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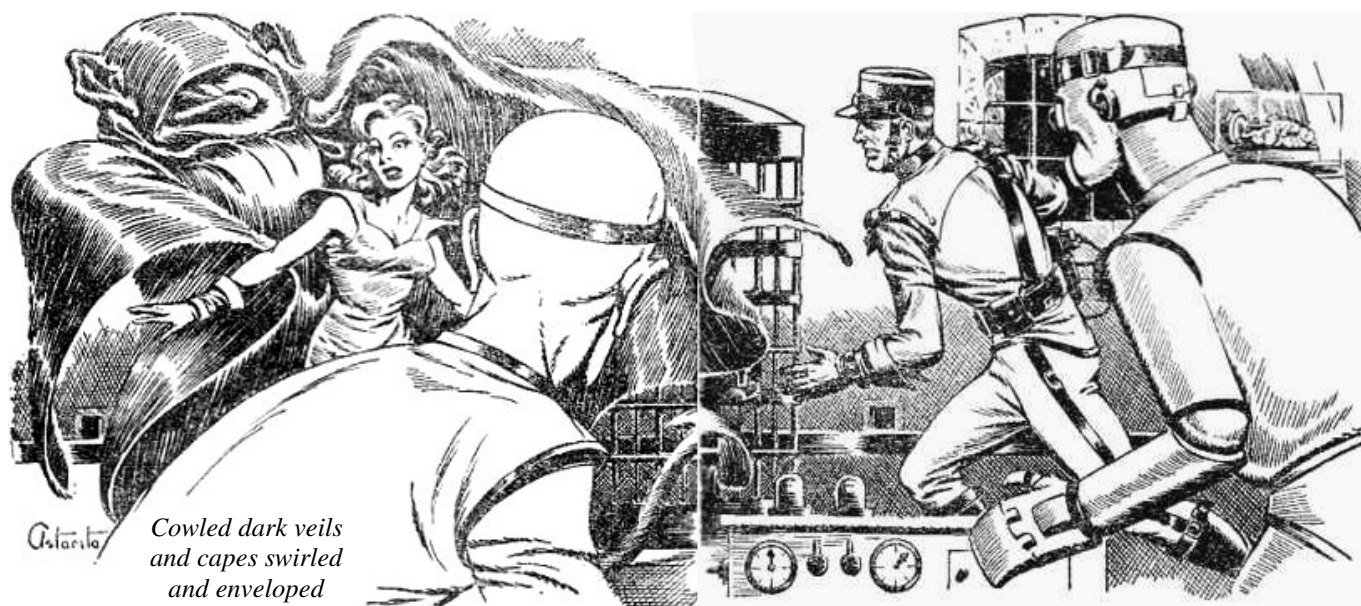
**THE RETURN OF
CAPTAIN FUTURE**

A Curt Newton Novelet
By EDMOND HAMILTON

**A THRILLING
PUBLICATION**

THE RETURN OF CAPTAIN FUTURE

by Edmond Hamilton



*Cowled dark veils
and capes swirled
and enveloped
Joan as she stood
blank eyed*

*The Man of Tomorrow clashes in fierce combat
with mankind's deadliest enemy – the Linid!*

CHAPTER I

In the Moon-laboratory

THERE were four of them, and only one of them was a man. One had been a man once, but only his brain and mind still lived. One looked like a man, but was born of no woman. And one was mighty, and metal, and only rudely manlike.

"There were four of them – the man, the brain, the android and the robot. And that strange quartet of inseparable comrades blazed a trail that the System will never forget. They rocked worlds, in their time. They pioneered the ways to the stars. And then they went beyond the stars, they went out into the outer darkness – and never returned."

The televue commentator's voice was full of hard, bright drama that went no deeper than his lips. To him, it was just another story, to be exploited and forgotten as soon as it was told.

To Joan Randall, sitting alone in an office of Planet Patrol Base in New York, the words he spoke had the icy finality of a Requiem.

With a gesture of denial, her hand moved to switch off the televue. Yet she paused a moment, as though yearning to hear again the name that was coming.

"They went out into the extra-galactic darkness three years ago today – those four whom the System called Captain Future and the Futuremen. No one knows the purpose of their quest, unless it be those two members of the Patrol who alone had their complete confidence. But it is known that they promised to return in less than a year.

"They did not return. They have never returned. Did Curtis Newton and his three strange comrades, somewhere out there in the infinite, meet foes or forces too formidable even for them? Did they, out there, find a tomb in endless space where –"

"No!" the girl cried, and snapped the switch.

Silence. But the echoes fled across her heart, asking, *Did they? Did they?* And her heart could not answer.

She rose and walked restlessly to the long windows that opened on a tiny balcony. Presently she went outside and stood there, looking up into the dark night sky, not seeing it, seeing only the blacker eternity of space and a ship that drifted there forever, lightless and silent as the void itself.

HER fingers closed hard around the metal railing. She said again, to the whole universe, "No!"

The universe did not answer. There was no answer

anywhere, and as she watched the silent Moon arose and mocked her.

The sound of her office door brought her to herself again. She turned and then called out "Ezra!"

The man who had just come in said, "Hello, Joan." He flung himself into a chair and watched her with bleak eyes, as she came toward him. He was a stocky man, worn hard and lean and gray with years of service. He was Marshal Ezra Gurney of the Planet Patrol, and he was a tired, beaten man.

"I talked to them, Joan" he said. "I took it right up to the top brass. I even cussed the President."

"What did they say?"

He told her, brutally, because the words hurt him. "They said Curt Newton and the Futuremen are dead. They were nice about it. They understood how I felt. But they can't run the Government on sentiment. The vote has been taken, and they won't change it. They're going to take over the Moon-laboratory."

His voice was curiously flat. He would not meet Joan's eyes.

"I've done all I can, Joan. They won't listen."

The girl said, "I thought they might wait, just a little longer."

"They've already waited. Two years is the legal limit for men lost in space. And it's been three."

"But not Curt!" she flared. "He's not like other men. And Grag, and Otho, and Simon Wright –"

She bent over the old marshal, forcing him to look at her. "You do believe that, Ezra? You do believe they'll come back?"

Gurney's massive shoulders sagged. He seemed suddenly shrunken, looking all his age, again avoiding her gaze.

"They went too far, Joan," he muttered. "They tried to burst barriers no one could get through, in that attempt to reach Andromeda galaxy. We ought never to have let 'em go."

"I tried to stop them!" cried the girl. "But you know yourself how little chance I had!"

Little chance, indeed! Captain Future and Simon Wright, the Brain, had been too eager to solve the secret of humanity's galactic past.

They had, for years, been penetrating deeper and deeper into that past, had uncovered the story of the Old Empire, the great human civilization that had ruled the stars a million years ago. They had even learned dimly of the pre-human races before that, the legendary Linids and the others.

Curt Newton and the Brain had been afire to learn the rest of the story. They had discovered that the first humans of the Old Empire had come from Andromeda galaxy. It had been inevitable that they would try to go there, to track down that cosmic secret of human origins.

"But no danger they might meet, even out there,

could be great enough to overwhelm the Futuremen!" Joan cried.

The old marshal spoke heavily. "The Futuremen were only mortal, Joan."

He looked up at her now, and his face was gray and sick.

"We might as well face it. We might as well quit feeding ourselves false hopes. If they were coming back, they'd have come by now."

The girl stared at him, stricken. The old space veteran looked at her, and the pity in his eyes was hard to bear.

"You think so too, Joan. You know you do."

The life seemed to go out of her face. "Yes," she whispered dully. She turned and pressed her throbbing forehead against the cold window.

"Yes, I do. The System has lost him. And I've lost him."

She felt his rough paw on her shoulder. "You never had him, Joan. No one ever did – not a man like Curt Newton, who was raised by a brain and a robot and an android, who never quite belonged to us others."

"I know," she whispered. "But I couldn't help thinking that someday –"

She stopped, and did not speak again for a time. The Moon rode white and cold in the dark sky. She watched it, and presently she said:

"So now they're going to take the last of him. His birthplace, his home – the work he did, the things that he and the others put all their minds and hopes into, to help mankind. There won't be even a memory of him left."

Ezra said awkwardly, "Try not to look at it that way. They have to do it, Joan. The things in that Moon-laboratory are too dangerous to take chances with. Criminals have tried many times to get through the barriers and steal the Futuremen's secrets. One of them might do it. And the knowledge sealed up there should be used, not lost."

Joan nodded. "I suppose so." She frowned suddenly. "Secrets? Ezra, there are things there that Curt wouldn't want anyone, not even the Government, to have. Things that wouldn't be safe for even the top scientists to experiment with. We can't let him down on that much, at least!"

Ezra looked at her sharply. "You're right, Joan. I remember some of the things he showed us, and some that he only hinted at."

He thought hard for a few moments, pondering the numerous angles involved. Finally he said:

"Yes. We've got enough time. Not much, but enough if we hurry."

QUITE suddenly, Joan and Ezra looked almost themselves again. There was something to do, definite action to relieve their minds of the quiet

brooding that was so hard to endure.

"We'll get the things out of the Moon-laboratory," Joan said. "We'll hide them, where they'll be safe. And then, if ever –" She stopped short and then went on again, lamely, "If ever it's safe to give those secrets, we'll know where they are."

"Curt would want us to do that," Gurney said. He grinned and turned to the door. "We'll be court-martialed if we're caught, but we're a brace of old foxes for catching! Let's go."

No questions were asked of Marshal Gurney and Special Agent Joan Randall. The Patrol simply cleared the way for them with swift efficiency, and within an hour, Gurney's small flyer had blasted off for the Moon.

The two of them did not talk much. Joan watched the great dark bulk of Earth fall away from them, and then she looked through the forward port at their destination. She thought of all the times Captain Future had come this way, bound for home.

Home – Curt's home. And his birthplace. Strange cradle for a child, the awesome, lifeless Moon! And strange eyes had watched, strange hands had served, that child.

Child of human parents, yes – of the Earth scientist and his wife who had gone to the Moon with their colleague for secret research. With their colleague, he who had once been Dr. Simon Wright but who had become the Brain.

In the Moon-laboratory they had built there, their science had created Grag, the robot, and Otho, the android. So that, after his parents' tragic death, it had been Brain and robot and android who had been this child's guardians!

Joan imagined again, as she had so many times before, how it must have been for Curt to grow up there, to have his first view of Earth through the great glassite ceiling of the laboratory, to hear speech first from the strange mouths of Grag and Otho and Simon Wright, to play his childish games up and down the sunken corridors of the laboratory under Tycho, with a robot, an android and a living Brain for playmates.

She pictured a small red-haired boy looking out at the bitter lunar peaks and pitiless rock plains, and thought how lonely he must have been sometimes. And there were tears in her eyes, not for the boy, but for the man he had become. For loneliness had been Curt's heritage, had stamped him with a subtle something that set him apart from other men.

It was fitting that, if he had to die, Curt Newton had done that too in a vast loneliness, far from other men, voyaging out with his three comrades, to new continents of stars far beyond the little ken of man.

The surface of the Moon plunged upward toward them, became a bas-relief in cruel black and white. The soaring peaks of Tycho crater tore the airless sky like hungry fangs. The little flyer passed over them, sank

down on blazing keel-jets to the floor of the crater.

Silently, Joan and Ezra got into space-suits and went out of the flyer, onto the surface of the Moon.

They had been here before. They knew their way. They found the hidden entrance, and Ezra, plodding and careful, operated the controls that opened the guarded door. Death, swift and terrible, awaited men who did not know the combination. The Futuremen kept their secrets well.

A section of lunar rock slid aside, revealing a dark stairway. They went down, and the rock closed again over their heads.

They went down some distance, into the airlock. Its automatic controls worked smoothly. The two waited until the dials showed that the lock chamber had filled with air. Then they removed their space-suits and went toward the inner doors.

For the first time, Joan faltered.

"I don't think I can," she whispered. "To go in there, knowing that he isn't there, that he won't ever be there again –"

His home. The table where he worked, the bed where he slept, the little things he left behind, forever. She clung to Ezra, sobbing, and he stroked her with his big hands.

"Come now," he murmured. "Curt wouldn't want you crying."

She took a deep breath. "I wonder!" she said, with a sudden burst of anger at the whole vast cruelty of fate that had made her love such a man. "I wonder if he'd care at all whether I cried or not!"

She flung her head back and went on through the inner lock. Ezra came close behind her.

The stairway beyond was dark. They started down it, conscious that their boots rang loud in the rocky vault, conscious of the silence, of being two intruders in a deserted place on a lifeless world.

Three steps downward. Four. Five.

Joan screamed. The cry burst in jagged echoes from the rock, and Ezra cried out too, a deep, harsh yell.

They were prisoned, pinioned, caught. From nowhere, out of the darkness and the silence, an iron grasp had reached and trapped them.

Quite suddenly, there was light.

Joan turned her head.

A towering shadow behind her, a monstrous unhuman shadow with a face of metal, expressionless and strange. The strength of metal arms holding her against a mighty metal body, a chill, imponderable force from which there was no escape.

Ezra Gurney made a queer sound in his throat.

Joan ceased to struggle. Her body went limp, and there was a sudden dusk before her eyes. Her mouth formed a word that was almost no word at all, it was so full of tears and joyous anguish.

The rocky walls gave back the word again and

again. It was a name, and the name the rock walls said was *Grag! Grag! Grag!*

CHAPTER II

Futuremen's Return

GRAG. Grag the robot, the metal giant of the Futuremen!

Joan felt herself set down, very gently. She heard voices, Grag's booming metallic tones saying apologetically:

"Joan! Ezra! I didn't know it was you. The alarm rang, but there was no way of knowing who was coming in."

Another voice, silken, sibilant, saying angrily, "You big cast-iron stupe, you've scared her half to death! Look out, she's going to faint!"

She did.

Lights, darkness, confusion. A dim sensation of being carried. Then she was lying somewhere in a vortex of swirling mists.

Shapes hovered above her. They were terribly indistinct. Ezra. Grag's looming metal bulk. And another face, white skinned, peculiarly slim and pointed, that looked at her with brilliant eyes and spoke her name, and she answered,

"Otho!"

The mists closed in again. And she was searching, desperate, sick with the pounding of her own heart, and she could not see –

Another form came clear. A small, square, transparent case, hovering man-high above the floor – a thing utterly strange and yet familiar. The artificial "body" that housed the living brain of Simon Wright.

Simon would know. She must ask him. But she could not –

Somewhere, in another universe, a voice called her. It was like no other voice.

"Joan! Joan!" it said, and her mind and heart fled toward it, fighting back the mists.

A spinning blur of light, a sense of all her being leaping upward, and he was there, bent over her, his gray eyes anxious, the strong remembered lines of his face softened now almost to tenderness.

"Curt," she whispered. "You're alive. You're safe."

She began to cry. He kissed her, and she clung blindly to him.

Then suddenly she sat up, thrusting Curt Newton away. She stared at him, her eyes bright with tears and fury.

"Why didn't you tell us?" she cried out. "Why did you let us think you were dead? Haven't you any heart at all?"

She looked around at the others, Grag and Otho and

the Brain. The Futuremen looked away, embarrassed.

Even Simon, the Brain that long ago had lived in a man's skull but lived now in a cubical case, with serum for blood and a serum-pump for heart – even he shifted uneasily on the unseen magnetic beams that were his means of motion, his lens-eyes looking away from her.

Big Grag, ordinarily capable of unhuman immobility, fidgeted clankingly. And the android, most manlike of the three, human in all but origin, dropped his bright ironic gaze.

"You must have known how we felt," she accused. "You came back – how long ago? Weeks, months? You came back safely, and you didn't tell us!"

She was trembling, now. She turned on Curt Newton almost as though she wanted to strike him.

"I'm sorry, Joan." Captain Future stepped back, not looking at her. "I – we knew how you'd feel. But we couldn't tell anybody. Not just yet."

In the harsh light from the ceiling dome, his face showed lined and tired. It had hardened somehow, and changed. It was the face of a man driven by some iron purpose, and the eyes had a shadow in them something dark and strange.

Ezra Gurney looked at him intently. "You must have had a reason. A good reason." Being older, he was willing to reserve his hurt and anger. His voice shook with eagerness as he went on.

"Did you reach Andromeda galaxy, Curt?"

Captain Future said briefly, "We reached it."

Even Joan forgot her emotions in the sweeping wonder of those three words.

"You reached it," she whispered. Then she sat quite still in awe. Andromeda galaxy. An alien continent of suns, washed by the farthest tides of space. An incredible, magnificent journey. Curt Newton had dreamed his dream, and made it come true.

"Did you find what you were looking for?" Ezra demanded. "The secret of the human race's origin?"

Curt shook his head. He said indirectly, "A lot happened. Trouble, near-wreck, the usual hazards. We were lucky to get back."

He smiled abruptly, a smile that pretended to be easy and was not.

"Will you two trust me? There's something I have to do, and I want you both to go back to Earth now. I'll be along, and then I'll tell you all you want to know."

Joan got up. She took hold of Curt and looked into his eyes.

"You're afraid," she said. "Afraid for me, for us, if we stay here. Why?"

"Nonsense." His scoffing retort had an unconvincing heartiness. "Go along now, Joan." He looked at Ezra over her shoulder, a glance full of hard meaning. "Take her back, will you, Ezra?"

THE Brain spoke, in his dry, mechanical voice. "Curt is right, Joan. We have much to do, with the specimens we brought back with us. You'd only be in the way."

"Sure," boomed Grag loudly to her. "No fun for you, looking at a lot of old rocks and things."

"Stop lying to me, all of you!" cried Joan angrily. She looked around at them, Captain Future and the incredible trio of his comrades. She saw that even in Otho's bright mocking eyes, the dark shadow lurked.

"You are afraid. Every one of you. You're afraid for Ezra and me, or you wouldn't want us to go. You brought something back with you, that's it! You brought something back, and you're afraid of it. So afraid that you didn't dare let anyone know you had returned."

No one answered her. And in the brooding silence of the laboratory under Tycho, a breath of fear touched Joan and Ezra Gurney – a black and freezing breath of terror from beyond the intergalactic abysses.

Ezra spoke, asking of them all, "What did you find out there?"

Curt Newton answered slowly. "Some of the history of the Old Race, the ancient humans. We hoped to find them, but didn't. They'd gone on long ago, to some farther part of the universe. The Old Empire, ebbing back toward its unknown centre as Rome ebbed back when it fell.

"But we did find worlds where they had lived. Worlds of deserted, silent cities, worlds of death, worlds of mystery."

The Brain said in his precise, emotionless way, "We found many records and inscriptions, in the language of the Old Empire – the so-called Denebian tongue we could already read. They were half-ruined, half-effaced, by time. But even those broken records told a strange, grand story."

Like a man haunted by a dream far greater than himself, Curt Newton began to tell that story. Red head bent forward, eyes seeming to look beyond time and space, he spoke.

"Some of this you know already. You helped us track down the mystery of mankind across the star-worlds of our own galaxy, until we found that the answer lay still farther on, beyond the gulfs of outer space. Well, we know now that answer lies even beyond Andromeda. But we have learned a great deal

"We know how the human race, the Old Race, came from some unknown birthplace and spread out across the universe. The Old Empire, that held whole galaxies as we hold worlds. Even some of the details we know – how the Old Race battled for supremacy against the pre-human alien empires, such as the Linids."

The muscles drew tight around his mouth. He said that name again, very softly.

"The Linids. The wise and dreadful creatures who were before man, and who came so near to stopping his

march of empire – so near to destroying the whole human adventure. They were great and proud, the Linids. They held whole galaxies for ages before the little creeping bipeds came. They did not like the intrusion.

"Out there on Andromeda galaxy, long ages ago, the last battle between Linids and men was fought. And our remote ancestors won it. That's what we found, the half-effaced records, the broken memorials, of that eon-old struggle. That, and the cryptic clues that merely deepened the mystery of our racial origins."

Curt Newton was silent for a time, caught up in the passion of his dream. His three strange comrades looked at him in silence too.

Ezra Gurney felt again the strength of the bond between the Futuremen. He and Joan could never, even by the greatness of their love, quite penetrate that inner bond of the four. Always, a little, he and she would be outsiders.

Joan said quietly, "You found more out there than knowledge. You might as well tell me, Curt. Because I will not go away."

"No" said Ezra. "Nor I. We've never backed out on danger yet."

Captain Future's haggard eyes sought Simon Wright. "What shall I do, Simon?"

The Brain answered, "They have made their decision. It is what they want."

"Very well," said Curt. His hands fell on their shoulders, gave each of them a strong grip. He smiled, and this time the smile was very weary, but not forced.

"I should have known."

He led the way, then, across the great central room of the laboratory, a vast circular space cut from the lunar rock, crammed with apparatus of all kinds. Smaller rooms and corridors opened off the main room. Living quarters, chambers that held supplies, the corridor that led to the hangar of their ship, the *Comet*.

Two small, queer beasts, completely dissimilar to each other, came rushing up to Joan and Ezra and leaped frantically around their legs.

On Ezra's strained face flickered a brief smile.

"I see you and Grag still have your pets, Otho."

Joan could not stop for them. Eek, the gray, snouted, metal-eating moon-pup, and Oog, the fat little white mimic-beast, had been dear to her. But even their gambolling welcome could not break her spell of dread.

And the two little beasts drew back from her when they saw the door to which Curt Newton was heading, the door of one of the smaller chambers. They backed away, as though in fear, when he opened that door.

"In here" said Captain Future.

Joan and Ezra stood quite still, looking in. There was a machine in the center of that rock-walled room. A cage-like thing of crystal rods and shining wires. It seemed very frail, to hold what was in it. It pulsed with a steady rhythmic beat of force throughout its rods and

coils, so that the crystal flickered with diamond points of light.

"The machine," said the Brain, "creates a complete stasis within itself. Within that cage that appears so simple, time, entropy, motion, cannot exist."

JOAN had shrunk back against Curt. Her eyes were fixed on what lay there, so still within its cage of force.

The thing had a central core of denser darkness, cowed by looped dark capes and veils. And core and capes and veils seemed solid, tangible – but not like flesh.

The design and function of this creature were so completely alien to the known evolutionary scale that their eyes could not comprehend its form. Yet something in the frozen immobility of the cowed thing and its folded and floating veils hinted a protean *impermanence* of form.

Even now, lifeless and insentient as it was, a feeling of power lay in that cryptic cowed form. Joan felt her flesh draw in upon itself with instinctive recoil, and it seemed that in her heart she could feel a black and icy tide that flowed from the thing, a sense of horror at beholding something so completely divorced from all life as she knew it.

"What is it?" she whispered.

"One of the first lords of the galaxies," Newton answered. "A Linid."

Somehow, just to know it had a name made it less shocking. Joan forced herself to look again.

"We found it," said Otho slowly, "in one of the dead cities of the old human race, out there."

"I found it," Grag corrected him. "I was the one who broke open that crypt under the Hall of Ninety Suns. And if it hadn't been for me, you couldn't have moved it."

"Strong back," said Otho, "weak mind." But his heart was not in his gibing. The dark sleeper held them all in a mood of awe.

"And millions of years ago, things like that were the lords of creation?" Ezra said, incredulously.

Curt nodded broodingly. "Yes. They held the galaxies before man. They warred with man, with the Old Race. Yet it was not man alone who doomed them. A species has its day, and theirs was done.

"They passed, like many another great species, largely because of a change in natural conditions. We think, from what we learned, that in the Linids' case the fatal change was that of entropy, the increase of cosmic radiation somehow adversely affecting their alien form of life."

"That thing," Joan breathed, "dead and perfectly preserved for all these ages!"

Captain Future's eyes had a queer look.

"That's just it, Joan. *It isn't dead.*" His words echoed

in the rocky vault like the living voice of danger.

As though by common instinct, they drew away from the door. For a time no one spoke. Then Simon Wright supplied the explanation.

"The records tell us that the Old Race won the galactic war with the Linids – but that even they could not destroy them. The Linids were a form of life too different for human science to destroy.

They could only prison them, using a stasis of force like this one."

"There were warnings. If the stasis were lifted, the Linid would regain life and consciousness. It would be as though all these eons had not passed. It would regain its full power – and the records caution all who read that the Linid had a terrible power – *a power of utter possession, against which only the jewels of force are protection.*"

"If the stasis were lifted –" Joan said. "No! Curt, you're not going to –"

Her voice trailed away. Curt's face was a thing cut from granite.

"We're going to lift it – a little. Enough to revive the thing, but still keep it prisoned. We're sure we can communicate with it telepathically." He was drawn and sweating with strain, with worry, with a fierce excitement.

"We know the risk we're taking. But we've got to do it! This survivor of a vanished eon can tell us things about the past that we'd never know.

"But you shouldn't take that risk, Joan. You and Ezra must go."

They answered as with one voice, "No." And Ezra added, "From the look of that thing, you may need an extra hand."

Curt sighed. "All right. We're not going into this completely without defense. There were jewels of force also in the Hall of the Ninety Suns. The Old Race must have used it as some sort of meeting ground with the Linids, where they parleyed for the rule of Andromeda. We brought them back, too."

He produced them, from a guarded locker. They were like no normal jewel. They were round and large, and black with the utter depthless blackness of the Linid itself. Each jewel formed the center boss of a light metal headband.

In a vast and crushing silence, the six armed themselves, donning the headbands. The Brain made his secure by binding it around his case.

"We don't know how these jewels work," muttered Otho. "It's to be presumed that they're effective."

Simon Wright said dryly, "I think we can trust the Old Race. Are you ready, Curtis?"

"Yes."

"Then let us go."

They went back into the room where the cowed shape of darkness slept. Now Joan and Ezra saw beside

the stasis-machine a tall and boxlike apparatus with an ordinary loudspeaker set in its face.

"That's the telepatho-mechanical interpreter that we've constructed," Otho told them.

Simon Wright explained. "The jewels protect against mental attack by shutting out all foreign telepathic impulses. We could project thoughts but could not hear the telepathic answers. But that apparatus will take the thought-impulses of the Linid and translate them electronically into audible speech, so we can communicate with it without danger."

He looked at Captain Future. And Curt, after opening the switch of the interpreter, stepped past it to the glimmering cage.

His hand reached out. Carefully, with infinite caution, he moved a rheostat, one notch. ... Two. The pulsing flicker of light faded just a bit in the crystal. The rods and wires dimmed their brilliance.

And the cowed shape of darkness stirred. Curt stepped back from the machine. Otherwise, there was no sound, no motion among them.

The Linid's capes and veils coiled and unfolded languidly about its central core. And there was a subtle chill that struck Curt's mind even through the barrier of the jewel, a faint dusk of horror.

The Linid had awakened.

CHAPTER III

Alien Enemy

CURT NEWTON was distantly aware of the rocklike stillness of his own body, the muscles drawn tight to the cracking point. Somewhere deep within him there was fear such as he had never known in all his adventurous life, an atavistic horror that comes usually only in nightmare. His heart pounded with such vaulting excitement that he found it difficult to breathe.

The dark veils shifted and swirled within the crystal cage. Slowly, fighting against the partial stasis that still held it, the cowed thing put forth its shifting members, unfolding, probing, testing.

The capes and veils touched the shining rods. They recoiled, and presently were still, but not as they had been before. They were alive now. They rippled with a terrible bridled strength. They were crouched and waiting.

Curt knew that the Linid was watching him.

He could see it watch. The central core of darkness beneath the veils had taken on a somber gleaming, and he thought of the hearts of dark nebulae seen from space, the clusters of brooding suns. He looked into that sentient core, and sensed intelligence, wisdom – a force primal and resistless as death.

A force that reached out subtle fingers to his mind, and then recoiled, even as the physical body had done. The jewels had reacted to their proper stimulus. Captain Future saw that he and the others were enveloped now in dusky auras that shrouded them from head to foot. He guessed then that the "jewels" were intricate receivers and transformers, gathering the telepathic thrust of the Linid mind, amplifying it, using as a shield of defense. Advanced application of the old, crude principle of fighting an adversary with his own strength!

Curt was suddenly, passionately grateful for the jewels of force. That faint touch of the Linid's against his had been enough. It was like the touch of withering cold that lies in the great deeps where no life has ever been.

Curt spoke, forming his thought clearly into words so that the others should hear and understand. This was the test. If the Linid was truly telepathic, as they were convinced, the shrouds of time could be ripped aside from the face of cosmic history.

Think strongly. Think clearly. Project the thought outward through the dusky aura of the jewel. There must have been communication once between man and Linid, in the Hall of Ninety Suns!

"Can you hear my thought? Can you hear me?"

He waited, and there was no answer. The creature watched, and brooded.

Curt's heart sank. Could they have misunderstood the records of the Old Race? No, he should not believe that.

"Answer me! Can you hear my thought?"

Silence. The dark cowls stirred, and beneath them the black core gloomed, and there was no sound from the telepathic interpreter.

Without knowing how he knew, Captain Future sensed that the creature's silence mocked him.

He strode forward, and there was a towering anger in him now, partly born of fear.

"So you cannot hear me," he said savagely. "You cannot speak. Very well. You shall sleep again."

He reached out his hand to the rheostat.

The veils rippled strongly, and the dark core gave out a bitter gleam. Abruptly, startlingly loud on the tense air, the toneless metallic voice of the mechanical interpreter spoke out.

"I hear you, human!"

A small gasping whisper ran among the five who waited. Sweat broke chill on Curt's body. The thing was done.

But he did not take his hand away. He held the rheostat, looking straight into the heart of the alien being, and he made his thought masterful and harsh.

"You know that you cannot escape! You know that I have but to move my hand, and you will sink again into helpless unconsciousness."

Again, no answer. Curt's voice, matching the

thought he projected, suddenly crackled.

"You know that, do you not?"

This time the toneless mechanical voice answered with sullen slowness.

"I know it."

Captain Future's forehead was damp. He was trying to win psychological authority over a mind so vast and strange he could not even comprehend it.

Yet that mind could understand his power to chain it again in frozen, unconscious stasis! He was counting on that as his lever to force from the Linid what he wanted to know.

And what he wanted to know was the secret of the galaxies' history, of humanity's origin – no less! A superhuman tension grew in Curt Newton as he saw himself on the last threshold of the mystery that he and the Futuremen had tracked across space and time.

He spoke in a hard voice. "Linid, there is something I can give you. And there is something you can give to me – knowledge!"

"Knowledge?" jeered the metallic voice. "Give the knowledge of the galactic lords to humans, so that they may use it against us?"

"Not that kind of knowledge," Curt said swiftly. "Not knowledge of weapons or forces. But knowledge of the galaxies' past, of your race's past, of my people's past."

"Shall I tell the wisdom of the Linids to the crawling, verminous new hordes of man? Human – no!"

CURT had expected that answer. He said steadily, "Remember, there is something that I can give you in return."

"What can you give me, human?"

"Freedom! Release from the stasis that prisons you!"

He caught the Linid with that. He knew it, from the sudden swirl of its capes and veils, from the pulse of movement that ran through all the cowed thing's strange body.

Joan's voice cut in. Her face was pallid, horrified. "Curt, even for knowledge you wouldn't *release* that thing?"

"It'd be crazy, suicidal!" exclaimed Ezra, aghast.

Curt did not turn, as he answered them. His thought spoke as much to the Linid, as his words did to them.

"I'd not release it here, never fear. A small robot ship would carry it, still in its stasis-cage, far across the galactic abysses. And far across the universe, automatic controls would lift the stasis. it would take very long – but time is little to this creature.

"Freedom!" he repeated again to the cowed thing. "Not immediate, but eventual. That is what I can give you."

"My brothers will give me that when they come at last and destroy you humans," retorted the toneless voice.

Curt felt a surprise. Then the Linid did not guess how long had been the ages it had lain unconscious – how much had happened in those ages? Yet after all, the creature had no way to guess.

He would not tell it. It would not believe him. He was sure. And there was no way to convince it.

"Have your brothers come yet?" Curt taunted.

"Did they come while you lay frozen under the Hall of Ninety Suns?"

There was a hesitation of silence on the part of the Linid. Then, finally, came a counter-question.

"What guarantee have I that you would fulfill your bargain, human?"

Captain Future's mind lit to a soaring exultation. He was winning.

"No guarantee, except my promise," he answered flatly. "There is no alternative."

"All the universe knows that man is the one creature who lies," came the Linid's bitter words.

"But – I would be free again. I must trust a human. I will give you what knowledge I can, for freedom."

Otho uttered a hissing sigh. "We've got him!"

"Then answer this," Curt Newton said.

"Whence, in the beginning, came our race?"

The question seemed to startle the Linid. "Do not you know?"

"If I knew, would I ask you?" Curt retorted savagely. "Answer, Linid!"

"Truly the sons of man are crawling vermin of an hour only, who know not their own fathers!" spoke the mechanical voice.

Curt disregarded the jeer. "Who *were* the fathers of man? From where did he spring?"

The cowed thing brooded, its capes and veils folding, unfolding. Finally the toneless voice of the interpreter came again.

"Humans, you are new upstarts in the universe. Ignorant of all its mighty past, even your own past. Yet how could you petty spawn of flesh, that die almost as soon as born, know the grandeur of dead cycles?"

"We Linids know. We are not of flesh like your flesh, we do not live with your life. For we are not children of the transient light but of the eternal darkness. Yes, children of the dark nebulae and not of the bright galaxies! So that *we* are not chained to rigid bone and flesh that must soon crumble and die, but are in body like the ever-changing yet changeless dark clouds where we evolved."

Captain Future felt a shock of memory. He remembered how the first sight of the Linid had made him think irresistibly of the coiling gleam of the extra-galactic dark nebulae.

The toneless metallic voice seemed to grow louder, prouder – an illusion lent it by the words it spoke.

"Forth from our dark home, we Linids went long ago, we who can fly space bodily and need no crude

mechanical ships! Forth we went to many galaxies, to conquer and hold them for our race."

"The glory of the Linids! The wisdom and the power that have brought great realms of stars beneath our sway! The wars that we fought across the starry abysses with other mighty races who challenged us and whom we met and defeated and destroyed!"

"All except the race of man!" Curt Newton reminded tensely. "Whence came *he*?"

"Yes – man." The interpreting voice spoke the words flatly yet they seemed to throb a bitter hatred. "The creature lower than the dust, that was raised up by the First-Born as a final challenge to us!"

NEWTON was as rigid as though the very portals of an eon-old, lost cosmic past were opening tangibly before him.

"The First-Born? Who were they, Linid? Who?"

"They were before the Linids," came the sullenly slow reply. "They were not like us, nor like any of the other races, nor like you humans, say the legends.

"They were mighty in wisdom – all the universe knew it. But they were mad dreamers. They dreamed of a universe utterly and completely ruled by justice. And they set out to accomplish that dream.

"They could not do it! They, the First-Born, whom all the universe had whispered of for eons, could not subdue us Linids, nor even all our rival-races! They went back to their secret worlds, in defeat!"

"They said, did the First-Born – 'We failed to bring the universe under one law because, great as was our wisdom, we are not physically or psychically adaptable to all the varying worlds of the universe. Our dream is dead, and with it passes our reason for life, so we too shall pass. But, before we depart, let us raise up a new race that will be supple and adaptable enough to succeed someday where we failed.'

"And for such an heir, the First-Born raised up – man! The crawling apes, the unclean, chattering hords of the far worlds, the liars, the cheats, the cunning ones! They said, 'Though he is all these things, in him is the seed of power, of power someday to unite the universe under the law of justice as we dreamed of doing.'

"So, from the noisy apes, the First-Born developed your race, human! A race that had no attribute of the great galactic races, that had nothing but curiosity – curiosity that unlocked powers for it that it could ill use. So your race was first loosed upon the universe far away in lost ages, by the First-Born before they passed!"

As the mechanical voice paused, Captain Future stood with a wild thrilling in his nerves.

Cosmic mystery dispelled at last – even though beyond it loomed deeper and older mysteries!

"So *that* is the secret of man's cosmic origin!"

breathed Joan.

"Yet apes evolved to man on Earth too, the scientists say," muttered Ezra bewilderedly.

The Linid answered him mockingly. "Always and on many worlds, the humans whom the First-Born raised from apehood slip back quickly to the ape, and must toilsomely climb again."

"But where did the First-Born do this?" Curt Newton pressed. "Where, amid the galaxies, was their home?"

"Not even the Linids know that," was the answer. "Though there are traditions –"

The creature's toneless, translated speech halted. A queer tense immobility had come over the coiling capes and veils.

"What traditions?" pressed Captain Future harshly. "Speak, if you wish eventual freedom!"

He was unaware, as he himself spoke, of a small gray shape that had crept silently into the room.

The Linid's translated voice spoke, suddenly rapid. "I shall tell you what I know. Perhaps it answers your question. Listen closely –"

They strained forward, hungering for every word. And then, out of the corner of his eye, Curt Newton saw motion – looked, and saw Eek the moon-pup, going with a strangely swift and stealthy rush toward Joan.

Realization came to him with a sickening shock. He leaped forward, crying out a warning, and knew as he did so that it was too late, that he had made a fatal blunder. He had forgotten Eek. He had forgotten the moon-pup's highly telepathic mind. And the Linid had reached out and found the one unshielded, receptive tool. All this rapid talk, this promise of a final piece of knowledge, had been to distract their attention.

There was an alarmed uproar, triggered by Captain Future's cry. Joan turned. Curt's hand brushed the small hurtling body, but it was going fast, too fast. Eek sprang, unerringly, straight for Joan's face. His jaws caught the jewel of force, and ripped it from the girl's head.

Eek fell to the floor, taking the jewel with him, and was instantly docile. And Curt Newton made a desperate lunge for Joan. For she had whirled around, the instant the protective aura left her. She was leaping toward the rheostat of the stasis-cage.

The Linid had no use for Eek now, it had a better tool.

Joan was closer to the machine than Curt. He might have shot her – that alone would have stopped her in time. Her hand opened the rheostat wide, in an instant.

And, with supernal swiftness, the Linid was out of the broken stasis and had grasped her. Cowled dark veils and capes swirled and enveloped Joan as she stood blank eyed.

With a hoarse cry, Curt sprang forward. Grag leaped with him, uttering a booming roar, and Otho and Ezra

and Simon.

They recoiled. They shrank back from what was happening to Joan. Ezra covered his face with his hands.

The Linid was melting into her body! The dark capes and veils, even the darker, denser core of the thing, were sinking into Joan's flesh!

"– a power of utter possession, against which only the jewels of force are protection."

Utter possession. Curt knew now, with agonizing clarity, what the inscription had meant. Not just mental possession but *physical* possession also – the solid body of the Linid entering and interpenetrating the solid body of its victim, due to an unearthly power of manipulating its bodily atoms that only so alien a creature could have.

Joan stood before them, face dark, masklike and strange, eyes pits of swirling shadows that looked at the stricken Futuremen and Ezra.

Words that were not her own came mockingly from her stiff lips.

"Now, humans, shall we speak of freedom for me?"

CHAPTER IV

Last Weapon

TO Curt Newton, as they stood petrified, came the dreadful realization that he had at last overreached himself.

The Futuremen, in the years they had blazed their adventurous trail across space, had faced many dangerous antagonists. Had faced, and ultimately defeated them. He knew now it had bred overconfidence. It had made him dare pit himself against man's most dangerous foe in all history, against a monstrous survival of elder eons to whom he was but a child.

"It's got Joan," whispered Ezra, his face deathly. "It's got Joan, and there's nothing we can do."

Joan? Not Joan, the dark-faced, shadow-eyed puppet that stood and confronted them. Not Joan's, the taunting words they heard.

"Shall I give you more knowledge, oh man? Shall I tell you more – before I speed back to rejoin my brothers in their war against the human spawn?"

The Linid meant to destroy them, Curt knew. Not from personal malice. But because they were its racial enemies. It meant to destroy them, before it left.

And it could do it using Joan as its tool. There was only one way to stop it and that was to break the tool it held.

To kill Joan.

Grag's booming voice came falteringly, as the robot stood rigid with uncertainty. "Chief – what can we do?"

They all recognised the terrible impasse, Curt knew. They knew that only one thing would stop the Linid, and that that was a thing that not even imminent death could make them do.

Raging self-accusation swept Curt. His foolhardiness, his too-great passion to solve cosmic mystery, had brought this end to the Futuremen, and Ezra, and Joan.

He would not let it happen. He would not. The old, cold anger, the emotion that was not human fury but a relentless thing learned of his strange tutors long ago, took hold of him.

"Hasten, human!" came the mockery again from Joan's stiff lips. "Speak your questions! For my brothers await me, in the great struggle!"

Two things flashed simultaneously across Curt's mind. One, that the Linid was again speaking to distract them, that in Joan's body it was moving stealthily forward so that it might snatch away their protective jewels and have them completely in its power.

The other thing was a thought that crossed his brain like a thin lightning flash of wild hope. He had one tiny advantage over the Linid – one only. But he might use it as a weapon.

Not as a physical weapon. No such weapon could harm the Linid without slaying Joan. No, his last weapon was a psychological one.

The Linid meant to destroy them. It could use Joan to do it. His only hope was to divert the Linid from its intention, by psychological attack.

Curt spoke, to that which had been Joan. He said harshly, "Go back then to your brothers, if you can find them! Go back to Andromeda – and rejoice with them at their great victory over man!"

The Linid halted its subtly stealthy movement. It had caught a disturbing something in Captain Future's thought.

"How long do you think you lay frozen beneath the Hall of Ninety Suns?" Curt demanded. "Years? Centuries? No – for ages! And how fared the Linid race in those ages? To victory?"

"No, to death! Your brothers perished long and long ago, and are not known in the universe! Not known except for you, the last – the last!"

Contempt and rage flared in the words that came from Joan.

"A lie! You humans could never have won and destroyed my race!"

"Not we humans alone did so – the radiation that was increasingly deadly to them withered them!" Curt retorted swiftly. "The fatal clock of entropy has run far down while you lay frozen!"

"Not in this galaxy, nor in Andromeda, nor the galaxies beyond, lives any Linid now but you! I have seen it – the ancient inscriptions of man that told of the passing of the Linids, the worlds that belonged to your race but are no more theirs. The memorials of man's fi-

nal victory!"

"Tricks! Lies!" flashed from Joan's lips. "I hold this girl – I hold her brain, her mind, her memories, and in them I can see no such things as you tell."

It was what Captain Future had hoped for, and he instantly pressed his attack.

"She has never seen those things! She has seen but this little System, no more. But *I* have seen – and I can prove all to you."

"The sons of the ape dealt always in falsehood! You cannot prove."

"I can!" Curt's face was marble pale. "You can leave the girl and possess me – my mind, my memories of what I've seen. You can prove the truth, by that!"

He hung tensely on the answer. It was his only chance, he knew. His only chance to save the girl his own rashness had doomed.

The shadows in Joan's blank eyes swirled – uneasily, disturbedly. He knew he had implanted a terrible doubt in the Linid's mind.

WOULD the creature dismiss that doubt, reject him? He could not believe it. The being who had spoken with such passion and pride of his race could bear to remain long doubtful of such a dreadful possibility as Curt had affirmed.

Curt laughed, a jarring sound on the bitter silence. Reaching up, he caught the jewel from his head and flung it away standing forth unarmed. He laughed again, facing the dank peering shadows in Joan's eyes.

"I offer you a stronger weapon against my comrades than the one you hold, and still you are afraid to take it. You are afraid, Linid – to learn the truth!"

"No," whispered the alien voice from Joan's lips. "My people knew not fear."

The subtly distorted outlines of the girl's body began to blur, to flow with the shifting of that strange and awful duality. The veiled and hooded shadow took form around it, swirling yet solid. It lifted – and Joan was free.

She fell, then, with only a small moaning sound to mark her plunge into unconsciousness.

The Linid hovered, and began to move.

Grag's raging bellow shook the rock. The robot took one ponderous forward step and Otho, his lithe, incredibly agile body bent like a bow for action, leaped beside him. But Simon Wright's incisive voice said sharply,

"Stop! Curtis must do this thing, in his own way."

With a terrible reluctance, Grag and Otho obeyed. They would have given their lives, but in this struggle of two minds for supremacy they could not help.

Captain Future watched the coming of that shape of darkness. And in that moment he knew fear, such as no man had known since the ancient ages when this same battle had been fought across half a universe.

The black veils rippled and widened. The solid

shadow covered him, shutting out the light. The heart-core of the Linid gleamed and brooded a cluster of dark little suns, pulsing, close, very close. The shadowy solidity whipped around him, a cloak, a pall –

It was in him, in his flesh, forcing apart the very atoms of his substance, interlacing them with its own, so that he would have screamed from the un-human pain of it, only that he had no voice. Their two minds shocked together and to Curt it was like the bursting of an icy nova in his brain. The cosmos reeled and darkened –

They were one, Curt Newton and the creature out of the gulfs of time.

His mind was open to the Linid – his whole life, everything he had thought and done and seen, forgotten and remembered. And the mind of the Linid, because of that uncanny oneness, was open to him.

Not all the way.

Much of it was incomprehensible to any human. It was a tremendously older, stronger mind, so much so that Curt felt a sort of shrinking awe in its presence. It was not an evil mind. Only – different.

Some of its memories he now shared.

The swift free flights along the shores of the dark nebulae, the plunges into ebony vastness beyond the ken of man. The homeplace, the cloudy worlds of mist and cold fire, striding dim and majestic across the universe, dank strangers even in their own cosmos.

The delights of thought, the unfettered strength, the ability to cross the intergalactic spaces naked and alone, learning a chill and vaulting glory from that kinship with the stars.

Above all, the pride and power that carried that race to dominance over all that lived in a hundred far-flung continents of alien suns.

Only glimpses, these. But enough to make Curt's human heart almost stop in wonder.

And now he saw his own memories, coming back to him through the mind of the Linid, as it searched and searched him for the truth.

The dead and empty worlds, the cities without light an sound, the deserted stars. The Hall of Ninety Suns, forgotten shrine of vanished glory, with its inscriptions that spoke solemnly of a war and a species that had ended long ago. Record of death, of defeat, Epitaph of pre-human empire.

The Linid saw, and read.

CURT felt the awfulness of that reading. The pride, the assurance of power, shaken more and more by every scrap of knowledge gleaned from the mind of this small human creature it held so in contempt. The cruel, inexorable coming of realization – the agonized shifting of truth from a concept held through numberless ages to one sprung new-born out of this last hour. *The Linids rule and are great.* Not that, now. *The*

Linids are gone, and even their name is not remembered.

Curt felt the moment when the creature ceased to hope. *I am the last. My race is dead, and I am the last!*

The terrible, urgent grip on Curt's mind fell away. The crushing alien presence sagged within his flesh, borne down by the weight of truth. It was as though the creature had died.

Curt knew the loneliness of utter desolation.

It seemed an endless period before the Linid stirred again. Slowly, very slowly, like one touched already by the hand of death, the creature withdrew its substance from the body and mind of the man.

It left him, floating free, and now its dusky veils were like funerary cloaks folded sadly around its heart.

With a last flash of ancient pride, the Linid spoke, the words coming strong from the mechanical throat of the interpreter.

"Time, not man, overcame us!"

Curt's limbs were weak. Oddly, now, he no longer felt fear or hatred for the Linid.

There was only a strange pity.

"The battle is over," said the toneless voice. It had now a curious illusion of distance, of withdrawal. "It is over and done. And I am the last of all my race."

The dark veils quivered and swirled, shrouding the creature's core. It seemed to look about it, not at Curt, not at Joan and Ezra and the Futuremen, but at something far beyond. Captain Future sensed that they, with all the human race, had utterly ceased to be important to it.

"I will go back to the birthplace of my people, back to the dark nebula that gave us life. It is fitting that the last of us should there find death."

The cowed shape glided past them, it moved with the somber sureness of fate, unswerving, unhurried, out at the chamber.

Curt and the others watched it go. It crossed the great central room of the laboratory and passed out of sight, into the passage that led upward to the surface of the Moon.

They listened, but they heard no sound of doors.

Joan, who was held now in Grag's arms, still white-faced and dazed, suddenly pointed upward.

"Look," she whispered. "Up there, against the stars –"

They looked, out through the glassite ceiling-dome. And Curt saw it, the proud creature that had watched the birth of empires and had shared the rule of a thousand suns.

Slowly, majestically, spreading its veils like wings to the windless vault of space, the Linid rose, going outward no man knew where, a dark and lonely shape against infinity.

Curt said somberly, "Somewhere out there, beyond where ever it is going, is the world of the First-Born that we know now was the birthplace of man – the world that we will never see. But we know."

They stood, the six of them, too full of thought for any speech, watching.

Dark unto dark. And presently the vault of space was empty.