keep the ship submerged while I'm

gone. I'll call you out by pocket-televisor when I get back here with Otho and Ahla."

"We understand, lad," assured the Brain. "It will give us a chance to examine the nature of the ancient Martian marine life, while we wait."

"Ocean-diving on Mars!" exclaimed Grag bewilderedly. "It's a goofy idea."

CHAPTER X

A Conjurer on Mars

CURT left the ship. With Grag at the controls, it rose quietly from the beach, moved a few hundred yards out over the moonlit sea and then sank down under the waters. The Comet, Future knew, could remain without harm beneath the waters for a long time and would be well concealed.

He turned and strode through the tall grass toward the road. Dawn was breaking as he stepped out onto the white highway and started southward. Some miles ahead rose a cluster of brilliant yellow towers and domes, the far-flung, fantastic structures of the city, Othar.

Captain Future began to pass Martian men and women, all moving toward the city and talking gayly of the coming festival. He became uneasily conscious that they stared at him with unusual attention.

"What the devil can be wrong with my appearance?" he wondered.

His dress was much the same as theirs. His stature and features and white skin were little different and he had concealed his red hair by a close-fitting cap.

Yet these ancient Martians continued to stare at him.

One of them, a withered-faced, sly-eyed little man who carried a heavy metal case, came up to him.

"Friend, where did you get that strange

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beast of yours?" the Martian asked, pointing behind Curt.

Captain Future turned sharply. It took an effort to refrain from breaking forth into profanity at what he saw. Oog was following him!

that had been attracting all the attention. As Curt knew, in this remote past age the species to which Oog belonged had not yet evolved.

Curt hastily picked up Oog to make him less conspicuous. He told the Martian



Otho leaped at the panicky spy (Chap. XIV)

He realized instantly that the little meteor-mimic, anxious to find its master, had slipped out with him when he had emerged from the Comet the second time. It was the fat, doughy, little white animal

who had questioned him:

"He is just a pet I caught and tamed in my home in the north."

"He doesn't look like any animal I ever heard of," persisted the sly-eyed little man

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"Oh, they're a common species in the north —" Curt began to explain.

But the little Martian suddenly uttered an exclamation of amazement and shrank back, staring with dilated eyes. Curt looked down and mentally groaned. Oog, feeling playful, had changed himself into an exact replica of the metal case the Martian held.

Captain Future felt that Oog had fatally betrayed him by demonstrating that he was a wholly un-Martian animal and thus inevitably giving rise to the suspicion that his owner also was not an ordinary Martian. Curt expected the little man to set up a cry that would bring a crowd around them. But instead, after his first display of amazement, the sly-eyed Martian showed an eager excitement.

"Why didn't you tell me that you were a conjurer, too?" he demanded. "A conjurer?" Curt repeated.

Then he began to understand. The fellow thought that Oog's feat was some kind of magical trick.

"I'm Slig, the most famous conjurer in the city Thool," declared the Martian. He slapped his metal case. "I'm on my way to Othar with my bag of tricks. The crowds that'll be there today for the birthday festival of King Luun ought to yield a fine harvest of dugats, eh?"

CURT fell in with the Martian showman's supposition at once.

"Yes, that's why I'm on my way to Othar, too," he answered readily. "My name is Burq. I have quite a reputation as a conjurer up in the north."

Oog, tiring of imitating the metal case, abruptly changed back to his normal shape with his usual swift flow of protean tissues.

"That's certainly a wonderful trick you've worked out," Slig told Captain Future enthusiastically. "How do you do it, Burq?"

"Well, I hardly like to tell that," Curt

said reluctantly.

"Sure, I don't blame you for not giving away the trick to a rival conjurer," Slig answered good-humoredly. "But why should we be rivals? Why can't you and I team up together today in Othar? We could give such a show together for the crowd that we'd be rolling in dugats."

Captain Future liked the idea at once. Working with Slig as a conjurer, he'd be far less likely to be suspected as a stranger. And he could easily give the other man the slip when he had got some inkling of where Otho and Ahla were being held in the city.

"I'm willing," he said. "You see, I've never been in Othar before. My home's in the far north."

Slig nodded knowingly. "I could tell you were from way back in the country by the queer, stumbling way you talk and the old-fashioned cut of those clothes. You stick to me, Burq, and I'll send you home with lots of dugats."

Curt grinned inwardly. It was pretty clear that Slig figured him to be a country boy who had developed some clever conjuring tricks, but didn't have much practical experience. That suited Curt.

They trudged together toward the sunlit, yellow towers of Othar. On their left was the rolling green ocean, but on their right stretched intensively cultivated fields of fruit and grain, thickly dotted with small stone homesteads. Curt perceived that, in this ancient time, Mars was a thickly populated world. The crowds of pedestrians surging along the road toward Othar constantly increased. More and more of the gas-powered open vehicles whizzed past them.

As they approached the city, Captain Future looked with intense interest at a spaceport they were passing. A number of long, pencil-like black ships were parked there. Beside his own Comet they were primitive craft, yet capable of long space voyages, as he well knew.

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"The one permanent rule in the System appears to be lack of permanence," Curt mused. "This civilization seems entrenched enough to last forever, yet it will soon disappear and be followed by thousands more, on Earth and every other planet."

They passed into the city, Othar. Its brilliant yellow synthestone towers loomed all about them, massive structures surmounted by hexagonal spires or domes. In its sunlit streets thronged countless Martians, drawn here by the birthday festival of their ruler.

"Pretty good crowd," approved Slig, estimating with sharp eyes. "Of course the celebrating's a little dampened this year by worry over the Katainian business, but maybe the dugats are still flowing."

"The Katainian business?" repeated Curt. "What do you mean?"

Slig stared. "You must be from away back in the country, if you don't know. Haven't you heard all these rumors that the Katainians are planning to kill everyone on Mars?"

"Oh, that!" Curt said nonchalantly. "I've heard all those crazy stories, but I don't pay any attention to them."

"A lot of people are scared, nevertheless. Those Katainians have great scientific powers and that devil Zikal is capable of anything."

HE dropped the subject, but Captain Future's mind was racing. Who was Zikal? Was it possible that the Katainians were really menacing Mars? Slig interrupted his speculation.

"Here's a good corner, Burq. Let's set up our show here."

The little conjurer had picked a corner of two of the most crowded avenues. All along the street they had passed other showmen, entertaining the throngs with acrobatic feats, exhibiting trained animals, or performing mind-reading feats.

Slig raised his voice in a loud call that

pierced through the babel and chatter of the holiday throng of Martians.

"This way, folks! The two greatest conjurers on Mars are about to unfold the most marvelous collection of magical wonders upon which the eye has ever rested. Slig, the master-conjurer of Thool, will show his mystic powers by such feats as the breathing of flame, the magic tree and many others. Burq, his colleague from the mysterious lands of the far north, will exhibit his incredible wonder-beast and other feats too numerous to mention. This way, everyone!"

A good-humored crowd of Martians had soon gathered around them and Slig began his show. Curt had to admit that the conjurer was clever. He kindled a small fire and breathed in the flame with every appearance of enjoyment. He took a seed from his pocket, touched it with a wand and it blossomed into a seedling that grew rapidly to a small tree. He did some amazing juggling with shining metal spheres as a final act. The applause was loud.

"And now Burq, master-sorcerer of the north, will perform for you with his wonder-beast!" announced Slig impressively.

Captain Future held up Oog for the crowd to see. Oog, who was scared by the crowd around them, took refuge in camouflage. His fat little body shifted suddenly into perfect imitation of a yellow rock. The crowd applauded enthusiastically.

"Show us how Eek looks," Curt whispered to Oog.

At once the meteor-mimic shifted into a perfect imitation of a small gray moon-pup. Curt continued to name one object after another and Oog proceeded to flash through a variety of metamorphoses.

When Curt decided that Oog had had enough and bowed to the crowd, the applause was long and fervent.

"We've got 'em all worked up, Burq!"

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breathed Slig eagerly. "Show them another trick as good as that and we'll get every dugat they have."

"I'll show them something good, all right," Captain Future promised.

He reached into his jacket. From his belt-kit he took the disk-shaped apparatus which could cause physical invisibility. He held it over his head and touched its switch. Its force streamed down through him. The crowd gaped ludicrously as Curt's figure began to fade from sight. Then he was completely gone.

A dead silence reigned, was suddenly broken by a rising babble of excited voices. Many began to edge away in fear. But then a cry went up as Curt slowly began to materialize.

The crowd recovered from its startlement. The applause was terrific this time and platinum coins were tossed freely toward Curt and Slig.

"Name of the ocean demons, how did you do that?" the conjurer gasped to Curt. "It looked as though you really made yourself invisible!"

Curt winked. "It was just a trick of mass-hypnotism."

"Oh, I see," said Slig, relieved. He beamed. "Look at the dugats we've got! Come on. We'll put on our show at another corner."

THROUGH the following hours they showed their conjuring tricks at many different points throughout the crowded city. Everywhere Curt's stunts with Oog and his invisibility trick evoked tremendous applause. But Curt began to think he had not been so smart. He wasn't able to get any idea where Otho might be held, busy as he was with these performances, and Slig seemed to have no idea of parting from the new colleague who brought in such a harvest of dugats.

The day was darkening to twilight. Curt began to look for an opportunity to slip away from Slig. Abruptly their show was

interrupted by a file of yellow-cloaked soldiers who came through the crowd toward them.

The captain spoke brusquely to Captain Future.

"You the conjurer who does the new invisibility trick everyone's talking about? Follow me."

"To where?" Curt asked, frowning.

"To the palace of King Luun," snapped the captain.

Slig paled. "Your trick has got you into trouble, Burq!" Curt thought the same, but he reassured the little conjurer:

"I'll be all right, Slig. You keep my share of the dugats for me."

As Captain Future walked with the soldiers through the darkening streets, he wished fervently that he'd never showed the invisibility stunt. If they examined him and discovered he was no true Martian —

Bright white and red lights were gleaming out as night came to the city. The two moons had hurtled up above the horizon. As the stars rose above the city roofs, Curt saw people all about him in the streets making a peculiar reverent gesture toward the rising star, Deneb. It startled him, for it was the same gesture of worship used by the tribesmen of Earth.

"So these ancient Martians worship Deneb, too, or at least have a superstitious regard for it," he thought. "I wonder what it means."

"Do you conjurers have no reverence for the rising of the Sacred Star?" the captain of the guards demanded sharply.

Curt realized hastily that he had made himself noticeable by failing to make the gesture of worship toward Deneb.

"I did not notice that the Sacred Star had risen," he explained.

CHAPTER XI

The Way Out

THEY approached the palace. It was a mammoth oblong pile of pale yellow stone, crowned by five hexagonal towers, of which the central one aspired to dizzy height. It sat amid great gardens with lights flaring from it. Curt's guards took him through antechambers and spacious frescoed corridors to the threshold of a large hall. It was a banquet hall, illuminated by soft white torches. Queer stringed instruments throbbed softly. Along sumptuous tables, a silken-clad throng of men and women was feasting.

A chamberlain in flowing crimson cloak came up and spoke to Curt.

"You are the conjurer who has been doing the wonderful tricks today in the streets?" he asked. "You are about to receive a great honor. The king has heard of your marvels and wishes to see your performance."

Captain Future breathed more easily. So that was it. He looked down the long hall to the raised dais upon which King Luun sat with a score of favored nobles at a table, facing the other feasters. The Martian ruler had risen. A big, powerful-featured man with proud eyes, he stretched out his hand.

"Koom is rising," he announced. "Honor to the Sacred Star!" Every feaster made the reverent gesture.

"To the Sacred Star!"

They resumed their seats after the brief ceremony. The chamberlain led Captain Future before the dais.

"This is the conjurer they talked of, Highness," said the official obsequiously. "He is ready to show his tricks."

Luun waved negligently to Curt. "Proceed with your wonders, man."

Curt whispered to the little meteor-mimic in his arms, sending Oog through

one metamorphosis after another. Laughter and applause came from those who feasted and drank at the tables. Then Curt took from his jacket his disk-shaped apparatus and faded from view as the invisibility force drenched him. When he reappeared, oaths of wonder went up from the crowd.

"Your tricks are original, conjurer," conceded Luun graciously. "Can you do anything else magical?"

"Ask him if he can read the future," growled a thin-faced old noble near the king. "Then we'd know what that devil, Zikal of Katain, means to do."

A towering younger noble guffawed.

"Sure, he should be able to read the future. Why, that new prisoner down in the palace dungeon claims that he came from the future."

Captain Future felt a sharp thrill of hope. Here, for the first time, was news of Otho. It must be Otho who was in the dungeon of this palace.

"Can you read the future, conjurer?" King Luun asked scoffingly.

Curt bowed. "Yes, Highness, I can. I cannot read the near future, but I can read the far future. I can see this world as it will be a hundred million years from now."

A shout of laughter went up, in which the monarch joined.

"So you can see a hundred million years ahead," he gibed. "Why, this is a great conjurer, indeed! Speak, man. Tell us what you see in that far time."

With skeptical grins, the whole throng of feasters bent to listen. And Captain Future, looking with somber gravity past them, began to speak. A gradual hush fell upon the hall.

"I see this planet after a hundred million years have rolled across its face," he said. "I see a dying, desert world. The great oceans have all disappeared. On all the deathly crimson deserts there is no water, except the scanty trickle brought

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down by canals from the polar snows, which barely supports the life of the few people surviving on this world.

"Othar and all the other mighty cities of this time are but wrecks of stone, half-covered by the drifting desert sands. The sand-cat and the moon-owl are their only tenants. And when the bitter chill of night descends, through the crumbling ruins wail the winds that are like the whispering ghosts of you who now hear my words."

SUCH an accent of utter truth rang in Captain Future's solemn words that, despite themselves, the feasters were held in a trance of silence and awe.

"I do not like such gloomy visions!" the king suddenly snarled. "Be gone, conjurer."

Curt bowed, picked up Oog and backed respectfully from the banquet hall. He heard nervous gaiety break out again among the feasters.

"You're lucky the king didn't have you flogged for conjuring up such a nightmare!" snapped the chamberlain. "Best not linger here, man."

Captain Future went through the corridors toward the front of the palace. No one appeared to be following him. When he saw a flight of stairs leading downward, he quickly darted into them. He found himself in a maze of dusky, ill-lit stone passages underneath the palace. The dungeon in which Otho and Ahla were confined must be down here somewhere. But where?

Curt had an inspiration. He put Oog down on the floor. "Find Otho," he whispered.

Instantly Oog started down a passageway, hurrying on his fat little legs. The creature sensed Otho's presence, Curt knew. He followed it. A sharp voice suddenly spoke behind him.

"What are you doing here?"

Curt whirled. The captain of guards who had brought him to the palace was

frowning suspiciously. He held a Martian gas gun trained on Captain Future.

"My pet got away from me," Curt explained. "He's somewhere down here. I must find him. My tricks with him are half my livelihood."

"I'll help you find him. Outsiders aren't permitted in this part of the palace." They hastened after Oog, who was running down stone steps to a still lower level. Emerging into a shadowy corridor below, Curt perceived that Oog was sniffing and scratching at a heavy locked door, in front of which two Martian guards were stationed. Captain Future realized instantly that Otho and Ahla must be behind that door. He quickly decided upon a desperate plan.

"Ah, there he is!" he exclaimed with pretended relief.

Hurrying to the door, he bent as though to pick up Oog. But his hand grasped the proton pistol inside his jacket and pressed the intensity ratchet back. He had to overcome these Martians, but he couldn't kill them in cold blood. He straightened, the proton pistol in his hand, triggering with blurring speed. The pale ray of the weapon flew like a lightning bolt, hitting the three Martians in quick succession with a beam reduced to stunning force. The three men sank unconscious.

Curt tried the door. It was locked. A search of the stunned guards showed that none of them had the key.

"Otho!" he called softly.

There was no sound from inside. The door was too heavy and close-fitting to allow sound to penetrate. Curt hastily jammed his proton pistol back into his jacket and took from his belt a tiny tubelike instrument. At that moment came a sharp cry of alarm from back in the corridor.

"He seeks to free the hostages. Kill him!"

Curt spun around. Two Martian officers had entered the corridor,

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apparently on inspection. They had already leveled their gas guns. From the weapons, little clouds of deadly green gas whuffed toward Curt.

AS he whirled around and saw the two Martian officers triggering their gas guns at him, Captain Future swiftly changed his turning movement into a spinning leap that sent him to the floor at one side of the corridor. As he hit the stone floor, he had his proton pistol out and was firing it. The stunning beam dropped the two Martians in their tracks. The gas clouds they had fired grazed over Curt's head.

"Devil take such close shaves as that!" Curt panted as he scrambled back to his feet. "If any more of them show up —"

He was already at the door of the dungeon, at which little Oog was whining and scratching. Curt applied the tiny tubelike instrument he had taken from his belt. It jetted an invisible but powerful magnetic beam that probed into the lock. He finally got a grip on the tumblers and turned them.

The door flew open and Otho the android bounded out of it, his green eyes blazing with excitement as he recognized Captain Future.

"Chief, am I glad to see you! I've been working on that lock myself for hours, but—"

"We're getting out of here!" Curt interrupted. He took from his jacket the little square pocket-televisor, pressed its call button urgently, then spoke swiftly into it. "Grag? Bring the Comet back over the city top speed to pick us up. I'll signal with my pistol where to land. Hurry!"

Ahla, the pretty Earth girl, had appeared in the doorway beside Otho. Behind them were three pale, excited young men whom Curt had never seen before. They were white, but unlike the Martians they were dressed in gleaming garments of woven gold cloth.

"Chief, these are Katainians," Otho babbled. "This one is Jhulun. He's the son of the scientist who sent out the time message!"

"Darmur's son?"

Captain Future looked sharply at the Katainian. He was a handsome, blue-eyed youth, tall and striking in his belted, knee-length tunic of woven gold.

"Jhulun and his pals were captured by the Martians weeks ago and have been held as hostages," Otho was rattling on excitedly. "Chief, he's told me the whole story about the situation at Katain. It's unbelievable —"

"No time now, Otho," Curt cut him off. "Grag and Simon will be blasting for here in the Comet. We've got to get out into the palace gardens before things blow up in our faces."

He led the way down the dusky corridor at a run. The five followed him hastily through the dungeon passage of ancient Mars. Otho was snuggling the overjoyed Oog in one arm. Ahla, the Earthgirl, ran lithely, clad in her snakeskin garment. Jhulun and the other two Katainians brought up the rear, visible by their gleaming gold tunics. Captain Future cradled his proton pistol in his fist, but luck seemed to be favoring him. They met no other guards or officers as they climbed a stair to a higher level.

A cool, intruding draft of air led Curt toward a door that was open to the palace gardens. They ran out into the light of the two moons. Behind them bulked the massive pile of Luun's palace, its windows blazing light. In front of them, the moonlit gardens with blossoming trees and shrubs stretched to the streets of the surrounding city. Othar was still gay and festive.

B-r-room!

Across the city came that drumming drone. At the unfamiliar sound, thousands in the city stared up into the sky. Then shouts of fear and wonder arose as the Martians glimpsed the unfamiliar,

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gleaming shape of the Comet, rocketing low across the spires and domes.

"Come on, Grag, step on that cyc-pedal!" groaned Otho.

MARTIAN soldiery were pouring out of the palace in answer to the alarm. Captain Future had pointed his proton pistol into the air and was pressing its trigger. The white beam shot up through the night like a thin beacon. The Comet changed course and came toward them.

"Look out!" yelled Otho. "Here comes those devils!"

The Martian guards were running through the gardens toward them, firing their gas guns. Flying clouds of green gas whizzed through the trees and where the gas touched the vegetation there were black ashes. The aim of the soldiers was uncertain in the moonlight. Their charge was halted by panic in a moment, for the Comet was diving down on them with its rocket-tubes flaming thunderously.

The ship came to rest nearby, its keel jets plowing up the turf of the garden. "Get in!" Curt yelled. "Hurry, before they get over their panic!"

They plunged toward the ship. Its airlock door flew open as they approached. The Brain had seen them coming. Curt thrust his companions in and tumbled after them.

"Up, Grag!" he shouted as he slammed shut the heavy door.

The thunder of the rockets was deafening as the Comet literally stood on its tail and raced skyward. Curt, Otho, Ahla and the three Katainians were jammed in around the crowding time-thruster in the cabin with hardly room to move: By the time they had scrambled to their feet, the lights of Othar were already a great distance below

and the ship was screaming out through the Martian atmosphere toward the stars. "They'll never catch up with us now!" Otho crowed. "Those Martian ships can no

more overtake the Comet than I could run down a meteor."

"Head for Katain at full rocket, Grag!" Curt called to the big robot at the space-stick.

"Check, Chief," replied Grag. "Say, couldn't you have left Otho behind in the rush? Yeah, I suppose that would be too much to hope for."

"You perambulating junk-heap, you nearly left us all behind, you were so slow coming to pick us up!" Otho exploded. "What were you doing — taking a little nap on the way?"

CHAPTER XII

A World Can Die

JHULUN, the young son of Darmur, and his two Katainian companions were looking wonderingly around the interior of the Comet. Their gaze had a quality of almost frightened awe as they stared at big Grag and then at the Brain, who was poised in mid-air, impassively eyeing them.

Curt asked the young Katainian the question that was in his mind.

"Jhulun, exactly what kind of scientific assistance does your father need that made him send the time message into the future?"

"I don't know. I didn't know about the time message myself until your comrade, Otho, told me in prison. You see, I have been a prisoner on Mars for weeks. My father must have sent out the time message since I left Katain. And you four are really from the far future? It seems unthinkable, yet only men of the future could build a ship like this. Maybe your science will be great enough to save my people."

"How long will it be, according to your father's calculations, before Katain will

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explode?" the Brain asked.

The faces of the three Katinians darkened, as though the words had brought the shadow of disaster upon them.

"It will be very soon," whispered Jhulun. "Less than two months remain before the fatal, final conjunction with Jupiter that will destroy our world forever."

Jhulun and the other Katinians stared with yearning, hopeless eyes at the distant speck of yellow light toward which the ship was racing. Bright as a drop of gold hung the doomed planet against the stars, companioned by the glittering spark of its moon.

Katain's beauty outshone even the white radiance of Jupiter, which lay to the left in the sky.

"Will this coming conjunction with Jupiter cause the explosion of your planet?" Captain Future asked.

"Yes," answered Jhulun heavily. "The orbit of Katain is close to that of Jupiter. The two worlds pass quite near to each other. At each conjunction they come a little closer, because the powerful pull of Jupiter has warped Katain's orbit. For the last few thousand years, each conjunction has resulted in great ground quakes. Now in this coming one, when we approach even closer, the mighty gravitational pull will split

the already weakened crust. The oceans will pour through giant fissures into the molten heart of the planet. The resulting explosion will shatter Katain to bits."

"And that cataclysm's going to happen in less than two months," Curt muttered. "Nothing in the Universe can prevent it from happening."

"Nothing," Jhulun admitted. "The only hope for our millions of people will be to find refuge on another world. There is but one world in the System upon which we could live permanently."

"What do you mean, only one world? Why, there are nine other planets —" Curt

stopped, nodded sadly. "But they're nearly all much larger."

"That is the difficulty. Katain is a small world. All the other planets except Mercury and Mars are much larger. We can visit those worlds for a short time, by wearing gravitation neutralizing devices, but they are impossible as a permanent home."

"But that still leaves Mars and Mercury and some of the bigger moons of Jupiter," rasped the Brain. "Their size and gravitation are nearly the same as Katain's. Why couldn't you live on one of them? Is there any reason?"

"The big moons of Jupiter are still semi-molten and therefore impossible. Mercury has only a narrow twilight zone that could not hold a hundredth of our people. Mars —" He paused, his face solemn. "On Mars we could live, but it is already overcrowded. There is no possibility of its supporting our millions also. Both races would die of starvation. The only way in which we could take refuge on Mars would be by first killing all the Martians."

THEY stared at him. There was bitterness on Jhulun's face as he continued. "Some people in Katain favor doing that. Their leader is an unscrupulous man named Zikal, who has formed what he calls the Invasion Party. They say it is better for us to destroy all the Martians than to die ourselves. And they have many adherents."

"But how the devil could you hope to kill the Martians?" blurted Otho.

Jhulun shrugged grimly. "Zikal has a plan. He has had certain scientists prepare great quantities of a poisonous vapor that would be released into the atmosphere of Mars. In one day it would destroy all life on that world. The poison is so devised that after a few days it would precipitate as a fine powder, leaving the air pure. The Martians would all be dead and their

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planet would be ours. That is Zikal's plan.

"But others of us, of whom my father is the leader, look on that plan with horror. We are a civilized people, the most civilized in the System. We believe that it would be better for us to go to death with our world than to commit such a ghastly crime. We have hoped, however, that we could devise a plan that would make such appalling sacrifice unnecessary."

"What is your father's plan?" Captain Future asked.

"He has maintained that we could find refuge without disturbing Mars, by migrating to a world outside the Solar System."

"What?" exclaimed the Brain. "You mean a world of another Sun?" Jhulun nodded solemnly, pointing out into space at the green star, Sirius. "Several planets almost the exact size of Katin circle that star. Our astronomers

long ago confirmed that. Those worlds would be a perfect refuge for our race, since observation has shown that they have atmospheres."

"But Sirius is almost nine light years away!" exclaimed the Brain. "How are you going to transport all your people there?"

"My father has been working on a great plan for many years," said Jhulun. His face was troubled as he added; "Yet it has begun to seem that his plan will not succeed, due to lack of one vital factor. It is for aid on that vital essential that he must have called for help across time. If you men of the future can give him that help —"

"What if we can't?" Captain Future asked gravely. "What if his plan for emigration to Sirius proves impossible?"

Jhulun's head sagged. "Then Zikal's invasion party will triumph and the murderous scheme to destroy the Martians will be carried out. That crime will be a black stain forever on the history of the System."

The young Katinian was so pale and distraught that Curt did not question him further. Going forward to the control room, Captain Future thoughtfully eyed the golden planet that was growing larger ahead.

The Comet finally swept in past the little moon, whose diameter was no more than a thousand miles. Future descried on the little, yellow satellite, the outlines of semi-subterranean structures and also a large, perfectly round pit or crater not far from its equator.

Jhulun nodded when he mentioned these things.

"My father will explain it all to you. Our moon, Yuga, is part of his great plan." The troubled young Katinian made a gesture with his hand toward the star, Deneb, which was shining brightly amid the heavenly hosts. "May the Sacred Star keep that plan from ruin."

Curt was startled. These Katinians, like the Martians and the primitive Earthmen of this age, also revered Deneb. He asked Jhulun about it.

"Yes, like every other people in the System, we cherish the belief that Koom is a Sacred Star," Jhulun answered. "Why do we believe it? No one knows. It is a religion that came down to us from the dim past."

The ship of the Futuremen had dropped past the moon, Yuga, toward the parent planet. Katin lay beneath them, half in sunlight and half in dark.

"Why, it's a golden world, just as it looked!" Otho yelped. Jhulun smiled sadly. "Yes, Katin the golden, we call it."

THE predominant hue of this world's vegetation appeared to be yellow. Parklike fields and trees varied from ochre to the glitter of new gold. The rivers, and the seas into which they flowed, were saffron in shade, apparently because of dissolved sediment from the yellow land. The cities of the Katinians stood out

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upon this golden world like clusters of black bubbles, shimmering jet spheres grouped in fantastic, graceful architecture. The number of these fairy-like black cities indicated a dense population for the little world.

Grag piloted the ship downward at Jhulun's direction. They flew over one of the saffron seas toward the night side of the planet. Here the shimmering lights of a large Katainian city starred the night.

"Vavona, our capital and largest city," said Jhulun. "My father's house is here. I will show you where to land."

A city of magical beauty was Vavona by night. Its bubble-like black buildings, each resting in its own garden, were grouped in concentric rings. At the center loomed huger bubbles, big public buildings. Nearly every building shimmered with iridescent light. There were moving lights in the streets, which radiated from the central area. Lighted aircraft or space ships flitted like fireflies overhead. And down upon the fairy city poured the warm, yellow glow of the small moon, Yugra.

At Jhulun's direction, the Comet sank toward the garden of one of the outlying bubble dwellings. It came quietly to rest amid flowering trees. Curt was first outside and he felt a thrill as he stepped upon the velvet grass and breathed in the soft, scented air.

"Katain, the System's lost world, and we're standing on it!" he whispered in awe. "It's like a dream."

"I see my father and sister!" cried Jhulun. "Come!"

A man and a girl had appeared in the lighted door of the shimmering mansion. They both wore sleeveless tunics of woven gold and were looking out in amazement. The man was elderly and stooped, with a thin, fine, wrinkled face.

"Jhulun!" exclaimed the elderly Katainian. "My son, we gave you up for lost! Where have you been?"

"In a Martian prison," answered the young man breathlessly. "Father, these are the ones who freed me and brought me back here. They were coming here to Katain in answer to your call."

"My call?" repeated old Darmur, mystified. Then his eyes dilated. "You mean my message into time?"

Curt Newton and his comrades had advanced through the moonlit garden into the light from the doorway. From Darmur and the girl came startled gasps. They stared wildly at Captain Future and his comrades. Curt knew how strange a spectacle they must seem to these eyes. He, a man of unfamiliar dress and appearance. Otho, the android, lithe, unhuman, alert. The Brain, floating in the light upon his beams and watching with cold lens-eyes. Grag, the towering, awesome metal giant.

FUTURE spoke quietly to the old Katainian scientist.

"I am called Curtis Newton, also known as Captain Future. These are my comrades. We have come a hundred million years beyond this time. We heard your desperate call for help and we have come."

"You four have come from the future?" breathed Darmur, his voice filled with amazement. "I hardly dared dream that anyone who heard my time message would be able to answer it, to come back across time."

"Jhulun has told me of your plan to have the people of Katain migrate to Sirius," Curt said. "I don't understand how you plan to do it, but I gather that you need help on some vital factor of the plan."

"I do!" Darmur stated. "You men from the future can save my plan, can prevent Zikal's hideous scheme to slay a race, if you can do but one thing." "And what is that?" Captain Future asked quickly.

"It is beyond my own science, but upon

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it all my plans now depend," choked Darmur. "Can you synthesize the element uranium? Can you manufacture uranium artificially in quantity from other elements?"

Curt Newton slowly shook his head.

"No, Darmur. Uranium, the heaviest and most complex of all the elements, can't be artificially synthesized. That feat is beyond our science."

Darmur's aging face seemed to grow older as he heard. His shoulders drooped, as though a crushing weight had descended on them.

"Then my last hope is destroyed. My plan to lead my people to refuge by peaceful migration is shattered. I have brought you on your tremendous journey across time for nothing."

There was a dead silence. In that heartsick stillness came a low, distant rumbling, a quiver of the ground beneath their feet, like a premonitory tremor of planetary doom.

CHAPTER XIII

Zikal's Spy

CROUCHED at the edge of the garden in the concealment of a tall clump of flowers, a dark-faced young Katainian had furtively listened. To his ear he held a small metal horn which contained an amplifying device capable of magnifying any distant sound. The eavesdropper was almost shaken from his feet by the rumbling quiver of the ground. He remained frozen in panic until the tremor died away. Then his fears quieted and he again applied himself to the task of listening to old Darmur and the four strange newcomers.

"It is but another groundquake," he heard Darmur tell them. "Katain is an uneasy planet. Its tremors will grow worse

and worse as it approaches the last conjunction with Jupiter."

The spy heard the clear voice of the tall, striking, red-haired man who had called himself Captain Future.

"Darmur, we must be able to help your people, somehow, now that we've come across so many millions of years for the purpose."

"There is no way in which you can help, if you cannot synthesize uranium," replied Darmur's dull, hopeless voice. "My plan had only that one possibility left. It was beyond my own science, but I hoped future science could solve it."

"It's beyond our science, as I said, but let's not give up hope so quickly. Maybe there's some other way. We certainly can't permit Zikal's party to murder a whole race."

The dark-faced spy saw the four dissimilar strangers go into the house with Darmur and his children, taking with them a terrified-looking Earth-girl who had until now remained in their ship. Silently the spy withdrew from his concealment, keeping in the shadows of flowering trees until he reached the moonlit street.

"Zikal must know of this at once!" he muttered excitedly.

He hurried to his car, a low-slung, narrow vehicle poised gyroscopically on two wheels. Jumping into it and switching on the rocket motor, he streaked toward the center of Vavona.

The streets through which he sped were lighted by iridescent glowing tubes set into the curbing. Many other gyro-cars were abroad. Overhead sped humming aircraft and occasional larger space ships from the big spaceport that lay to the north of the moonlit Katainian city.

The dark-faced young Katainian was immensely wrought up. He paid little heed to the throngs of men and women that crowded the more central portions of this fantastically beautiful city of shimmering black bubbles. Rippling stringed music

and shrilly gay burst of laughter and song came from every side. Half-intoxicated people were numerous.

A certain section of the people were engaged in more and more frenzied pleasure-seeking as Katin rocked toward certain doom. The premonitory shudder of the planet tonight seemed to have stimulated their forced gaiety to an even higher pitch.

A jam of gyro-cars held up the vehicle of the spy outside an extensive pleasure garden. He heard an ancient Katinian who was loudly exhorting a scoffing, half-drunken crowd.

listeners. "We'll go to destruction with Katin, unless we listen to Zikal."

"Yes, Zikal's the only one who can save us now!" cried other voices readily. "There's no hope in Darmur's mad plan."

A few voices cried for Darmur, but they were heavily outnumbered. The dark-face spy smiled in satisfaction as he maneuvered his gyro-car out of the jam and sped on through the city.

His destination was a large, globular, black mansion not far from the giant spherical public buildings at the center of Vavona. As he reached its doorway, guards stepped out to challenge him.

A Forced Exile to Other Worlds Is Faced by the Inhabitants of Mercury

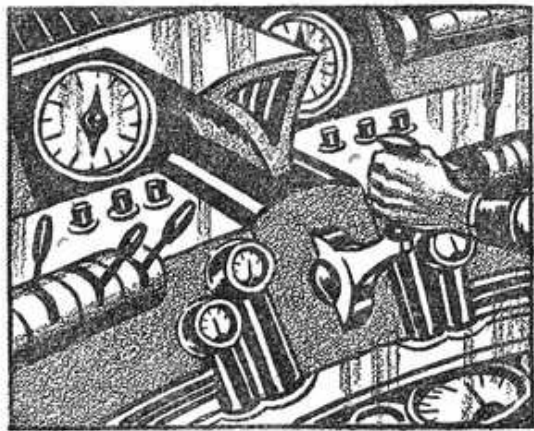
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"It is because you have forgotten the Sacred Star that doom comes upon Katin!" the old man was declaiming shrilly, making a worshipful gesture toward the calm, bright spark of Deneb.

"The Sacred Star is just superstition, and that won't save our world from destruction, old man!" jeered one of his

"It's I, Quirus!" panted the spy. "I must see Zikal at once. A report of the highest importance."

A FEW seconds later he was in a luxurious room. The curving walls of black glass reflected back and forth interminably the iridescent glow that came

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from illuminated tubes set in the floor. A tall, powerful-looking Katainian came striding to meet him, impressive in the golden tunic that left his great limbs bare. His close-cropped black hair helmeted a harsh, massive face whose black eyes were impatient and purposeful.

"Well, Quirus?" he snapped. "Your report. Darmur hasn't found a new uranium source at this late date, has he?"

"No, Zikal," quavered the dark-faced spy servilely. "But something has happened. You remember, I was the one who told you about the strange message that Darmur tried to send out into future time."

Zikal smiled sardonically. "Yes, I remember. I knew we had him beaten when he resorted to such fantastically hopeless devices."

"It wasn't so hopeless!" Quirus exclaimed. "That call of his into the future has been answered. Men from the far future have come to Katain and are conferring with Darmur now!"

"You're drunk or dreaming!" exploded Zikal. "Men from the future? Did Darmur pay you to tell me this crazy tale? By Koom, if he did —"

His enormous hand gripped the throat of the terrified spy.

"It's true, Zikal!" Quirus babbled hastily. "I saw and heard these men myself. They must be from the future, for no such men have ever been seen in our time. Their leader seems human like ourselves, a tall, red-haired man with eyes like ice. Another is a green-eyed devil who does not seem completely human. A third is a metal giant. The fourth is a brain — a living brain inside a transparent case, yet it moves and sees and talks with the others!"

Zikal was a little incredulous still, but badly staggered.

"Men from the future? How could they come back through time? In future ages perhaps there may be a science, greater

than any we know, that would achieve time-travel. If such future scientists have really come back to aid Darmur —" He whirled back on the spy. "What did Darmur say to them?"

"He seemed stupefied himself at their appearance," said Quirus. "Then, when he was convinced they had really come from the future, he asked them at once if they knew how to synthesize uranium."

"And what did they answer?" demanded Zikal anxiously.

"The leader of the strangers, the red-haired one who called himself Captain Future, said that the synthesis of uranium was beyond his science."

An expression of relief and satisfaction crossed Zikal's powerful face.

"So!" he exclaimed. "Darmur's help from the future has failed him as everything else has done. This explodes his plan completely. When the Council of Katain meets tomorrow, he'll have to admit it."

"But that is not all," continued the spy hurriedly. "The red-haired leader of these strangers from the future told Darmur that he must not give up hope. He said that they might be able to find some solution of the problem!"

"They won't," predicted Zikal. "Darmur's whole scheme hinged upon his securing an enormous amount of uranium. His exploring expedition have failed to find enough natural uranium in the whole System. He can't synthesize it artificially, either, so his crazy plan is done for."

AFTER a moment, though, the Katainian leader's massive face expressed a troubling doubt.

"And yet this stranger, this Captain Future, might be able to find a way, somehow. The man must be a supreme master of science to have achieved the colossal feat of crossing time. Who knows but what he might just be able to find some way of implementing Darmur's

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plan?"

Zikal's great fists clenched.

"By Koom, that mustn't happen! When the Council meets tomorrow for the great decision, it must decide in favor of my plan. It's taken me months of weary work to overcome the faint-hearted, sentimental objections of our people to the killing of useless Martians. I'm not going to let all my work upset at the last moment by allowing these strangers from the future to come in and swing the Council to Darmur's scheme. His scheme, even if it worked, would gamble with the lives of all our race!"

Quirus smiled thinly.

"You need not pretend such great solicitude for our people to me, Zikal. The populace may believe you're considering only their safety, but I'm not one of the ignorant mob."

"Well, what if I do gain dictatorial powers, once my plan is decided upon?" demanded Zikal angrily. "Don't I deserve such power? Isn't it I who have worked out all the preparations for destroying the Martians and taking their world? Wouldn't our people be better off with a strong master to guide them, rather than under this doddering, weak-hearted Council?"

Zikal paced back and forth in the curving-walled black chamber, while the dark-faced spy watched him. Worried doubt increased on the leader's hard face.

"Quirus, we're not going to take any chance of this man from the future upsetting all our work at this last moment," he rapped out, turning abruptly. "This Captain Future must be eliminated at once."

Fear came into the spy's dark face.

"You mean — kill him?" he muttered. "I don't know if it could be done. The man is strange, powerful —"

"Bah, he's a living man, even if he has all the science of future ages in his head," spat Zikal. "He can be killed like anyone else. You have a neutron tube?"

Reluctantly the spy nodded, drawing the weapon from his tunic. It was in appearance a thin glass tube mounted on a metal stock.

"Then you know what to do," said Zikal harshly. "Get this leader of the strangers and, if possible, the others, too."

Quirus' dark face was panicky.

"I'm afraid!" he gasped. "Those four — they're so weird, so strange —" "Would you rather take your chance with them, or with me?" demanded his leader threateningly.

The spy gulped and nodded shakily. "I'll do it."

"Report back as soon as you have," Zikal snapped. "I'll be waiting here." With dread in his soul, the Katainian spy drove his gyro-car back through the city toward Darmur's home. Only greater fear of his merciless master forced him forward.

He left the car and stealthily began creeping through the moonlit garden toward the old scientist's dwelling. From open windows of the bubblelike black mansion came the soft glow of iridescent light and the sound of low voices.

CLUTCHING the stock of his neutron tube, Quirus wormed his way silently through the graceful flowers and trees, until he was peering through the window of a lighted room.

He saw Darmur in there, sitting at the end of a long table, with his daughter and son standing behind him. The old scientist was talking earnestly to the red-haired man called Captain Future, whose back was toward the window. Nearby poised the weird case of the Brain, floating without movement in mid-air, his strange lens-eyes fixed on the old Katainian scientist. In a chair sat the awesome metal giant.

Quirus could not see the green-eyed, unhuman one, nor the Earthgirl, but the ones he saw were enough to deepen the dread in his mind. How could he hope to

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slay such beings as these? Yet he must do it, or face the wrath of Zikal.

He raised his neutron tube, aiming at Captain Future's back. At that moment came a loud, hissing exclamation from behind him. He turned quickly, "Who the devil are you? What are you doing here?"

Quirus spun around, appalled. The green-eyed android and the Earthgirl had surprised him. In mad panic, the spy fired the brilliant, deadly neutron beam pointblank at them.

CHAPTER XIV

Death Under Yugra

FUTURE and his comrades were experiencing Katainian hospitality. Not even the baffled desperation that old Darmur must be feeling, nor the awesome shadow of destruction that the premonitory shudder of the planet had cast upon them, could make the scientist forget his duties to his strange guests. He insisted upon postponing further discussion until the Futuremen had rested and eaten.

He introduced to them his daughter, Lureen. A slim, young girl in a graceful gold tunic, with dark hair braided back from a pale, beautiful face, she had been watching Captain Future and his strange companions with breathless wonder in her violet eyes.

"I'll get Ahla!" Otho said hastily as they started into the house. "She was afraid to come out of the Comet at first."

Ahla, indeed, was somewhat terrified by her succession of strange experiences. But the primitive girl of Earth seemed to trust Otho utterly, for she came hesitantly with him to the black mansion. Darmur's daughter promptly led the shy girl off, though Ahla looked back anxiously at Otho. The old scientist himself conducted Curt Newton and his comrades to a

chamber of the dwelling.

Future looked around appreciatively. There was an austere, unadorned beauty about the curving black walls and simple, severe furniture.

"This is a beautiful world," he murmured. "Katain, the golden. No wonder its people are heartsick as its destruction approaches."

"They have certainly delayed leaving it until the last," the Brain, always coldly unemotional, commented raspingly. "They've little time left."

There was a sunken bath adjoining the chamber. Curt soaked with delight in the scented waters, as did Otho. Even Grag, following their example, polished up his metal limbs and hammered out a small dent in his knee with a tool he brought from the Comet.

"If you really want to improve your appearance, hammer yourself out a new face," giped Otho.

Grag raised the tool threateningly.

"I'll hammer one out for you, you product of the residue at the bottom of a laboratory retort."

They went down to the softly illuminated dining hall where Darmur and the others were waiting. Ahla had been dressed in one of Lureen's gold tunics and the shy primitive flushed with pleasure at Otho's admiration.

The meal was a simple one of fruits, cakes and a mild wine. Curt and Otho ate with gusto. Grag replenished his own energies by inserting a small charge of copper fuel into the orifice by which his atomic machinery was fed.

The Brain basked in the stimulating vibrations of a small projector which Grag had brought from the strange Comet.

Curt looked past his wineglass at the moonlit garden outside. The flowering trees were stirring softly in the warm breeze and showering white blossoms over the golden ground like drifting snow. The beauty of this lost world of time

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caught at his heart.

"Aye, Katain is lovely," murmured old Darmur, sensing his thought. "No wonder my people dread abandoning it for such a perilous odyssey to a distant star as I had hoped to lead."

Captain Future pushed back his glass and bent forward keenly.

"Darmur, what is your plan? Why do you need so much uranium? Even if you had it, how could you transport all the hosts of this race across almost nine light years to Sirius? You haven't enough ships for that, surely!"

DARMUR for answer, pointed up at the little, yellow moon that was shining softly in the starry sky.

"There is the ship which I proposed to use to transport our race across the Universe," he answered.

"Katain's moon?" Curt asked, startled. "Do you mean that your proposal —"

"I planned to make our moon, Yugra, into a great ship to carry all our people to Sirius. It seemed the only possible solution. The satellite could be torn away from the System and hurled into outer space toward Sirius, by continuous explosions of atomic energy on a great scale. It could carry our entire race there. The Council allocated men and materials for me to use in making preparations for my plan, years ago.

"We built on Yugra semi-underground chambers extensive enough to hold our millions of people. We also constructed near the moon's equator a gigantic pit, lined with refractory material, which would be the rocket-tube that would propel the satellite. By continuous explosion of vast quantities of pure uranium in that colossal rocket-tube, Yugra could be accelerated finally to a speed half that of light."

"But even at that speed, it would take you nearly twenty years to reach Sirius!" objected the Brain. "How could all your

people live so long on that little moon in the dark cold of interstellar space?"

Darmur turned his tired eyes on the questioner.

"Our people would be sleeping during that time. We know a way to cause complete suspension of animation by a freezing of the atoms of the body. The whole population would lie in artificially induced sleep in the protected subterranean chambers, except the few required to pilot the moon."

The old Katainian shrugged his shoulders wearily.

"But all that long toil of preparation has proved useless. The quantity of uranium needed to release sufficient atomic energy to tear Yugra from this System is enormous. I had been confident that we could amass enough uranium by sending prospecting expeditions to the other planets."

"But when you sent them, they found there wasn't sufficient procurable uranium in the System," Curt Newton finished for him.

Darmur nodded heavily. "Aye, that is what they found. Uranium is not a plentiful element, at best. And it constantly grows less in quantity as time passes, since it constantly disintegrates by radioactive decay into other elements, the final end-product being lead. There is much more uranium in the System now than there will be in your time, a hundred million years from now. Even so, there isn't enough for my purposes."

He made a defeated gesture.

"There might be enough if we could get all that lies at the molten cores of the planets, but that would be impossible. There's not nearly enough of the element in deposits that could be reached. The expeditions we sent out prospected every planet, every possible source."

Jhulun spoke quietly to the Futuremen.

"I was leading such an expedition when the Martians captured us. They held us for

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hostages, since they have heard rumors of Zikal's plan to destroy them and are worried."

"Aye, and now Zikal's hideous scheme will receive the Council's approval at tomorrow's fateful meeting," said Darmur somberly, "It is all because there isn't enough uranium to operate my migration plan. You know now why my first question was whether you could synthesize uranium. That was my one hope. That is why I sent out the time message in a call for help. I had hoped that future science would be able to synthesize uranium artificially."

CAPTAIN FUTURE shook his head slowly, "It just can't be done," he declared. "Uranium is the heaviest and most complex of all the elements and it's inherently unstable. To force together hundreds of protons, electrons and other particles into that unstable pattern is beyond the power of any science."

"And since only uranium contains enough stored power to propel a body of Yugra's mass, the whole thing is hopeless," Darmur added hopelessly. "Tomorrow's meeting of the Council will indeed be a fateful one. When I confess defeat, the Councilors must approve Zikal's plan to murder all the Martian people and take their world."

"Say, I just thought of something!" Otho exclaimed. "Zikal's plan can't go through. There are Martians in our own future age and there wouldn't be any if they are all murdered now."

Curt looked at the android witheringly.

"Your reasoning is cockeyed. If the present Martian race is all killed now and the Katainians take their place, the Katainians will be the ancestors of the Martians of our time."

"Well, it was just an idea," grumbled Otho. "I'm going out to get some air. You great minds can figure it out. Want to come, Ahla?"

The pretty Earthgirl rose eagerly and accompanied the restless android from the room. The others sat in dull despair, thinking frantically. Grag's booming voice broke the silence.

"Couldn't we use the time-thrusting force somehow to transport all the Katainians to a future age?"

"Couldn't be done," rasped the Brain. "It would take far too long to build enough time-force generators to use on this whole race. Remember how long it took us to build just one? And even if you could send the Katainians into the future, where would they live? Their own world would be gone. Mars, a desert world, couldn't support them. The gravitation of the other planets would still be too great for them to live upon."

Captain Future had paid little heed to them. He had been staring at the wall with narrowed eyes, his mind racing with the impact of a new idea.

"Darmur, I've just thought of a way in which we might get enough uranium for your plan," he said tensely. "It came from what you mentioned about uranium disintegrating, growing less all the time. I—"

At that moment came a startling interruption from the moonlit garden outside the window. It was a loud exclamation in Otho's voice.

"Who the devil are you? What are you doing here?"

CURT and the others spun toward the window. Just outside it, Otho and Ahla were confronting a dark-faced young Katainian who held in his hand a glass tube mounted on a gunlike stock. The Katainian whirled in panic as Otho spoke, and fired a brilliant beam at pointblank range. Simultaneously, with a cry of alarm, Ahla thrust Otho aside. The thin beam struck the Earthgirl's chest. She collapsed without a sound.

Curt Newton was on his feet with his

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proton pistol out, plunging for the window. He was already too late. With a terrible, hissing cry of rage, Otho had leaped at the panicky spy.

The android's super-swift lunge carried him past the spy's deadly beam. The weapon fell from the Katinian's hand as Otho's fingers gripped his throat. When Curt reached them, the android had forced the spy down upon his knees and was squeezing his neck in a death-grip.

"Otho, wait, don't kill him!" Curt yelled. "We've got to find out who sent him—"

His exclamations had no effect. This was one time in which the android was beyond hearing Future's command. Otho's green eyes were blazing with superhuman rage.

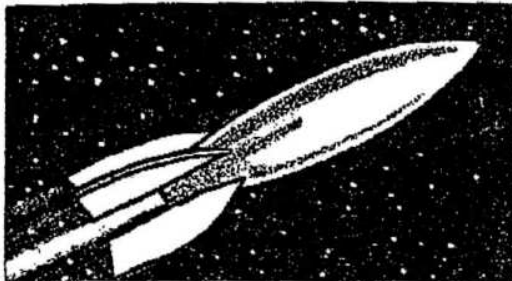
Even as Curt Newton reached their side, the spy's neck gave way. The man sank in a lifeless heap. Otho turned, wild and dazed, toward the others who were now bending over Ahla's still form.

One glance at the Earthgirl was enough. The deadly beam had driven directly through her heart.

"She pushed me aside," Otho muttered blindly. "She sensed the danger and wanted me to be safe."

For the first time in his life, Captain Future saw a glimmer of tears in Otho's green eyes.

Darmur and his son had been examining the dead spy.



"One of Zikal's men," said the old scientist in a low voice to Curt. "I think Zikal sent him here to kill you men from the future, but we can prove nothing."

Curt nodded, looked pityingly down at

the white face of the primitive Earthgirl who had come so far across the System to die.

"We can bury her here in the garden," Lureen was saying gently to Otho. "I think she would like that."

Grag dug the deep grave at the garden's end and carefully lowered into it a long chest of silvery metal, into which they had put Ahla's body. As the robot silently refilled the grave, white blossoms drifted onto it from the flowering trees. And then came another dim, quivering groundquake. The low, rumbling thunder was like a distant requiem.

They left Otho brooding there and walked silently back to the mansion. Lureen, crying, fled to her chamber, but old Darmur looked earnestly into Captain Future's somber face.

"Just before that happened" — the old scientist made a mournful gesture toward the garden — "you were saying that you'd thought of a way in which it might be possible to secure enough uranium for the migration plan. What is your idea?"

The old Katinian's tension was apparent. With an effort, Curt forced his thoughts back from the pathetic tragedy.

"Yes, I thought of something that will sound mad to you, but that might just work. You have the figures on the exact amount of uranium needed?"

"In my laboratory," Darmur answered eagerly. "This way."

He led them to a smaller spherical black structure behind the mansion. Its lighted interior was one large room, crowded with the apparatus of Katinian science. A few instruments were unfamiliar, but most Curt recognized. At the center of the room towered an object like a squat telescope, mounted upon gimbals over a complex of multilayered quartz disks. Darmur nodded toward it as he went to his files.

"The achronic beam projector I used to send into the future the message that

brought you here."

He brought Captain Future a mass of calculations. Curt sat down with him, the Brain poised beside them. As Darmur explained the figures, Curt asked sharp, brief questions.

"That tells me the quantity of uranium you would need," he said finally, jotting it down. "Now what was the final estimate by your prospecting expeditions of the whole amount of uranium now procurable in the System?"

DARMUR told him. Curt jotted the figure down, also, and then began a series of rapid, complicated calculations. He finally looked up, his eyes far away. "It might just be done," he muttered. Then his jaw tightened. "It's got to be done! There's no other possible way to get enough uranium."

The Brain had followed the calculations and even his icy calm was startled by what he guessed of Curt's intention.

"It will be a great risk, lad," Simon warned. "Greater by far than any we have yet dared."

"Captain Future, what is this plan of yours for getting uranium?" old Darmur appealed.

Curt Newton explained briefly. As he did so, a look of wonder and awe came into the old Katainian scientist's eyes.

"Name of the Sacred Star!" he whispered. "You would try that?"

"I'd try anything before I'd let Zikal and his party murder the whole Martian race," Curt stated. "Hand me those papers and we'll go over my figures again. We've got to have this all prepared to submit to the Council tomorrow."

CHAPTER XV

Disaster

SINCE dawn thousands of Katainian men and women had been streaming through the streets of the capital, toward the towering black sphere of the Council Hall. From all over the golden world they had come. Those who could not crowd into the great building were packed in the surrounding park in a dense, motionless, silent throng.

Their absolute silence was proof of the terrifying gravity of this hour. The hopes and fears of generations were to come at last to a climax in today's fateful session of the Council. The millions of people of the doomed planet were to learn at last whether desperate urgency must drive them to the slaughter of a fellow-race, or whether they could somehow escape that crime.

The vast amphitheater interior of the Council Hall was gripped by the same taut silence. Far up into the shadows towered the curved tiers of seats, a sea of blurred white faces. Every eye was watching the dais at the front of the great fane. Pure white light from a concealed source beat brilliantly on the dais, but no one yet sat upon it.

Sharp trumpet blasts rang suddenly across the cavernous interior of the hall. Then a deep, amplified voice roared forth. "The Council of Katain!" Down the broad isle toward the dais, in a somberly silent procession came thirty men in the yellow silken robes of state, their faces pale and drawn. Wordlessly they took places on the dais, facing the throng.

"The Chief Councilor!" roared the same powerful, amplified voice.

Stepping forward a little from the others an old, white-haired man stood arrow-straight in his heavy robes. His voice came solemnly.

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"People of Katain, for long we have lived in the shadow of a foreknown doom. There is none of us who is not aware that, within eight weeks, our planet will pass into a last conjunction with Jupiter, which will cause its explosion and final destruction. Nothing can save our world itself from that disaster, but we have long searched for a means to save our race.

"Almost two years ago, two of the most renowned scientists of our race, Zikal and Darmur, proposed different plans for the salvation of Katain's millions. To each of them the Council allocated all that was needed to prepare for his plan. It seemed wise, in view of the dreadful nature of the emergency, to prepare both proposals. Then, if one was found impractical, the other could still be used.

"Now the time has come to decide whether the plan of Zikal, or the plan of Darmur shall be followed. The Council will today make that decision. Before making it, however, the two proponents of the different plans will be heard in a final exposition of their proposals."

The Chief Councilor made a gesture. Up onto the dais from the front row of the spectators came Darmur and Zikal. The two men were a contrast — Darmur's gray hair, stooped, aging figure and haggard face against Zikal's stalwart form and massive, confident features.

"Zikal will summarize his proposal first," said the Chief Councilor. "Listen well, people of Katain, and pray to the Sacred Star that we make a wise decision on this fateful day."

Zikal stepped forward. His strong face was serious, confident in expression as his black eyes swept the throng. His voice was firm and strong.

"Katainians, I shall be brief. All of you know the details of my proposal. You realize that it contemplates the immediate elimination of the Martian race, to be followed by a rapid migration of our people to Mars in the great fleet of space

ships that has already been built by the Council.

"The plan itself is impossible of failure. At this moment a hundred space ships are waiting for the word to attack Mars. Each of those ships contains a tremendous quantity of lethal gas, stored at high pressure.

"The gas is so lethal that a concentration of a thousandth of one per cent will kill instantly. The gas ships do not even need to land upon Mars. They will enter the Martian atmosphere at selected points and release their vast quantities of compressed vapor. The people of Mars will die swiftly and almost painlessly, before they are even aware of danger. Within a few days the gas will have precipitated as powder and we can begin migrating to Mars."

ZIKAL'S voice deepened, throbbed with controlled emotion.

"People of Katain, I know that you shrink from this dreadful necessity. I shrink from it, too. We are a human race, detesting war and every other form of murder. This necessity to put to death the people of a neighboring race seems appalling to us, but either the Martians or we Katainians must die. Their crowded world cannot support both races.

"It is far better for the System that we Katainians survive. Ours is the higher, finer civilization. In ours lies more of hope for the future. Therefore, hating the necessity as much as you do, I still feel it my duty to ask that the Council approve my proposal and that I be given authority to carry it into full action at once."

There was no break in the taut silence of the crowd and the Council as Zikal paused. He glanced at Darmur before continuing.

"One more thing, Katainians. My plan is the only plan by which we can escape. Mars, as you know, is the one other planet in the System upon which we can

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permanently exist. As for Darmur's fantastic scheme of carrying our whole race on a colossal interstellar migration to Sirius, it is impossible. To propel our moon, Yugra, to that distant star, as he has proposed, would require for production of atomic power more uranium than there is in the whole System. I challenge Darmur to deny that fact!"

A low wave of murmuring that rose to a swell of excited voices swept through the hall as Zikal stepped back after flinging his challenge. Darmur walked to the front of the dais. The hum and roar died away as the aging scientist stood waiting patiently.

"Katainians, you know the details of my plan, also. You know that our astronomers have proved that around the far star, Sirius, circle many worlds whose size and natural conditions would make them ideal homes for our race. You are aware of the preparations that have been made to use our moon as a great ship to bear us to that distant haven. There we could take up life anew, free of the crime of having slaughtered a fellow-race. "You would rather undertake that great migration than commit a hideous crime, I know, but you are asking if such a migration is possible. Zikal has just charged that there is not enough uranium in the System to propel our moon to Sirius and I admit the truth of that charge."

A roar of tremendous excitement broke through the Katainian throng. Zikal stepped forward, his massive face flushed with triumph.

"Since Darmur now admits his plan is impossible —" he began. Darmur held up his hand. "Wait, I have not admitted that. Hear me to the end. Months ago I faced the appalling fact that we could not find enough uranium in the System to carry out my plan. In that desperate emergency I sought the help of a greater science than our own — the science of future ages."

Darmur saw the growing puzzlement

on the faces of those before him as he continued.

"We know that time is but a dimension, that the worlds and people of the future are as real as we are, but separated from us by that dimension. In my desperation I sent out a plea for help along the time dimension by means of an achronic beam, a plea to the unguessable future. I begged that if any men of future ages had solved the problem of physical time-travel, that they come back and aid us in our dire extremity."

Darmur's voice sank. He leaned forward, his eyes burning coals of hope. "That plea was answered, people of Katain! Men of the far future have come back a hundred million years to our time, in answer to my desperate call!"

THE Katainian throng, spectators and Council alike, seemed frozen in amazement. Darmur flung up his hand in a sweeping gesture.

"Those men who have come from the unthinkable far future to help us are on Katain now!" his voice rang out. "They are here!"

Thousands of eyes turned in the direction the old scientist was indicating, the rear of the great hall. The four Futuremen were marching down the broad aisle toward the dais. So dramatically unexpected was their appearance that in that moment they were the only moving figures in the whole vast amphitheater.

To the Katainians, they were supernatural figures. Curt Newton, tall and grim in his gray zipper-suit, his red head bare. Otho's lithe, unhuman white figure, his slanted green eyes fixed on the dais. Grag, stark and mighty giant of metal, clanking on with his gleaming photo-electric eyes sweeping the throng. The Brain, gliding magically beside them, cold lens-eyes watching.

"Men from the far future, they have come back across the ages to Katain to

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help us in our hour of need!" Darmur cried. "And they can help us bring my plan to success!"

Across the frozen throng passed a sigh of awe. No one of the Katinians could doubt that these four had come from the future. Their awesome un-familiarity of appearance could be explained in no other way.

As the Futuremen ascended onto the dais, Otho was glaring in bitter hate at Zikal's big form.

"So that's the guy," muttered the android. "He's the one that sent that spy who killed Ahla. I'll settle with him."

"Not now, Otho," Curt whispered urgently. "Any open struggle now might make the Council decide against our plan."

Darmur was speaking on to the throng.

"These men from the far future, with their superior science, can do what we cannot. They can secure enough uranium to propel our moon to Sirius."

Zikal recovered from his amazement and found his voice. He shouted furiously: "Darmur is lying, people of Katin! The leader of these men of the future was heard to admit that he could not synthesize uranium artificially. Let him deny it if he can!"

Captain Future's gray eyes narrowed on Zikal.

"I do not deny it. Uranium cannot be synthesized by anyone." Zikal's face blazed in triumph.

"Then where will you secure the uranium for Darmur's scheme? He has just admitted that there is not enough natural uranium in the whole System for his purpose."

"That, too, is the truth," Captain Future said calmly. "There is not enough uranium in the System — now. But a billion years ago there was enough uranium for our needs. Uranium is an element that steadily disintegrates into other elements at an unvarying rate. Its quantity constantly

grows less as time passes. A billion years ago, according to our calculations, there was more than enough uranium on the System's worlds for Darmur's plan."

"Yes, a billion years ago," scoffed Zikal sneeringly. "But what good does that do now?"

Curt sprang his surprise.

"We Futuremen are going back a billion years in time, when uranium was plentiful, and secure enough of the element to carry out Darmur's migration plan!"

WILD excitement swept the hall. It was minutes before the turmoil quieted enough so that those on the dais could be heard.

"It's impossible!" Zikal was shouting. "A fantastic scheme that can't possibly work —"

Curt addressed himself to the Council.

"It is quite workable," he assured them calmly. "The uranium does exist in great quantities back in that time. And our ship, which has already come back across a hundred million years of the time dimension, can make that greater flight into the past just as easily."

"But even if you could, how could you bring back enough uranium in your one ship?" the Chief Councilor stammered.

"We wouldn't bring it back in our ship. We can focus our time-thruster force through an auxiliary projector upon the uranium deposits of those worlds of the far past and hurl them by a powerful, calculated time drive toward this present time. It means that the uranium deposits now existing on the planets will suddenly be almost doubled. The fleet of space ships you've prepared can transport the element to Yugra."

"It's a crazy, utterly impossible scheme!" Zikal roared vehemently. "If you pin your hopes to it, the people of Katin will be destroyed."

"They will not," Darmur contradicted.

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"The plan is sound. It will permit us to migrate to Sirius without the crime of murdering a race."

The violent argument went on until the Chief Councilor held up his hand for silence.

"The Council will consider the proposals," he stated.

They left the dais and went to their private chambers. Tension gripped the throng as they waited for the fateful decision. Curt Newton was strung to harp-string tautness, but his face was calm.

When the Council finally returned, an utter hush fell upon all as they waited for the Chief Councilor to deliver the decision. The old Katainian addressed Captain Future.

"We have decided to make a trial of your audacious plan. If you can actually venture into the remote past and drive great quantities of uranium into this time, Darmur's scheme of migration to Sirius will be carried out. But we can grant you only a limited time to prove that your daring proposal is feasible. Unless by four weeks from now the uranium you propose to drive forward from the past is actually collected and in readiness for use on Yugra, we shall be forced to abandon hope of your plan and give Zikal authority to proceed with his Martian invasion plan."

Curtis first relief chilled a little as he heard this condition. He saw Zikal's massive face, which at first had been raging, now assume a confident expression.

"So Zikal still hopes to get the game into his hands," Captain Future thought. "We're not through with that would-be dictator yet."

Darmur was gravely accepting the Council's conditions, "The uranium will be ready on Yugra by the time you specify. I have absolute faith in the ability of our friends from the future."

As the session broke up, the Brain muttered to Curt:

"Four weeks doesn't give us much time, lad. It'll take us half that to build an auxiliary projector."

"We'll have to do it in less," declared Captain Future grimly. "Darmur will give us the use of his laboratory and that will help."

CHAPTER XVI

Castaways Before Creation

THE next few days and nights were filled with intense labor by the Futuremen. Using Darmur's laboratory and equipment, as well as the apparatus of the Comet, they worked frantically to construct the auxiliary projector that was essential to their audacious plan. Each day seemed to bring more and heavier groundquakes and electrical storms of increasing intensity. And each night the white disk of Jupiter grew larger in the starry sky as Katain swept on toward its doom.

By the fifth night, the herculean efforts of the Futuremen had finished the projector. It looked like a great searchlight, mounted outside the wall of the Comet near the prow. The time-thrusting force of the machine inside could be diverted into this projector and shot forth as a concentrated beam to drive matter a calculated distance forward along the time dimension.

Darmur's ships had already started for the other planets and would be waiting to collect the quantities of uranium the Futuremen were to force across time.

In his laboratory that night, Darmur showed the Futuremen his maps of the various planets, on which all surface uranium deposits were marked.

"There should be deposits of uranium in most of the same places a billion years back," he said. "The deposits would

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merely be far more extensive than those that exist now."

Curt nodded as he rolled up the maps.

"You have your men ready to collect the stuff quickly and take it to Yugra without an instant's delay. We'll drive it forward, all right."

"I wish I were going with you!" exclaimed Lureen, her eyes shining.

At that moment came a yell from the garden, then the crackle of a neutron gun. They rushed out just in time to hear a gyro-car speed away. Jhulun came running up, panting, a weapon in his hand.

"I saw a prowler near your ship — One of Zikal's spies, I think! He got away—"

Darmur paled. "That devil would do anything to wreck our plan, to get power into his own hands by having his Martian scheme adopted."

"You should have let me kill him before now, Chief," stated Otho.

"We'd better get started before he does something to hold us back," Curt said sharply. "Start up the cyscs, Grag. Good-bye Darmur. We'll do our best. See that your men do the same."

With awe in their faces, Darmur and his son and daughter watched the

Futuremen start upon the tremendous billion-year journey into the past.

The Comet soared up out of the garden and rushed out from moonlit Katain into empty space.

"All right," Curt called out to Grag, who was piloting. "Hold her steady and I'll start the thruster."

He and Otho had already donned their space-suits. Now Curt turned the power of the throbbing cyclotrons once more into the time-thruster. From the cone sprayed the extra-electromagnetic energy, driving every atom in the ship back along the time dimension, rocking them with a sick dizziness.

Captain Future saw that the System had again become a featureless blur. He watched the main gage. The arrow was

creeping slowly backward as they were driven up the mysterious time flow into the unguessable past.

Without warning, there was a blazing explosion near the front of the cabin. It picked the Futuremen and hurled them against the walls with irresistible force. Curt's helmeted head hit a stanchion and he knew nothing more.

Four Futuremen lay silent and unconscious where they had been flung by the violence of the unexpected explosion. Though the bulkhead between the main cabin and control room had been wrecked, the hull and cyclotrons and the big time-thruster had not been injured. With no hand now at its controls, the machine continued to drone on, spraying forth the powerful energy that continued to drive every atom in the

Comet farther and farther back along the time dimension.

On and on, back into the time, the ship bore its senseless occupants, until finally the throbbing cyclotrons sputtered and died. Then at last the time-thruster's glow faded away. The ship floated silently in space.

OTHO was the first of the Futuremen to recover consciousness. The android staggered groggily to his feet, his head still ringing from violent impact with the floor.

"What in the First Principle's name happened?" he wondered dazedly as he looked around the silent ship. Then alarm seized him as his eyes fell on his unmoving companions. "Chief! Simon! Grag! Imps of Pluto, if they're dead —"

He removed Curt's space-helmet and applied frantic first aid. Gradually the red-haired planeteer came back to consciousness. He looked around with wide, stunned gray eyes.

"What was it? Something exploded. I felt as though a meteor hit me."

"Chief, I can't bring Simon around!"

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Otho cried worriedly. "Something's wrong with his pumps."

The Brain's square, transparent case lay motionless. It had been flung against the hull so forcefully that the electrical connections of its serum-purifiers had been snapped, rendering Simon's living brain unconscious.

Curt Newton stumbled unsteadily to a cabinet and brought out instruments with which he rapidly opened the Brain's case. Working deftly, Captain Future soon repaired the snapped connections. When his vital mechanisms functioned again, the Brain regained consciousness.

The three of them, without stopping to parley, bent over Grag. The big robot was the most badly injured by the explosion, since he had apparently been nearest to it. One of his giant metal legs had been torn almost away and his electrical nervous system had been smashed.

The other Futuremen had repaired Grag's strange body before this. They plied a portable atomic welder and other tools skillfully. When the robot's nerves had been rejoined, Grag showed every sign of full life.

"What happened?" he demanded, clambering to his feet.

"Something exploded right in the midst of us," Captain Future said. "It wasn't a cyc-explosion, but it —"

"Chief, that was a neutron bomb!" Otho cried. "And I'll bet a planet that one of Zikal's men planted it here!"

Curt's eyes narrowed. "I believe you're right. Remember, Jhulun caught a spy prowling around the Comet just before we started." He swore with feeling. "Zikal would go to any lengths to wreck Darmur's plan, so his own would be carried out, giving him dictatorial authority."

"It's lucky you and Otho had your space-suits on," Grag declared. "At least that gave you some protection from the explosion."

Curt looked swiftly around the Comet.

"It doesn't seem to have done any irreparable damage. The cycs are too far back to have been affected." He went to the big time-thruster and inspected it carefully. "As far as I can see, the thruster wasn't harmed, thank the stars. It has stopped, probably due to the shock, but we can start it again and go on back —"

Curt Newton's voice trailed away into silence, his jaw dropping in an expression of utter amazement as he looked at the gage of the thruster.

"Why, this dial must have been knocked out," he muttered. "It shows a trip of three billion years, which is impossible."

Then a sudden thought made Captain Future lunge back toward the cyc-room. His eyes leaped to the fuel gages on the feed-lines that brought powdered copper fuel to the cyclotrons to be transformed into atomic energy.

"Holy sun-imps!" he cried, aghast. "The fuel tanks are absolutely empty! While we were unconscious, the time-thruster was running wide open. It shot us so far back into the past that the cycs stopped from lack of fuel!"

"You mean it's taken us three billion years into the past?" asked Otho. "Why, Chief, you must be imagining things. That bump on the head —"

But Captain Future was striding toward the control room. His tall figure froze as he stared wildly out of the broad windows. The other Futuremen, following him, became as motionless as they, too, looked out upon the strange spectacle in space — a spectacle upon which no human eye had ever rested before.

THE Solar System they had known — was gone entirely. Millions of miles from where their ship floated, the Sun was blazing. But it was not the brilliant yellow star they had always known. It was a vastly larger, dull blue sun that burned

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now in the black heavens. And it was entirely alone in space. Not one planet, not even a single asteroid circled that huge, flaring blue orb.

"Where are the planets?" Grag cried bewilderedly. "What's become of all the worlds and moons?"

Captain Future tore his gaze from the spectacle to face the others.

"The time-thruster did carry us back three billion years in time, while we lay senseless and unable to stop it," he said tonelessly. "We've come back to an age before the planets of the System even existed!"

"Aye, lad!" rang the Brain's voice, charged with pulsing excitement. "The wonder of it! We are looking upon our Sun when it's still a blue giant."

"You mean the worlds of our System haven't been born yet?" echoed Grag unbelievably. "Melt me down, this really is trouble! Zikal's cursed work has thrown us two billion years farther back than we wanted to go. Now we'll have to turn around and go forward again. We can't get the uranium of the System's planets when there aren't any planets yet. Let's get going."

"You've forgotten something, Grag," said Captain Future grimly. "The fuel supply of the cycs is exhausted. There isn't an ounce of copper left in the tanks."

Otho's green eyes widened.

"Then what are we going to do?" he blurted. "We can't get copper for fuel from some planet, for there aren't any planet's yet."

"That's just it," Curt rejoined significantly. "We've no fuel and no place to get any from."

"Devils of space!" gasped Otho. "We're cast away in time — cast away before the creation of the System!"

There was a grim pause. They looked out at the wild, strange spectacle of space. The Sun's mighty blue orb, millions of miles away, was the only comparatively

near object. Aside from it, there was nothing but the blindingly bright eyes of the burning stars, a gorgeous skyscape such as they had never seen.

"The stars are much closer to each other in this age," muttered the Brain. "Look at that one yonder."

Curt's eyes fixed on the brilliant red star at which the Brain was gazing. It outshone any other in the blazoned heavens.

"There might just be a way out of this jam," Curt said thoughtfully. "If we could get the time-thruster going enough to take us only a few million years forward in time, I think it would give us a chance to do something."

"By that time the planets may be born and we can get copper?" Otho questioned.

Curt nodded, staring at the red star.

"I think so. It's about the only chance left."

"But how can we start the time-thruster up for even that little jump when we haven't a scrap of fuel for the cycs?" Grag objected. Captain Future looked around the interior of the Comet, crowded with scientific equipment.

"We've got to strip the ship," he said. "We must use every ounce of copper in it, except that in the cycs and the time-thruster itself, for fuel. It may be enough to take us a little farther on to a time when there'll be planets and unlimited fuel supplies."

WITHOUT dissent, they put Curt's desperate expedient into operation. Ruthlessly the Futuremen tore apart scientific apparatus that would have been invaluable to any laboratory in the future Universe. Delicate instruments and massive tools that had taken years and infinite pains to build were relentlessly scrapped.

The copper flanges of the fine electro-spectroscopes, the copper switches on the control panel, the copper base of a fine

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therapeutic projector, all went into the macerator, in which Grag reduced the metal to fine powder.

When they had finished, the Comet looked as though vandals had been at work. Anxiously the Futuremen waited as Curt estimated the amount of powdered copper they had secured. He shook his red head.

"It's mighty little. It won't operate such a power-hungry device as the time-thruster for long. We can only-hope it will take us past the time when the planets will be born."

"What makes you think there's any chance of that?" Otho asked pessimistically. "Maybe the planets won't be formed for another half-billion years."

The Brain looked toward the brilliant red star out in space.

"If that star is coming toward here, as I think it is, the planets will soon be born."

"Yes, Simon, I'm gambling on that red star," Curt said. "Come, we'll load this copper and start the cycs."

The small amount of precious fuel was poured into the tanks. The automatic injectors shot it into the cyclotrons. As the cycs were switched on, the explosion of copper atoms into pure energy began in them.

Curt had already changed the setting of the time-thruster's controls so that the mechanism would emit an extra-electromagnetic force, which would accelerate the movement of the ship's atoms along the flowing time dimension, instead of reversing it now the force would hurl them forward, rather than backward in time.

As the cycs started throbbing, Captain Future hastily closed the circuit of the time-thruster. Again the quartz disks glowed. Again the big cone sprayed its radiance. And once more the Futuremen steadied themselves against the dizzying shock of that atom-pressing energy.

The needle of the time-gage began to

creep forward again. Curt hastened into the control room, the others at his heels. They stared in awe through the ports at a sight no one had ever seen.

CHAPTER XVII

Birth of a New System

THE Sun seemed unchanged, a giant blue orb glaring in empty space. But before their eyes the brilliant red star in the distance grew brighter.

"It's coming closer!" Curt exclaimed. "We're seeing millions of years of change take place in minutes, which is why it seems to be moving so rapidly."

The red star already presented a visible disk. As the time-thruster droned on, hurling them on through time, it became obvious that the star was moving in the direction of their own Sun.

"If it keeps coming on that way, it'll pass near the Sun," Otho said. "Say, then that red star must be the one that caused the birth of the planets!"

"I don't get it," protested Grag bewilderedly. "What are you talking about?" "Remember your astronomy, Grag," Curt Newton explained tensely. "The planets were known to have been formed by the approach of another star to our Sun. I think we're going to see that happen."

"Holy sun-imps!" cried the robot. "So that's what you were figuring on!"

The Comet was speeding on and on through time. Curt hoped fervently that the copper fuel would hold out long enough. Now the red star had itself become a sun-sized orb, blazing dazzlingly in the starry heavens as it approached. With solemn, cosmic majesty, it swept ever nearer toward the blue Sun, which seemed to be moving ponderously to meet it.

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In the youth of the Universe, chance was flinging two colossal, spinning orbs of flame toward each other, and out of that cosmic collision would come a strange sentient thing that called itself man.

"They're beginning to pull each other closer by mutual gravitational attraction," rasped the Brain in the closest his mechanical voice box could get to an awed whisper.

Then the Futuremen fell silent. Even their hardened spirits were overwhelmed by the titanic spectacle that was unfolding before them. The spectacle of the birth of the Solar System was about to take place before their eyes.

Stupefying indeed was the sight as the blue, glaring Sun and the even more gigantic red stranger marched majestically toward the fateful encounter. A weird, blinding radiance of mingled red and blue light streamed through even the glare-proof windows to dazzle the eyes of the Futuremen.

Curt saw long, wild streamers and prominences of flame lance out from the blue Sun. Its surface seemed wildly disturbed and the disturbance was increasing as the distance between it and the red giant shortened.

"They're going to pass mighty close to each other," gasped Otho, his green eyes dilated.

"Look, both stars are already warping from the tidal effect of gravitation," Captain Future exclaimed.

As the blue Sun and the huge red star drew closer to each other, the mutual pull was tugging each great sphere of flaming gas out of a flattened, whirling ball into a pearlike shape. The elongated projection of each star was being drawn out farther toward the other.

Now the two mighty stars were but a scant hundred million miles apart, about to pass each other. The terrific pull between them drew out still farther the tidal projection of each. And then —

"The projections are breaking away!" yelled Otho.

The strain upon the masses of the two tortured stars had become too great. The elongated streamers of fiery matter were torn loose in flaming masses. In that appalling moment, blazing prominences raged up from each riven star. Through space came a terrific wave of electrical force that rocked the Comet like a chip in a storm, flinging it wildly about.

CURT NEWTON and the Futuremen held on desperately to prevent being knocked senseless again. The time-thruster continued to drone, but they heard control panel fuses popping like firecrackers. Then the ship quieted as the unbelievable electrical wave passed.

"The two stars have passed!" Grag's booming voice shouted.

Red giant star and flaming blue Sun had passed and were now marching away from each other. But around the Sun, as around the departing stranger, now raced a swarm of small, flaming balls that had been torn away and given rotatory motion by the passing star.

Captain Future pointed at those circling satellites of the Sun with a hand that trembled slightly.

"The worlds are born," he said softly, his throat tight with emotion.

The red star, like a fat woman with a big family, grew smaller and smaller as it departed into infinity. But the eyes of the Futuremen were fixed on the flaming planets around their own Sun. What had seemed a bewildering swarm of blazing matter fell rapidly into definite orbits and patterns that now scrambled madly around the Sun.

From the little mass that had been flung farthest out, which would eventually become Pluto, to tiny Mercury close to the Sun, the ten worlds were recognizable. Nearly all had satellites of smaller flaming masses, embryo moons. And as they raced

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around the Sun, they seemed to be swiftly cooling, shrinking, solidifying.

"They'll soon be solid enough so we can land on one, at the rate we're going through time!" Curt exclaimed. "Then we can get enough copper —"

Ironically at the moment he spoke the throbbing cyclotrons began to sputter, then died. The scanty fuel had been exhausted. Their progress through time came to a dead stop as the thruster ceased to function.

"Stuck again!" said Otho bitterly. "And this time it looks as if our orbit was scrambled for good!"

"Can't we get copper yet from those planets?" Grag asked.

Captain Future shook his head. "They're still semi-molten. We've got to go farther in time before we can land on them."

"And there isn't a scrap of copper left that we can spare for cyc fuel," lamented Otho. Then a gleam came into his green eyes. "But, say, come to think of it, there's a little copper in Grag's insides."

"I'll twist your rubber neck into a knot!" cried Grag furiously. "Do you think you're going to make fuel out of me?"

"You'd be more help feeding the cys than otherwise," Otho retorted. Despite the gravity of the situation, Curt Newton grinned.

"There's not enough copper in Grag to help, anyway," he pointed out. He looked around the interior of the Comet. There appeared to be no possible source of fuel. "There's only one thing to do — tear down one of the cyclotrons and use its copper parts for fuel. It'll leave us only eight cys, but we can get just enough power from them."

"If one of them blew, we wouldn't have a spare," objected Otho.

"I know, but we have to take the chance," Curt replied grimly. "Come on. We'll take apart Number Nine Cyc."

The Futuremen rapidly went to work.

The big inertron outer and inner casings of the massive cyclotron were disassembled. From between them came the copper wire coils and plates which were the last possible source of fuel.

The powdered metal they obtained by their desperate expedient seemed pitifully small, compared with the risk they were running. Taking care not to spill a grain of it, they poured it into the fuel tanks. Soon the remaining eight cys began again their powerful throbbing.

Captain Future already had the time-thruster switched on. Once more its cone sprayed white radiance. Again they felt the familiar shock of extra-electromagnetic forces hurling their bodily atoms on into time.

THE planets resumed their nightmare race around the Sun. And, as they moved on along the time dimension across millions of years, the Sun itself was changing perceptibly. Its bluish shade faded through blue-white and white to a pale yellow. The yellow deepened as time flashed by.

"The Sun's temperature is increasing, as it begins to contract," Curt muttered, watching. "It must be near a more stable phase by now."

"Aye, lad," rasped the Brain, scrutinizing the great orb with intense interest through a shielded electro-telescope. "The increase of temperature inside it is causing thermo-nuclear reactions on the carbon-nitrogen cycle, a steady transformation of hydrogen into helium, with a great release of radiant energy as a concomitant."

"It's the planets I'm worried about, not the Sun," declared Otho. "But you can't see 'em. They're just streaks of light at this time speed."

Curt glanced sharply at the time gage.

"They should be nearly solid worlds by now. How is the fuel holding, Grag?" "Going down fast!" called the robot from

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where he sat at the space-stick. "That time-thruster eats up energy like nothing I ever saw before."

Captain Future came to decision. They could not risk being stranded again. It was better to take a chance that the planets were solid.

He shut off the time-thruster. The giddy race of the ten worlds around the Sun became a normal movement. Intently the red-haired planeteer scrutinized them in turn through the powerful electro-telescopes.

All of the worlds now had a solid crust, he noted. The great outer planets still appeared to be quite hot, but their moons and the smaller inner worlds were cooler. Each planet was now wrapped in an atmosphere that had been formed of occluded gases.

"They're solid, thank the stars!" Captain Future declared. "Here's where we start shipping uranium into the future. Head for Mercury, Grag."

With its dwindling fuel now powering the rocket-tube?, the Comet hurtled through space toward the yellow orb of the Sun. Soon they made out Mercury, a tiny globe swinging near the colossal flaming sphere. The surface of the smallest planet was a tumbled, jumbled wilderness of hardened lava and basalt as they swooped down toward it. The number of active volcanoes argued that the interior of the little planet was still in a highly molten state.

"First we have to find copper for ourselves," Curt said. "Then we'll start on the uranium."

Swinging back and forth over the tumbled, rocky planet, they searched its surface with their spectroscopic apparatus. It was not long before they had located a copper deposit large enough for their needs.

They brought the Comet down to a landing. Curt and Otho ventured out with Grag. For two hours the three comrades

labored in the blazing light of the huge Sun, digging out the metal.

When they had sufficient, it took but a few minutes to run it through the macerator. Then, with fuel tanks well loaded with the powdered metal, the Comet rose again above the surface of primeval Mercury.

"That takes care of the fuel problem, finally," Curt said, breathing more easily. "Now for the uranium. We've got a terrific job ahead. We must locate the main uranium deposits on nearly all the worlds and drive the element into the future with our auxiliary time force projector."

Otho looked discouraged.

"Chief, it's too big a contract for anybody. When you think of all those worlds we have to cover —"

"Thinking won't help us do it," rejoined Captain Future. "You know what depends on getting the uranium across time to the age of Katain — a whole people saved and Zikal's murderous scheme frustrated."

Otho's eyes hardened at mention of Zikal's name.

"You're right," he almost snarled. "Anything is worthwhile that'll crush that Katainian devil."

SIMON had been examining one of the planetary mineralogical maps which Curt and old Darmur had formulated for guidance.

"This shows two main deposits of uranium here on Mercury," rasped Simon. He read off the positions by latitude and longitude of the planet. Curt gave the order and Grag sent the Comet rushing across the wild, new planet to the nearest position. When they reached it, the robot kept their ship hovering low over the black rock plain, while Curt and Simon unlimbered the powerful fluorovisor they had built for this purpose.

The fluorovisor was a boxlike apparatus with a broad, white lens in one end and eyepieces in the other. It was

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designed to make it possible to see highly radioactive elements, even though they were imbedded beneath other minerals. The principle of the instrument was an induced hypersensitivity to the gamma radiation of radioactive substances.

Captain Future, his eyes at its eyepieces, swung the fluorovisor to cover section after section of the terrain below. Finally he held it steady. Through it he could see the dimly shining mass of a radioactive deposit of considerable mass, not far beneath the surface of the rock plain.

"There's our main deposit of uranium compounds!" he called. "Otho, turn the thruster-force into the auxiliary projector."

Otho started the time-thruster droning. But this time its cone did not spray the time driving force through the ship. Instead, from the quartz transformer disks the time-force was channeled into the big projector that moved on a swivel outside the Comet's bow.

Curt, without raising his eyes from the fluorovisor, called off the exact position of the uranium deposit. Otho carefully turned the projector to point at that particular spot below.

"All right, let it go!" Captain Future ordered tensely.

Otho touched the switch. The brilliant radiance of the time force shot down from the exterior projector in a broad conical beam.

CHAPTER XVIII

Darwin's Mistake

THE intensity of the force had been accurately determined by Curt's careful setting of the time-thruster controls. The broad beam struck a large circle of the black rock plain and the black rock instantly vanished to a great depth. A

yawning pit lay where the precious uranium deposit had been.

"All right, turn off the projector," said Captain Future. "That's done it." Otho looked incredulously down at the yawning excavation.

"You mean we've actually driven that whole deposit of mineral forward in time to Darmur's age? Chief, I can't believe it."

"It's true, though," Captain Future assured him. "The time force has hurled every atom of that mineral forward for a period of time determined exactly by the intensity of the beam. It means that, in that other age ahead, the quantity of uranium in this deposit on Mercury will be almost doubled. We've caused the uranium to skip nearly two billion years of radioactive disintegration."

"Say, we're time engineers, that's what we are!" Grag boomed proudly. "Nobody ever did anything like this before."

"But when that increased amount of uranium appears at this spot in the time ahead," asked Otho, "won't it cause a physical explosion? It'll be appearing where there's other matter already."

Curt shook his head. "You're forgetting that, by causing the uranium to skip that long period of disintegration, you're eliminating the lead and other products of disintegration that would normally be present at this spot. The uranium simply takes their place."

"And Darmur's men will be waiting in their ships and will gather it up to take to Katin's moon?" Grag questioned. "But it looks to me as though digging out all the stuff and transporting it will be a tremendous job itself, even with all the power-tools they have."

A look of worry appeared on Curt Newton's tanned face.

"That's what I'm most anxious about," he admitted. "Darmur's men will have less than four weeks to collect all that uranium and take it to Yugra. If they don't get it done in time, the Council will reject the

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whole migration scheme and give Zikal's plan approval."

The hated name of Zikal spurred Otho.

"Let's get on with the job!" he gritted savagely.

The unprecedented time engineering feat of the Futuremen had only begun. They flew around Mercury to the other uranium deposit marked on the planetary mineralogical maps. The time force was turned on it in the same way, hurling it forward to Darmur's age in a twinkling.

Then they steered for Venus. They had to comb nearly all the planets of the System, for every available scrap of uranium would be needed for Darmur's colossal proposal.

It's a titanic job we've set for ourselves," said the Brain as the Comet flashed toward the second planet.

"I know, but it was the only way," Curt said soberly. "Uranium was the key to everything and that is the only way in which enough can be had."

Venus was a hot, new world of low lands, covered with primitive plants. They swung back and forth over it, using the time drive on the main uranium deposits. Then they went on tirelessly to the next world.

Earth, in this early age, was an even wilder planet than when they had visited it in the Mesozoic. Its steamy seas washed on beaches of wholly unfamiliar continents. Its life consisted mainly of scrubby plants and crawling crustaceans. Rain fell constantly from the heavy skies.

THE Futuremen rocketed past Mars without stopping when they continued their gigantic time engineering expedition.

"There must be uranium deposits on Mars, too," pointed out Grag. "Undoubtedly there are, but it'd do no good to force them ahead to Darmur's age. The hostile Martians wouldn't permit the Katainians to collect the element." Through the Solar System, stopping at

world after world, the Futuremen continued their unceasing labor. How long they had already spent at it, Curt had no idea. Keyed up by the desperate urgency of Katain's plight, he had snatched rest only in the journeys between planets.

But the long toil now approached completion. They wearily searched for the uranium beds on Pluto, the outermost planet. It was a snowy, fairly cold world in this age, though not as terribly cold as in their own time. Hanging in a driving snowstorm above rolling, white-clad hills, the Futuremen sent their concentrated time force down to hurl the last available uranium deposit of major proportions across time.

"That finishes it," Curt Newton said, staggering with fatigue. "We can start back now. If Darmur's men have done their part, there'll be enough uranium on its way to Yugra to hurl that moon clear to Sirius."

"We didn't cover all the uranium in the System, did we?" Otho asked. "The way I feel, though, it seems we must have."

"No, we covered only the biggest, richest deposits. There are plenty of smaller deposits left on all these worlds, but they won't be needed."

Grag headed the Comet up through the flying snow of somber Pluto to open space. Curt stumbled to the time-thruster and cut out the auxiliary projector so that the mechanism would again drive the ship itself forward in time.

"Screaming moon-devils!" yelled Grag suddenly from the control room. "There's a fleet of great ships coming!"

"You're off your orbit from weariness," soothed Curt Newton patiently. "There aren't any ships in this age. There wasn't even semi-intelligent life on any of the planets we've just covered."

"I don't care, I see space ships coming!" Grag boomed excitedly.

They hurried into the control room. One of its windows was telescopic,

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magnifying many times what was seen through it. Grag pointed into the black vault beyond Pluto, to the interstellar void that stretched toward the brilliant stars.

"Devils of space, there are ships!" Otho said incredulously. "A fleet of thousands — and look at the size of them!"

The Futuremen were looking upon the most incredible sight that had yet met their eyes in all their spectacular journey through time. From the interstellar void toward the System was coming a vast armada of unestimable thousands of great space craft. The ships were of totally alien design. Like gigantic cylinders, they flew at tremendous speeds without any sign of rocket-tubes or any other visible propulsion.

"Who's in them?" babbled Otho bewilderedly. "There's only the most primitive life on the System's worlds in this age, no creature of any real intelligence at all — nothing that could build ships like those."

Curt Newton's gray eyes were narrow with thought.

"The only time I ever saw a space ship of that kind was when I found that interstellar derelict in the Sargasso Sea of Space," he said slowly. "You remember the strange cylindrical craft that had come from another star and was powered by reactive force pressure instead of rockets."

"You mean these ships are coming to our System from another star?" breathed Otho. "It must be. They're approaching from outer space."

"They're coming from the direction of the star, Deneb, if that means anything to you," the Brain said significantly.

REALIZATION flashed across Curt Newton's brain. Simon's remark had recalled to him the great mystery that had puzzled him so deeply on their odyssey through time — the peculiar reverence for the star, Deneb, shown by every planetary people.

Deneb had been a sacred star to the Katinians of Darmur's age, and to every other planetary people, as well. All had venerated it, though none had known why.

"Look, their fleet is splitting up!" Otho exclaimed wonderingly.

The Comet was hanging above the plane of the ecliptic. The Futuremen could gaze down upon the great fleet from Deneb, which now was dividing into ten squadrons. One headed toward each of the System's planets.

They saw the squadron nearest them circle around Pluto and land upon that snowy world. Then, peering down through the higher powered electro-telescope, Captain Future witnessed men in strange space-suits emerging from the newly landed ships.

Curt looked up at his comrades.

"It's just as I guessed when Simon pointed out that they came from Deneb. They're colonists from that star who are settling on the worlds of our System. We're seeing a great historical event. We know now that the human race did not originate in our System at all!"

"Holy sun-imps!" yelled Otho. "You mean that these colonists from Deneb are the ancestors of all the human planetary races?"

"There can be no doubt of it," Curt affirmed. "See, they're already beginning the construction of a temporary city down on Pluto. They must be doing the same on the other planets." His eyes were shining. "We've solved the cosmic riddle that perplexed us. This is why the peoples of later times regard Deneb as a sacred star. Those planetary peoples are the retrograded descendants of these colonists from Deneb. All that has survived of these colonists in future ages is the dim racial memory that

Deneb is important, a venerated star."

"But if they're all men of the same race, how can they colonize the ten different planets?" Otho objected. "The conditions

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of gravitation and heat and atmosphere are nothing like each other on the different worlds."

"There's only one possible explanation for that," Captain Future suggested. "These people must have a great science, to have been able to build ships like those, a greater science than any we've ever encountered. Before coming here in force, they must have investigated the conditions. Then they prepared for the expedition by conditioning, perhaps even breeding definite types of people who would be able to live permanently in their own selected environment."

"Are you saying that they bred a race of Plutonians, a race of Jovians, and so on, before they came here?" Otho marveled.

Future nodded, his features wistful as he stared out at the great ships.

"But if they're colonizing the planets so scientifically," Simon put in, "how came it that their colonies reverted to savagery on some worlds, and a lower plane of civilization on others?"

"Natural conditions must have caused that," Curt offered. "The rising of the seas on Venus, the seismic convulsions on Earth, all the difficulties caused by the System's aging. We'll go a little farther in time and see."

They turned on the thruster. The Comet was hurled forward a million years and again came to rest in time.

THEY peered out eagerly at the planets. Now beautiful cities covered almost all. From this populated System, vast ships constantly came and went toward Deneb and various other stars.

"Contact with the mother-race at Deneb has been maintained," Curt said. "I had never thought of the possibility of an interstellar civilization. Later ones were puny, compared with this. It seems so advanced, so deeply entrenched, what could have made it collapse?"

A million years beyond that point, he

shook his head sadly. The ships no longer plied outer space. Though there was still some travel between the planets themselves, the great cities appeared stagnant.

"Some unknown disaster across the Universe must have broken the line of communication," Curt guessed. "Now, isolated here, they're subject to inevitable decline, as we already know. I'd give a lot to find out what happened, but we can't take the chance. We must get back to doomed Katain, and we can't risk operating too long without our full battery of cycs."

He started the thruster. After a long period, the gage at last registered the date of Darmur's time. Curt stopped the machine.

The Comet floated in the outer reaches of the System. Without delay the Futuremen drove headlong across space toward the yellow spark of Katain, which was moving with its tiny moon toward the ominously close disk of Jupiter. Curt eyed the two nearing planets somberly. When they came into conjunction in a few weeks, it would be all over. Katain would perish forever.

Their ship screamed down through the sunny skies of Katain toward the beautiful city, Vavona. Otho landed expertly within the garden of Darmur's bubble-like black mansion. Darmur and Lureen came running to meet them. The old man's face was pale with emotion, as were the lovely features of the girl.

"What's wrong?" Curt demanded, sensing calamity.

"Everything is lost!" choked the old scientist, "Our work, your tremendous expedition into the past, all for nothing. Zikal has sailed with the poison fleet for Mars!"

"What?" cried Curt. "But the four weeks the Council gave us isn't up yet." "No, but Zikal convinced the Council that your plan was too mad to succeed, that

you were lost in the past. He won them over, despite my pleas. His fleet is on its way now to slaughter a whole race!"

CHAPTER XIX

The Plot Against a World

CAPTAIN FUTURE was stunned. It seemed indeed that their odyssey across time to help the people of this doomed world achieve their interstellar migration had all been for nothing. A race of civilization almost as high as the Katinian was about to be murdered to the last man, woman and child by the ambition and power-lust of one man. Death was soon to come irrevocably to the whole Martian people. "Why did your Council let Zikal do this?" Otho was raging to Darmur. "They promised us four weeks to get the uranium collected on Yugra for the migration. We've gone back and forced the necessary uranium forward into this age. Your ships must be collecting it and bringing it right now."

"I know," moaned the old Katinian, "but none of the ships and men I sent have yet returned to Yugra. It's taking them time to collect the uranium. And Zikal assured the Council vehemently that the whole plan was fantastic, that the uranium would never be available. They finally submitted and gave him authority to carry out his plan."

"He told the Council that he was certain none of you would ever return to this age!" Lureen cried to Captain Future.

"He thought he'd made certain of it by putting a time neutron bomb in the Comet" gritted Curt, his gray eyes flaming. "We're not going to let Zikal carry out his scheme. How long ago did he start with the poison fleet for Mars?"

"More than a score of hours past," answered Darmur hopelessly. He wrung

his hands. "Now that you've returned and we know the uranium is being secured, I could convince the Council to call off Zikal's expedition. But Zikal wouldn't heed messages and he has too much of a start to be overtaken."

"The Comet can overtake him and his poison ships!" Curt promised. He raced toward the compact teardrop ship. "Grag, Otho — we're blasting off!"

"You can't stop Zikal, his flagship is heavily armed —" Darmur was protesting, but already the Futuremen were inside the ship.

B-r-r-oom!

Thunderously roared the cys as Curt sprang into the pilot chair and jammed down the pedal. The Comet flung up into the sky like a projectile from a giant gun. Friction alarms were shrieking by the time they roared out through the atmosphere of Katin. Curt laid a course straight toward the green orb of Mars, forcing every cys and rocket-tube to the limit.

Somewhere ahead of them, a ponderous fleet of space tankers crammed with the deadliest of gases was speeding toward the murder of a race. Curt felt a bitter, throbbing hatred choking him, hatred for the man who would coldly carry out the crime to further his own ambitious ends.

Recklessly he strained the thundering cys. Grag and Otho and Simon peered tautly from the telescopic window of the control room, their eyes searching the black, starry vault ahead. Hours passed like eternities.

"I see them!" yelled Grag's booming voice.

The great robot pointed his metal arm excitedly. Curt glimpsed the swarm of metal specks ahead, moving swiftly toward green Mars. They were flying in a wedge formation.

"The proton guns!" he ordered. "If Zikal won't stop at our challenge, we're attacking."

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Otho's green eyes were flaring as he sprang to the breech of a big proton cannon.

"I've got my own score to settle with Zikal," he said venomously. "I just hope he fights!"

THE Comet rushed up on the tail of the poison fleet, sped over the wedge of flying tankers and overhauled the ship at the apex. That craft, Zikal's flagship, was a space cruiser. From its sides projected the snouts of heavy neutron guns.

Curt leaned forward and switched on the televisor to an all-wave beam. "Captain Future speaking! Zikal, order your fleet to return at once to Katain.

There's no necessity whatever for this plan of yours!"

From the instrument came the harsh, startled voice of the Katainian. "Captain Future? You've returned and have secured the uranium Darmur needed? Very well. In that case I'll abandon the expedition to Mars."

Zikal's flagship began to bank around, preparatory to turning back toward Katain with the tanker fleet.

"I thought he'd at least protest," muttered Curt suspiciously. "I —" "It's a trick!" yelled Grag.

Zikal's ship, banking around, had suddenly opened fire with half its heavy battery of neutron guns. Deadly, brilliant beams lanced across space toward the Futuremen's ship.

Captain Future had not been caught napping. Wary of Zikal's ready submission, he had been on the alert. He had flung the space-stick over sharply the moment he glimpsed the beams. The Comet skidded in a lightning space spin, the neutron beams stabbing above it. Curt whirled up in a hairpin loop toward the keel of Zikal's cruiser.

"Get their rocket-tubes — disable them!" he shouted to Grag and Otho.

Zikal's craft was looping desperately,

trying to bring its heavy batteries to bear on the little Comet. But the Katainians were meeting the finest space fighter of a hundred million years from their own time. Curt Newton's lightning shift sent the Comet racing after the enemy, clinging to its tail. Next moment the pale rays of the proton cannon lanced at the Katainian ship as Grag and Otho fired.

"Got their rocket-tubes!" yelled Otho. "They're disabled!"

The unerring aim had fused the rocket-tubes of Zikal's ship into a molten mass of metal. Almost instantly an explosion shattered the rear of the Katainian ship as the back-blasting tubes blew up the cyclotrons.

"We're boarding her," Curt said. "Stand ready, you two!"

The Comet drove up level with the rent hull of the drifting wreck. In their space-suits, Captain Future, Otho and Grag leaped across the gap into the wreck, their proton pistols ready in their grasp. A scattered fire of neutron beams met them. Some of Zikal's men had escaped the explosion. But the three Futuremen waded forward, the guns kicking in their hands. They blasted continuous beams that sent space-suited men tumbling in scorched heaps. The survivors raised their hands in panicky surrender.

Beyond them appeared Zikal's tall, space-suited figure, aiming a neutron gun. The Katainian's face was distorted with fury inside his helmet. His gun was leveled with deadly purpose at Curt. But before Captain Future could move, Otho had sprung forward with a yell of hate.

Brilliant neutron beam and pale proton ray crisscrossed in the wrecked ship as Otho and Zikal stood and fired. But it was the Katainian who fell, clutching the breast of his suit and slumping dead to the floor.

Otho looked down at him, eyes still burning with hatred. "That was for Ahla," he grated harshly.

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CURT led his two comrades back to the Comet after disarming the survivors in the flagship. Then he broadcast an all-wave command to the fleet of poison tankers that were clustered bewilderedly in space nearby.

"The expedition to Mars is countermanded. Release your cargoes of gas, pick up the flagship survivors and return to Kaitain."

There was no move by the tankers to obey.

"Unless you do so in two minutes, we'll open fire on you!" Curt warned. The threat was sufficient this time. The unarmed tankers could make no effective resistance and their crews were stunned by the fate of the flagship. Curt Newton saw the valves of the tankers being opened. The compressed clouds of green gas that had been intended to destroy the life of the Martian people puffed harmlessly into space.

The Comet led the way back to Kaitain.

When they landed on the great spaceport at Vavona, Darmur and the Chief Councilor met Curt. Captain Future told them of Zikal's treachery.

"But that's ended now," he concluded. "Darmur's ships should be bringing the uranium from the other planets to Yugra. The migration to Sirius can be carried out successfully."

The Chief Councilor's aged face was pale.

"It's got to succeed! The whole existence of our people is staked upon Darmur's plan, without recourse, and Kaitain is drawing near its end."

Kaitain was indeed approaching the solemn hour when its existence as a planet would be terminated forever. That thought spurred Captain Future to superhuman exertion in the tumultuous, terrible days that followed.

With Darmur and Jhulun, the Futuremen flew out to the little moon,

Yugra. It was a barren, arid sphere of rock with scant vegetation. Curt inspected the multitudinous underground crypts, airtight chambers fitted with special apparatus, in which the mass of the Kaitainian people would lie in frozen sleep during the twenty years of the voyage to Sirius.

Then they hastened to the device that was the heart of Darmur's great plan — the colossal rocket-tube that was to propel the little moon. It was like a giant well sunk deep in the rock of the moon, lined with tremendous thickness of the most refractory metals.

"There are vast fuel chambers in the ground all around this firing-tube," Darmur explained as they stood at the lip of the shaft. "The uranium will be stored in those chambers in macerated form. It can be fed from them into the bottom of the tube, to be exploded as atomic energy."

He pointed to a domelike glassite structure that rose on massive metal supports several miles from the firing tube.

"The controls are in that place. The crew who will guide Yugra on its flight to Sirius will dwell constantly in that airtight shelter. It has food, air and water supplies for the long years the journey will take. The rest of our people, all those millions, will be sleeping in the crypts."

Curt Newton and the Futuremen went to the control house with him and ascended in its swift elevator to the topmost level. Up here in the dome of the glassite structure was the massive panel of switches that would control the flight of the moon.

"Everything was prepared long ago, has been ready for months," Darmur said, twisting his hands. "Everything except the uranium."

"It will come, Father," Jhulun encouraged gravely. "Our ships at the other planets must already have collected the mineral the Futuremen forced across

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time. They will arrive any day now."

Quietly, yet dramatically, Curt Newton pointed into the starry heavens outside the glassite dome.

"I think the first uranium ships are coming now."

THE space ships that began dropping from the heavens proved in fact to be those that had collected the uranium from nearby Jupiter.

"We couldn't believe our eyes!" babbled the leader of the party. "We waited near the main uranium deposits on that world and the amount of uranium in them suddenly almost doubled. It was magical!"

"Magic of the Futuremen's time engineering!" Darmur exclaimed, his eyes shining. "Hurry and unload the mineral into the fuel chambers."

The uranium compounds were fed through automatic macerators into the buried storage chambers around the great firing tube. Some hours later, other ships with similar cargo arrived from Earth.

During the following days, one after another of the parties of ships laden with the precious element came in from the more distant planets. The buried chambers began to fill with the mineral.

"But we've hardly two weeks left!" Darmur said when the uranium was all stored. "Two weeks before the final conjunction and cataclysm. And we've got to get all the people of Katain here and into the sleep crypts."

"The space fleet we built in preparation is ready," Jhulun reminded him. "We'll get it done in time, if the Sacred Star favors us."

Captain Future looked curiously at them.

"Do you Katainians know why Deneb is your sacred star?" he asked. As he told them Darmur's face became awed.

"So long ago our remote ancestors came to this System from Deneb. Now we

Katainians are going to leave the System, are returning to the stars from which our ancestors came. There is poetic justice in it."

CHAPTER XX

Cosmic Destruction

A VOICELESS dread hung over Katain like a pall. Jupiter's ominous disk was growing constantly more enormous in the heavens. Ground-quakes shuddered through the mass of Katain every few minutes. The seas were running against the lands in wild, high tides.

The night the Futuremen returned with Darmur, a tremendous electric storm swept the city, Vavona, with mad bursts of rain and sheets of lightning.

"The end is near," Darmur said resignedly. "It may be that Katain's crust will shatter and let the seas pour into the molten interior, even before we reach conjunction with Jupiter. We must speed up the transfer of the people to Yugra."

"Chief, I can't understand how all these Katainians are going to stand it on Yugra," Grag complained to Curt. "Darmur said they couldn't stand a different gravitation for very long and Yugra's gravity is far weaker than that of this world."

"You forget that all these millions of Katainians will spend their twenty years on Yugra in suspended animation," reminded Curt. "With the vital activities of their bodies frozen, the lesser gravitation won't harm them. Darmur and Jhulun and the others of the control crew who guide the moon to Sirius will have to wear a form of gravitation equalizer."

The tremendous storm was succeeded the next morning by an even fiercer electrical tempest. The day was dark as night. Sheets of rain and masses of hail fell from the savage sky. The ground

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quakes were stronger than ever.

Curt Newton and the Futuremen labored in the night-black tempest at the big spaceport of Vavona, helping to shepherd the Katinians into the ships for the short flight to Yugra. The plan of transfer had been long prepared. The people were being taken in prearranged numbers.

Captain Future flew out to Yugra, where Jhulun was superintending the reception of the crowds of Katinians who were constantly arriving. Here, too, the plan had been long ready.

Each group of five hundred Katinians trooped down into its allotted subterranean crypt and lay down in the tiers of metal bunks. From disks in the ceiling radiated a blue force that froze their organs in suspended animation by absolutely balancing anabolism and catabolism of their cells. Then, as they slept, the crypt door was hermetically closed.

"They will not awake until we reach Sirius safely and open the chambers," Jhulun told Curt. "They will be the same age as now, though we of the control crew will be twenty years older."

More Katinians were arriving and entering the crypts. There was no panic as the people did so, but all of them looked back with silent yearning at Katin.

Other ships were bringing prearranged cargoes of seeds, animals, tools, books and everything else that would be required for life in the new home.

"We're going back to Katin," Curt told the Futuremen as the last million Katinians began arriving. "I told Darmur I'd bring him to Yugra myself."

They landed on Katin in what should have been day, but was instead a storm-swept, terrifying darkness. Bolts of lightning revealed the spaceport surface, heaving perilously underfoot, and the Katinians thronging to the ships.

Darmur was haggard, his eyes bloodshot from strain, but still stubbornly

directing the final phases of the evacuation.

"The last of us leave Katin tonight," he told Curt. "We shall have a last dinner in my home before we leave it forever."

IT WAS a silent, bitterly nostalgic meal in the lovely bubble mansion, shared by the four Futuremen and Darmur and Lureen. The girl, with true Katinian courage, served the others as calmly as though it were no unusual night.

"There will be dancing tonight in the pleasure palace by the spaceport," she said to Curt. "We wish to leave our world gayly, gallantly, not with tears."

Vavona was a deserted city as they made their way to the spaceport through the shrieking storm. Jupiter was hidden from sight by the swirling tempest, but the ground rolled uneasily beneath their feet.

On the lightning-washed spaceport, loaded ships were roaring away and empty ones landing. The last thousands of the Katinians were being taken to Yugra, but those who had a few hours to wait were dancing in the big pleasure palace nearby. Curt Newton felt his heart go out to these people who were abandoning their world for a stupendous migration, yet making this courageous gesture.

The silvery, beautiful interior of the great pleasure hall was crowded with Katinian men and girls, dancing to the lilting strings of the orchestra. They were all young, for the older people and children had been evacuated first.

"Will you dance with me?" Lureen asked Curt, looking up at him with sober violet eyes.

Curt felt a lump in his throat as he danced to the music with the slim Katinian girl in his arms. Louder sang the music of the strings, trying bravely to drown the crash of thunder and the roar of departing ships.

Outside, a trumpet blast blew sharply in a signal. Some of the dancers quietly

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moved out of the hall, unobtrusively leaving to take their allotted places in the ships.

"Katain, Katain!" Lureen was whispering, her eyes glimmering as they danced. "Will the System of your future day contain a world as beautiful?"

"I think not," Curt said gravely. "I think the beauty of lost Katain will be a legend forever."

Trumpet blasts blared across the lilting music again and more of the dancers left. And again and again came the summons, until but a few dozen of the dancers were left.

There rang a louder trumpet signal.

"The final call," murmured Lureen. "We go now, the last ones to leave Katain." The music had stopped. The Futuremen were waiting outside, Grag towering grim and mighty in the lightning flares, Otho and the Brain waiting. Darmur came up to them, his face deadly pale. The other ships were taking off.

The time had come to abandon this world forever.

Storm buffeted them as they struggled across the spaceport toward the Comet. Continuous sheets of lightning revealed the last ships rising into the tempest. The tarmac rolled wildly to new quakes, almost throwing them from their feet. Even over the booming of thunder could be heard the frightening grind of the shifting ground beneath.

Hail and rain smashed Captain Future's face as he helped Lureen into the ship, but old Darmur hung back.

"Let me be the last to leave my world," he begged.

Curt understood and respected the wish. He got into the ship with the Futuremen and held the airlock door open, waiting. Darmur stood out there in the flaring lightning, motionless. They could not see his face. Through the storm came the crash of falling buildings.

"Better get out of here!" Otho cried.

"This world's starting to break up already." "Take the space-stick, Grag!" Curt shouted.

Darmur at last came inside, his face ghastly in the lightning. Captain Future slammed the airlock door.

"Blast off, Grag!"

THE Comet arrowed up on a steep slant through the inferno of night and storm that now shrouded the doomed planet. They burst out of the wildly boiling atmosphere of Katain into the clear vault of space.

Lureen cried out in horror at what they now saw. Jupiter was now a giant cloudy moon in the heavens, bulking ominously huge and near with its ten circling satellites. Katain and its moon were rushing headlong toward fatal conjunction with the monarch planet.

The Comet raced at tremendous speed toward the little, yellow moon. When they landed on the great spaceport near the control house, they saw that the last Katainians were being marched hastily toward the entrance of the labyrinthine underground fleet crypts.

Jhulun came running up to them, the pallor of excitement and exhaustion on his face.

"The last of our people have been checked," he said. "They'll all be in the sleep crypts in a few minutes."

"Look at Katain!" exclaimed Otho, staring up into the sky.

The planet whose great shield hung over them was now an appalling sight. It was wrapped in a seething envelope of clouds that parted now and then to give a glimpse of shifting land masses, of unleashed oceans running wildly over the entire world.

As they looked, there came a shuddering of the rock surface of Yugra under their feet. The control house in the distance swayed slightly on its massive metal piers.

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"Jupiter's exerting its pull on Yugra, — too," said Captain Future. "But since this moon has a smaller, more compact mass, it shouldn't be so badly affected."

"If it was my moon, though, I'd get it out of here on the jump!" Grag declared earnestly.

Darmur shook his head. "We can't, start for some hours yet. We have to hurl Yugra out of its orbit at the exact point at which a tangential course will propel it in the direction of Sirius. The course has long been plotted. We must adhere to it, or face disaster when we pass Saturn on the way out of the System."

They ascended into the big control house. Its lower levels were thronged with an excited group of Katainian men and women. These were the Councilors, technicians and other experts who had been selected to act as control crew during the long flight to Sirius.

They met Darmur with excited babble of half fearful exclamations, pointing out the slight, shuddering quakes that were beginning to be felt on Yugra. Darmur reassured them in a firm voice.

"All these tremors were foreseen. They will not be strong enough to harm our firing tube, or the sleep crypts. We shall be leaving before Jupiter can cause too great a disturbance on this moon."

The Futuremen followed the old scientist, Jhulun and Lureen up into the glassite dome of the control room. Here pale, anxious technicians were watching over the massive panel that was the heart of Darmur's plan.

As they waited, Curt and Darmur checked again the calculations on which all depended. The disturbances on Katain's sphere were clearly increasing. Lands were sinking into the wild seas, new lands rising from them.

"That's the danger point, the planetary crust under the oceans," rasped the Brain unemotionally. "When it splits wide open and the seas pour down into the planet's

molten interior —"

"I wish it was time to go," complained Otho uneasily.

NEVER had individual hours seemed so endless to those waiting in the control room. The shocks that quivered through Yugra were becoming dangerously stronger.

"Almost time," Curt warned finally, eying the dials. "The first blast must be fired precisely at seven-forty-three-eighteen."

"Recoil chairs, everyone!" called Jhulun warningly into the amplifiers. "The shock of the first blast will be heavy."

Curt helped strap Lureen into her chair before he took his own. Darmur's seat was in front of the center of the control board. Here, amid the rheostats and switches, was a small, red button. A blinker blazed suddenly in front of him.

"Time!" Future cried.

Darmur pushed the button. The springs of their recoil chairs creaked torturedly as a shock rocked the whole control house madly on its piers. Curt Newton, shaken, peered out. Far around the surface of the little moon, a gigantic column of white fire was shooting into space. The uranium that the Futuremen's time engineering had procured was being exploded into pure atomic energy in the great firing tube.

"We've started!" Otho yelled. "We're being torn away from Katain!"

CHAPTER XXI

Planet's End

YUGRA was moving ever more rapidly out of its orbit around Katain, flying out at a tangent toward the outer edge of the Solar System plane. That tremendous push of atomic energy had made a rocket of the little moon.

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They moved on and on, hour following hour as Darmur fired the great rocket-tube at precalculated intervals. Jupiter and Katain, now almost in conjunction, dropped behind, but Saturn and its twelve moons bulked ahead.

"Are we going to collide with Saturn, Chief?" Grag asked anxiously.

"No, though we'll go pretty close," reassured Captain Future. "The whole course has been carefully calculated. The only thing that couldn't be calculated is the exact way in which the fragments of Katain will fly when the planet explodes. If a fragment should rush out after us and hit this moon —"

He did not finish, but he knew that that danger was what weighed on Darmur's mind as the old scientist looked constantly back toward Katain. Saturn's huge gravitational pull drew them closer and closer. A collision with the outlying moons seemed inevitable, but Darmur steadily fired the great blasts at the proper times. They began finally to draw past the spinning moons of the great planet.

"Look at Katain!" yelled Jhulun hoarsely.

They stared back. The small golden sphere of Katain and the mighty globe of Jupiter had almost reached full conjunction. The telescopes showed that Katain's surface had become a playground of crazy forces. Molten lava broke up through splits in the crust. They saw great cracks appear around the planet's surface. The seas appeared to sink. "There it goes!" came a shriek.

Katain suddenly exploded in bursting steam. The white vapor swirled away quickly, but the planet was gone. Thousands of large and small fragments of its mass were flying out in every direction.

"Katain — Katain the golden!" whispered Jhulun. "Katain no more!"

Lureen was sobbing wildly. Curt's eyes were riveted through the telescope upon those great fragments of the exploded

planet.

"One of the bigger fragments is hurtling almost straight after us," he reported, controlling his voice with iron discipline. "It may miss us. Can't tell yet, but it'll be close."

"Holy sun-imps — look at that chunk hitting Jupiter!" Otho yapped.

One of the great fragments of the lost world had been flung straight toward equatorial Jupiter. They saw it strike that world, saw a great up-rush of red, molten lava where it collided.

"The fragment drove through Jupiter's crust into the molten interior and released the lava inside," declared the Brain. "Lad, we've seen the origin of Jupiter's Fire Sea, its Great Red Spot."

Yugra was moving on and on toward the orbit of Uranus, on its way out of the System. For hours Curt, Darmur and the other technicians watched the progress of the threatening mass that was hurtling after them.

"If it passes Saturn, it'll collide with us," Curt said. "There's a chance that Saturn's gravitation may pull it in —"

The Solar System was in wild chaos from the effects of the exploded planet. During the following hours, one incredible astronomical phenomenon succeeded another. They saw the greater number of the fragments of Katain spreading out in a broad, shapeless band between Jupiter and Mars.

"The beginning of the Asteroid Zone of our own time," the Brain commented. "But look at that piece flying toward Earth!"

One of the bigger masses of Katain had hurtled past the orbit of Mars. They thought it would strike Earth, but as hours dragged on, it became apparent that the fragment would pass somewhere close to Earth, within the orbit of its two Moons.

"It's going to hit the smaller Moon!" Otho chattered. "See that?"

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THE fragment was rushing toward the smaller, nearer one of Earth's two Moons. They collided squarely. Both the fragment and the little Moon burst into a shower of blazing meteoric debris.

The meteor masses hurtled, from the momentum of the original impact, toward the silvery, blank sphere of the farther Moon of Earth — the Moon of the Futuremen's own time. They saw the meteors raining upon it in a cosmic hail of fire, each plunging into the lunar plain and throwing up a great ring of splashed matter around it.

"The origin of the lunar craters!" marveled Otho. "So that's what became of Earth's second Moon!"

"The fragment that's flying after us," Jhulun was appealing anxiously to Curt, "will it pass Saturn and hit us?"

"It's going to be close," muttered Captain Future, peering through the telescope. "There's nothing we can do but wait and see."

Hours of superhuman tensivity dragged on. Everyone in the control house knew that their fate depended upon the course of that flying fragment of Katin, which was coming after them with far greater speed than Yugra had yet been able to attain. The hour approached when the fragment neared the orbit of Saturn. Would it be deflected by that planet, or would it pass safely and bring destruction to fleeing rocket moon?

"It's not going to hit Saturn," Curt called tensely from his post of observation. "Then — then we're fated to be destroyed?" Jhulun stammered. "All our tremendous labors is to go for nothing?"

"Wait, there's still a chance!" Captain Future exclaimed. "The fragment's going very close to Saturn. If it hits one of those moons —"

They crowded to watch, knowing their lives hung upon the event. With the naked eye they could clearly perceive the tiny,

gleaming point of the cosmic fragment, closely approaching the twelve-mooned planet, Saturn.

From the shadow of Saturn came one of its inner moons, closely followed by another. The first moon and the gleaming fragment rushed toward each other.

"They're colliding!" yelled Jhulun exultantly.

The fragment of Katin had met the moon almost squarely. In a fusing, flaring mass, they rocked close to Saturn, moving toward the oncoming inner moon. Then the blazing mass struck in and this second collision resulted in an explosion of flaming fragments. They could see the innumerable pieces spreading out in all directions around Saturn, drawn in conflicting courses by the pull of the planet and the ten remaining moons.

"And Saturn will be a ringed planet henceforth," Curt Newton whispered. He looked at the breathless Katinians. "But Yugra is safe. There is no other hazard between us and the edge of the System."

The edge of the System! The rocket-moon, moving at ever accelerating speeds in these last days had finally reached it. Yugra had passed the orbit of Pluto and now was launching out into the vast void of interstellar space. Out there, bright and beckoning, shone the brilliant green star, Sirius. And toward that star beacon the little moon of lost Katin was moving on its titanic journey.

STANDING in the domed control room beneath the bright eye of the green beacon star, the Futuremen bade farewell to the Katinians.

"You should have no more trouble," Curt Newton said earnestly to Darmur. "When you finally reach Sirius, the rocket-tube can be used to cause Yugra to fall into an orbit around one of the habitable planets you observed there. It will be like living in Katin again."

Darmur nodded gravely. "Yes, a new

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home for my people — worlds upon which they can expand into a great civilization. We all owe our lives to you four, who came from the future to answer our call for aid."

His voice choked as he and Jhulun wrung Curt's hand.

"Not even in your future time can there be other men who could do what you four did!" he declared. "The gratitude of an entire people will be yours forever."

Curt flushed under the praise.

"We merely helped, Darmur. The plan was yours — and an epic plan it is, this great migration starward."

"Yes, we go out to a far star, never to return," Darmur replied solemnly. "But I think that a little part of our hearts will always be here in the System with lost Katain."

The Brain, who disliked shows of emotion, moved restlessly. "Shall we get started, lad?"

Curt took Lureen's small hand. The girl's violet eyes had tears in them as she looked up at him. Impulsively he kissed her. "Good-by, Lureen."

"Good-by, man from the future."

The Comet flashed up off the surface of Yugra in a blaze of rocket-fire. Twice Captain Future circled the towering control house in farewell. Then he turned the prow of the little ship back toward the Sun.

Not until they were within the System again did he turn on the time-thruster. For the last time the force rocked and shook them as they leaped across a hundred million years to their own age.

CURT finally shut it off. They looked out. The familiar planets of their own time were like the faces of old friends.

Grag gave a long metallic sigh of relief.

"No more time jaunts for me! I vote we scrap that thruster."

Curt was looking toward the bright star, Sirius. There was an unusual intensity in

his gray eyes.

"In this time," he murmured, "the remote descendants of the Katainians must still live on Sirius' worlds. Maybe some day —"

"Maybe some day we'll go and see?" Otho cried eagerly.

Captain Future did not answer, but the bright spark of Sirius, glimmering across the vast void, was somehow like a shining promise.