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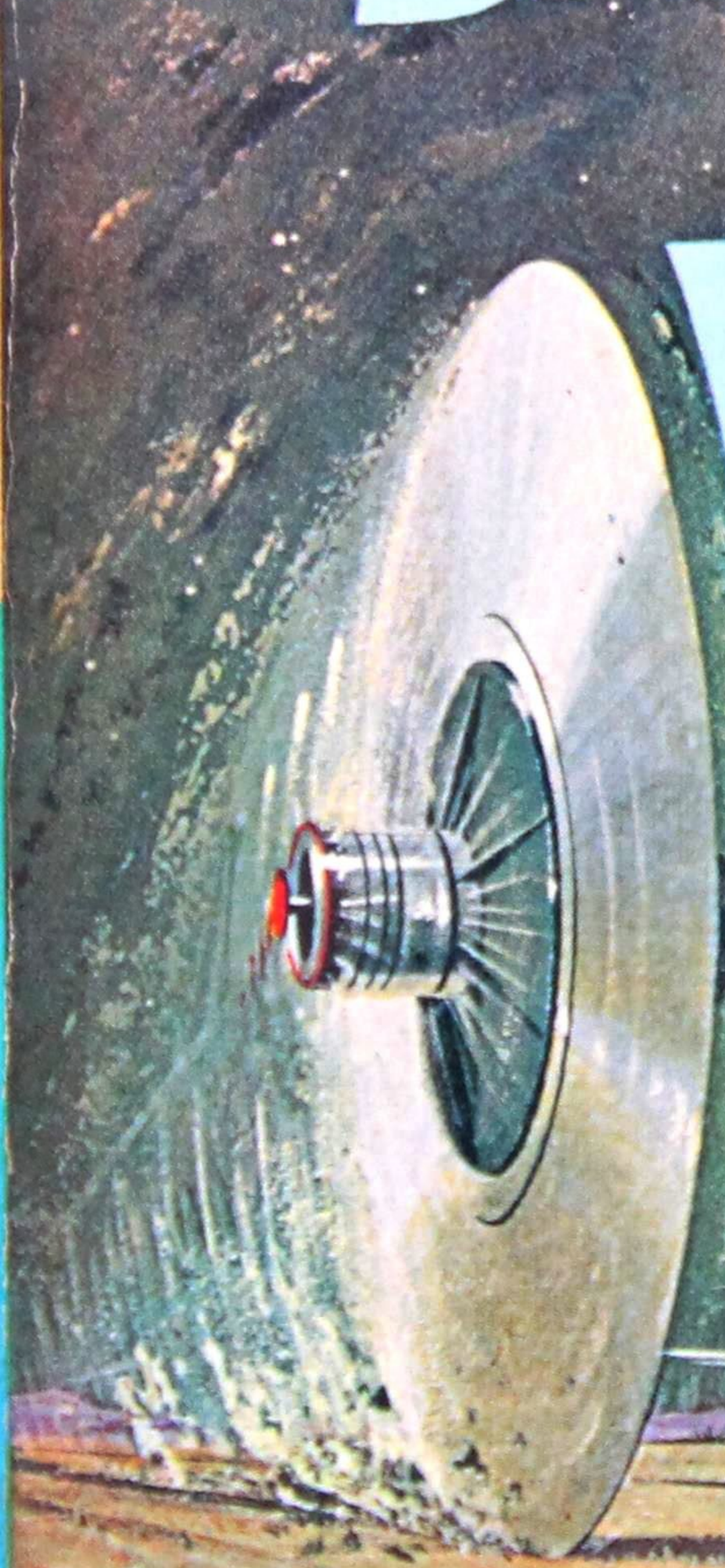
WAS THE STAR OF LOVE A WORLD OF WAR?

BATTLE ON VENUS

WILLIAM F. TEMPLE



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Earth's first spaceship to Venus landed amidst a war where strange weapons like the archaic ones used in the old wars on Earth in the Twentieth Century hurled shells at each other. But this war had lasted over a thousand years—and by remote control!

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But George had an ally, a Venusian girl who thought stealing was virtuous—and, unknowingly, he had something else that turned out to be the most valuable substance on Venus—a box of chocolate bars!

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WILLIAM F. TEMPLE is a London-born Englishman, who was publishing science-fiction long before it became a respectable word. His youthful friends and fellow-authors were Arthur C. Clarke, John Wyndham, and John Christopher. Before World War II the Temple-Clarke flat was the headquarters of the British Interplanetary Society (Temple edited its *Journal*). Then, space travel was regarded as beyond the lunatic fringe. Now, the B.I.S. is as respectable as science-fiction. Temple still lives in hopes of becoming respectable also.

He has had numerous science-fiction stories published on both sides of the Atlantic, and many have been anthologized. Besides four science-fiction novels, he has published a straight book on space travel, and a crime thriller.

He has written a good deal of (intentionally) juvenile general fiction, and has two perfectly legitimate children of his own.

For a brief dark space he was an editor but prefers to pretend it never happened.

BATTLE ON VENUS

by

WILLIAM F. TEMPLE

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BATTLE ON VENUS

William F. Temple is also the author of

THE AUTOMATED GOLIATH
THE THREE SUNS OF AMARA (F-129)

THE SILENT INVADERS

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I

ON EVERY roll his name was entered as "Captain J. Freiburg." He signed his checks "J. Freiburg." Friends called him "Cap" or simply "J."

He never let on, unless he had to, what "J" stood for. He'd always been sensitive about it and now he was downright superstitious about it.

His given name was Jonah; he'd wrecked a ship once, and right now he had a hunch he was on the point of wrecking another. And there wasn't a thing he could do about it. It wasn't a question of skill: he was skillful enough. It was a question of luck. He'd used up a lot of luck on this trip, and he felt the last drops of it oozing away through his boot soles.

Inside the spaceship, the light was becoming unbearably bright. Freiburg felt he was standing at the focus point of a score of naked arc lamps. Meter dials shone like mirrors and defied reading. Handrails blazed like rods of white fire—a man hesitated to grasp them.

But it was all just light, nothing more. The temperature hadn't risen a single degree, even though the ship was twenty-six million miles nearer the sun than their native Earth: the air-conditioning was that good.

Freidburg cupped his hand around the chronometer, shield-

ing it from the glare. He calculated that, at the present rate of deceleration, the ship would reach, tail first, the outer wisps of the clouds of Venus in about fourteen minutes.

He said into the mike: "Fasten glare shields."

From a loud-speaker the mate's voice acknowledged.

Slowly, with a hand made heavy by two g's, Freiburg reached out to his cabin's solitary porthole. He swung an amber disk to cover the quartz, fastened it with a snap. The joint glare from the Venusian albedo and the sun itself was softened into a cool lemon light.

He recalled a time when as a boy he was on an Atlantic liner which ran into heavy sea mist. There was other shipping around. The liner crawled, hooting. Answering warnings sounded from the blank white curtain on all sides.

The boy pictured the anxious skipper on the bridge and didn't envy him. But he trusted him. The skipper, he thought, wouldn't hold such a position if he weren't equal to the job. They'd come through, all right. And they did.

Now he was the skipper, with his ship about to enter impenetrable cloud. His TV screen showed only that same blank white curtain. But he was in a trickier position than that sea captain. He could neither stop his ship nor reverse it, not now. He'd handed it over to the computer. It was dealing with the mass and speed of the ship, the mass of Venus, and the readings of the radar altimeter.

He trusted the computer but not the altimeter. At this distance its measurements were relatively coarse. The needle flickered indecisively over whole divisions marking a hundred metres. It would fine up as they neared the ground. But if it were just one division out, that could be equivalent to dropping the ship from a height of better than ninety metres—say 300 feet—on Earth.

It would do the ship no good at all, to say nothing of its crew.

If only he could see the ground, he would feel happier bringing the ship down by manual control. But the current theory was that the clouds of Venus extended clear to the ground. Hence the handover to instruments. But he didn't feel he'd handed over his responsibility as part of a package deal. The crew believed that he, personally, was responsible for their safety.

That was okay so long as he had complete control and knew what was happening. It was the unexpected or inexplicable events which tended to throw him. He had a deep-rooted hate of the unknown quantity. It seldom turned out to be in his favor. He trusted himself, but not his luck.

Gambling lost him that earlier ship. The gale had passed, he risked the take-off, and the gale promptly rushed back like a fury and smacked the ship into a side-slip. There were other near-disasters through unlucky timing and freak happenings.

Yes, his name was Jonah.

And he was losing his nerve and getting too old for pioneering. If he came through this last and most dangerous adventure, he'd retire.

George Starkey came in, working his way slowly along the handrail and sagging a bit at the knees—from two g's, not from age. Starkey had yet to experience the fading optimism and the growing anxiety of middle age.

"Well, Skip, here goes—third and last strike."

There was no disciplining Starkey. He wasn't one of the crew. He was a professional explorer: tenacious, resourceful—and lucky. He'd done enough good work on Mars to qualify for inclusion in this first attempt to make Venus. He had an unquenchable thirst to learn what was on the other side of the hill. Sheer curiosity gave him unflagging energy.

The Captain made no answer to the obvious remark.

George looked at the infra-red visi-plate. It showed only a few vague and spotty shadows.

He said: "A lot of help that is. If that's the best it can do, I guess it must be true the clouds reach all the way down."

"Maybe, Starkey. Or maybe it means the clouds themselves are thick with floating particles."

"Atmospheric dust?"

The Captain shrugged. "Who knows? Maybe chemical powder on the loose. There's plenty of carbon dioxide there—but what else?"

"We'll soon know when Firkin gets his specimen."

George sank into a sprung chair. The braking drive was steadily increasing. Talking became difficult and they both fell silent.

The Captain thought back to his home in Vermont, the porch and the rocking chair, the view of distant woods. George thought forward to Venus. These minutes of excited anticipation; these formed the crown of life. He was one hundred per cent energized.

Venus was the real surprise parcel of the solar system, and yet, excepting the moon, it was Earth's nearest neighbor. Mars had been interesting, but you knew too much about it before you got there. You knew the so-called canals were only natural fissures. You knew there were no cities, no traces of human life. Still, it was something to confirm the insect life. But the landscape was pretty flat—in all senses—and there wasn't a great deal to add to the astronomers' maps.

Venus was something again: the masked sister to Earth. No one had ever seen her face. She might be an ugly sister—or even more beautiful than Earth.

He longed to see behind the mask.

Captain J. Freiburg stared at the dull infra-red screen and at the glowing green radar screen, trying to match the hints of contours. He was scared at the thought of mountain

peaks. A level area was practically essential. He decided that if he were reading the screens aright, there were no prominences immediately beneath them.

If there was an underside to the clouds, and time and space to maneuver, he might be able to accomplish a little something with the side jets. Meantime, he could only sit and watch and let the increasing up-pressure try to wrap his chair around his ears.

A glacial age passed. It was all of five minutes long.

Then they were in the clouds. By moving his eyes (it was nearly impossible to turn his head) Freiburg could cover all the screens and the porthole.

The yellow light deepened to amber. It was like a swift dusk. The photo-electric cell responded and the interior lighting snapped on. Beyond the glare shield the daylight faded to a dull glow. The clouds were something more than just water vapor or carbon dioxide.

Around the height of 17,000 metres, the first explosion happened. A flash somewhere outside sent a brief yellow flare into the cabin. The ship rang like a gong and seemed to jump sidewise. It shook and tilted. The gyroscopes pulled it back on balance.

The same thing happened again. Then again. Yellow flashes and the ship jumping every which way, and the thuds of heavy explosions outside.

It was hell to sit there inert as lead, unable to speak. The two men questioned each other with their eyes. What's happening? What's gone wrong?

The Captain thought: I've misread the screens. I'm trying to set her down on an active volcano. The luck of Jonah.

George thought: What are these clouds made of? Have we started a chemical reaction in them through friction?

There was another flash and jarring shock. Then it began

to get lighter outside. The Captain was aware of it although he was concentrating on the altimeter now.

11,000 metres.

There *was* an underside to the clouds and the ship was falling out of it, ever more slowly. Freiburg stole a look at the TV. The surface of Venus was visible, in a dull gray light, like a rainy late afternoon. There were mountains in the distances, whole ranges of them, white-capped. Below was a rolling plain, dun-colored but with patches of dirty green.

During the moments of his glance, the TV registered a white flash some distance away and below. From the flash a ball of black smoke expanded swiftly and shot out ragged tentacles. The ship's jets tore into the black wisps and shredded them.

Then he understood. The flashes were shell-bursts. They were being fired at by some archaic anti-aircraft artillery or guided missile battery.

The motives might be mad but the effects were comprehensible. He felt calmer. He could see what was happening and knew what he must do; take evasive action.

His finger on the chair-arm switched off automatic control. At the same time he eased his foot onto the pedal governing the speed of efflux ejection. To hell with the computer: he'd handle it himself.

The ship, which had been slowing, dropped suddenly like an elevator starting down. This relief from the overplus of g's lifted them momentarily from their seats.

"Going . . . to . . . land?" George asked, in jerks.

"Have to." The Captain hadn't time to explain to a non-spaceman just why you couldn't reverse a rocket in mid-air and have it lift you out of range. The only chance was this sudden duck under and the hope that the guns—if they

were guns—would lose you on the ground. Maybe there was a dip or hollow, some dead ground . . .

There was small opportunity, though, to look for such a spot. They were approaching the ground much too fast. His foot moved again on the pedal. The impetus was checked with a suddenness which drove the air from their lungs with sharp groans.

The harsh check threw the Captain's foot away from the pedal. He tried to recover control and his breath simultaneously. The ground was awfully near. He got in a last burst before they hit. It was enough to save their lives. But the impact hurled them from their chairs.

The ship was motionless now, nose-upward, erect. A civilian might have thought everything was fine, no harm done. If necessary, the ship could soon take off again and get to hell out of it.

But Jonah Freiburg knew he had wrecked another ship.

If only he hadn't interfered and so invited his own brand of bad luck. The programmed electronic brain wouldn't have forgotten to lower the landing gear, the spider-legged shock-absorber.

But Jonah Freiburg had forgotten.

Blame it on the stress of being under fire, suddenly and unexpectedly, at the critical moment. Blame it on what you like. But Freiburg knew where the blame should be laid, fairly and squarely: upon his own inadequacy.

He also knew what that impact must have done to the ship's fins. They weren't designed to stand up to that sort of thing. If they were bent only a little out of straight, it would be suicide to attempt to take off again. The ship would begin to spin and veer and end up out of control.

Freiburg lay on the floor with his eyes shut. He wished he need never open them again. He felt himself sinking into an abyss of misery.

George Starkey crawled over to him, laid a hand on his forehead, began to investigate him cautiously for broken bones. The Captain sighed, opened his reluctant eyes, and sat up wearily.

"I'm okay, George." It marked the first time he'd used the explorer's given name. He thought, masochistically: Who am I to claim any kind of authority?

George regarded him critically.

"Don't look so depressed, Skip. You're not blaming yourself for anything, are you?"

"I forgot to put out the landing gear, George. I must have smashed the fins up."

"So? We were being shelled, weren't we?"

"That's what it looked like."

"Okay, then, you did the only thing. You saved us. You dropped us out of the line of fire. We'd have been blasted to pieces. We may be a little bent, but we're in one piece, not pieces. You can't think of everything when things happen too fast."

"A captain should *always* think of *everything*," said Freiburg, with slow emphasis. He got up and reached for the microphone. "You there, mister?"

The mate's voice was a little shaky. "Yes, sir."

"How's everyone? Anybody hurt?"

"A few bruises here, sir, that's all. I don't know about Firkin yet, though—I'm just going along to check."

"Right, mister."

George pulled back the glare screen and looked out on Venus. It was quiet and still out there. The gray clouds hung high overhead, unbroken so far as the eye could see. They looked dark and full. It seemed as though at any moment rain might come lashing down.

But the earth appeared dry and cracked. It was yellow-brown, with patches of thin grass here and there. Also, it

was pockmarked with craters, five, ten, twenty metres in diameter. There was no sign of habitation nor of any living creature. The light was too bad to see the horizon distinctly, but a darker blur seemed to lie along it.

The Captain peered over George's shoulder.

"Hardly the place to spend a sunny holiday," said George.

"Gloomy." Freiburg nearly added that it was almost as gloomy as he felt, but restrained himself. He must try to avoid spreading despondency.

The loudspeaker clicked and came alive. The mate's voice was shakier yet. "Sir, Firkin appears to be dead."

Freiburg felt another load laid on his shoulders. Was he to be labeled "killer" now? It was unfair. A flame of resentment flickered.

"Why 'appears' ? Can't you tell? What happened?"

"I don't know, sir. I think you'd better come along to his cabin right away."

"Coming."

The Captain hadn't liked Firkin as a person, and as a person he was small loss. An opinionated, egocentric bore and whiner, alternately boasting or beefing. But a competent and conscientious analytic chemist and valuable to this expedition.

George followed the skipper along the passages, down the ladder. The mate stood guard at Firkin's door, and he looked worried.

"Don't go in, sir. Just look through the spy-hole."

Firkin's cabin, which was also his laboratory, was air-tight. In there he was to carry out analyses of Venusian atmosphere. There was a small glass panel in the door and the drill was that you were to tap and get his indicated okay before you entered. He'd likely be wearing a pressure helmet, while you were unprotected. And you couldn't know what

might have seeped in through the air-lock or out of the specimen bottles.

The Captain looked. Firkin wasn't wearing his helmet, so he hadn't started analyzing. He lay on his back, very still, face and body contorted. His mouth was half open. So were his eyes. His face was congested, blue-black. There was wet blood over his chin and there seemed to be spots of it on the floor. It wasn't easy to be sure, because a thin white mist was swirling around inside the cabin like cigaret smoke, and visibility wasn't too good.

However, two things were plain enough. The broken quartz specimen bottle at his side. The jagged slit in the outer wall of the cabin.

"What do you make of it, George?" asked the Captain.

George peered in his turn. "H'm. Looks like he took a specimen of the cloud stratum, as per plan, but a shell splinter came through the wall and broke the bottle under his nose. That cloud-stuff must be poisonous: he's been coughing up blood."

"I agree," said the Captain. "And there's still some gas in there: you can see it. You did the right thing, mister, stopping us at the door. We're still in a spot, though. Now our expert is dead, how are we going to tell if the atmosphere outside is breathable or not?"

"I don't think it's harmful, sir—at least, not poisonous," said the mate. "Take a look along here."

He led them down the passage to a place where there was another rent in the outer wall. It was maybe five centimetres wide and you could see Venus through it.

"I guess that hit us after we'd got below the clouds," said the mate. "But it don't seem to have made any difference to us."

George put his fingers over the hole. He could feel a steady inflow. He put his nose near the aperture and sniffed.

"Careful," Freiburg warned.

"I think it's all right; as near enough to our kind of air to be acceptable. There's a bit of a tang to it, and it's certainly denser than Earth's atmosphere: it's pouring through to even up the pressure in here."

"Well, that's something on the credit side at last. Looks like we may not need spacesuits . . . How's the radio, mister? Has Sparks got through again, yet?"

"No, sir. That . . . um . . . crash-landing loused the set up quite a bit. He's working on it."

"Aw, hell." The closer they'd got to the sun and the wavering streams of electrons it emitted, the worse radio communication with Earth had become. Finally, static had drowned it altogether. Freiburg was barred from the qualified triumph of announcing the landing on Venus. Still, on the other hand, he hadn't to announce what a mess he'd made of the landing. He said, between relief and irritability: "Let's go outside and assess the damage."

The air out there was breathable, all right, but the tang made you cough. And the density was somewhat oppressive. You could feel the air pressing against your eardrums and everyone seemed to be speaking annoyingly loud. These things, and the gray light and the scowling clouds, did much to offset the slight lift which the lesser gravitation gave you.

Freiburg regarded the crumpled tail-fins glumly.

"More than a week's work to put that back in shape," he said.

George had brought his collapsible telescope and was staring around the horizon through it. "High mountains in that direction," he reported. "Around sixty kilos away, I'd say. So far as I can see, all of the rest of this area looks pretty much the same as where we're standing—one darn great plain."

"A plain," grunted the Captain. "Yes, and a battlefield, too,

I guess. These depressions in the ground look pretty much like shell craters to me. And fairly new ones, too. Well, I was hopeful of finding intelligent life on Venus, but now it looks doubtful if we shall. Oh, yes, there must be Venusians, all right—who else could have fired at us—but they must be around the level of the nuts who were running things back on Earth going on a century ago. We may be lucky if we got off this damn planet alive."

George snapped his telescope shut, frowning. He didn't like this kind of defeatism. They'd only just arrived on Venus and already the skipper was talking about getting away from it.

Three more of the crew came climbing down the ship's ladder, curious to sample Venus. That left the radio operator alone in the ship, still struggling with his set. Everyone started wandering around inspecting the terrain.

The Captain searched in one of the bigger craters and found metal fragments of shell or bomb casing. There had been a war on around here, sure enough.

From way off, George suddenly shouted and beckoned him. The Captain went over. George, pointing, said: "And what d'you make of that?"

There was a perfectly straight slit along the gound, only three or four centimetres wide. It seemed to be endless; it led off unbroken in either direction as far as the eye could see, straight as a ruled line.

"I've followed it way out. It just goes on," said George.

"Queer," he commented. "Looks as though someone's drawn a giant knife across the landscape. Are there any parallel marks of any kind?"

"I can't see any."

"Then how the devil does the knife hold up? I mean, if it were some kind of plow, there should be the marks of wheels or—or *something* around here."

"I still can't see any, Skip."

"What's it supposed to be? A boundary line? A frontier?"

"Maybe. I don't know. I guess the only way to find out is to follow the line until we bump into whatever made it."

"Yes, George, and we might bump into whoever's behind those guns. Don't be too hasty about dashing off to explore. We'd better stick together here for a while, and wait and see if the natives approach us. They don't seem over-friendly. We may need all hands to beat off an attack. We'll set up a command post in one of these craters; I've a notion we may be safer below ground level, and if—"

The Captain broke off. From somewhere far off came a thin, keening wail, getting louder. The crew started to shout and point. There was something moving out there on the plain.

"Your telescope!" snapped the Captain, and George passed it to him.

Even through the telescope the thing racing towards them was not easy to see in the poor light, especially as it was almost edge on. Captain Freiburg had once seen the wheel of a racing car come off and go bowling on by itself at a hundred miles an hour. Something like that was coming along the ground in their direction at about the same speed, but it was all of seven metres in diameter. An unattached wheel of solid, gleaming metal tapering down from the hub to an edge of extreme thinness. It was like the wheel off an enormous bacon-slicer, run amok.

"Everybody down the craters!" bawled Freiburg.

The rising scream of the wheel's approach all but drowned his voice. He waved frantically, and the crew began to run for the holes. When he saw they'd taken shelter, he ran, with George at his side, to the nearest crater. It was pretty shallow, but if the wheel came their way its speed might carry it to the far lip of the crater without touching them. He

had no doubt that this frightening thing had cut that track, but he remembered that the track wasn't very deep.

The scream of the wheel made the air quiver now, and the ground seemed to be shaking in sympathy. In one respect, Freiburg was glad of that; it camouflaged his own trembling.

The two lay there, faces in the dirt, waiting for the wheel to pass them by. But the howling went on and on, accompanied by a secondary swishing noise, like that of an electric fan.

And still it went on.

Cautiously, they raised their heads and peeped out of the crater. The wheel was running in a wide circle around them and the whole group of craters. It pursued its circular course so swiftly that there appeared to be dozens of blurred wheels chasing themselves around, forming a hazy, glimmering barrier seven metres high.

Their space-ship stood near enough exactly at the center of the circle.

George shouted in the Captain's ear: "That darn wheel's gotten itself stuck in a groove!"

Freiburg ignored the humor. "Follow me." And he started running back to the ship. George was surprised, but jumped out of the crater and ran across the quivering earth after the Captain. Heads popped out of craters here and there and regarded them inquiringly. Freiburg waved them back.

Inside the ship it was a little quieter.

"Get hold of Sparks! Bring him down to the armory," said the Captain, breathlessly.

George nodded. So much for hope, he thought, as he climbed towards the radio room.

There had ben some controversy concerning whether the first expedition to Venus should be an armed one or not.

Much nonsense had been talked, considering that nobody knew whether Venusians were warlike or peaceful, human or non-human, monsters or insects—or if they existed at all.

There was general agreement on one point: no atomic weapons should be taken. Their use could start something nobody could finish.

On the other hand, it wouldn't be fair to the crew to risk putting them in the spot of fighting off, say, carnivorous dinosaurs with their bare fists.

A light, portable but potent weapon seemed the golden mean. The old bazooka was finally chosen. It was simple to operate, and every man in the crew soon passed the test in its use.

And everyone hoped it would never be needed.

George found Sparks staring out of his porthole and trying to make sense of what was happening out there. On the way down he did his best to put him in the picture.

The Captain had unpacked the tripod and barrel of a bazooka.

"I'll take this," he said. "You two get a box of shells each."

The boxes had been heavy on Earth and were still quite heavy enough here. As George staggered after Freiburg with his, he called: "Did you spot any Venusians, Skip?"

"No. But we can try to knock out that blasted wheel."

The fearsome shriek of the wheel hit their ears with full power again as they quitted the ship. The Captain began setting up the tripod a few metres away. George and the radio operator dumped their boxes, opened them, and prepared the fuses of the rocket shells.

It may have been his fancy, but George thought the wheel had slackened speed a trifle. At least, there didn't seem to be quite so many wheels whirring around the perimeter. But that perimeter was still plainly impassable. However fast you tried to dash across it, before you were over the

groove that flashing wheel would have run full circle and sliced you in two.

The skipper was having trouble with the tripod, but waved away George's proffered help impatiently.

Sparks was staring fascinatedly at the wheel. Suddenly, he shouted: "It's closing in on us!"

George took a good look at the base of the blurred wall. It was true enough. The groove had widened to a shallow trench, and was steadily widening yet towards them. The keen edge of the wheel was paring its way inwards.

He remembered Poe's *The Pit and the Pendulum*, and was no happier for the memory.

The skipper tugged at his ankle, and roared: "The shells, man! Quick-firing drill."

George quickly laid eight shells in a line, and fed the first into the tube. The bazooka had an automatic firing device.

Freiburg was aiming at the center of the moving, yet seemingly stationary, wall. He wanted to hit the hub.

Whizz! Trailing fire and smoke the first shell darted out of the magic circle.

Whizz! Whizz! Whizz! Three more followed it.

All four passed through the wall as it itself were but smoke, and fell to the ground and burst half a kilo beyond it.

Whizz! Whizz! Whizz! Whi—*Crash!*

They glimpsed a mid-air explosion and flung themselves flat as bits of shrapnel moaned and whirred about them and thudded into the earth. The very last shell had scored a hit. Instantly, the howling had lost half its power.

They looked up cautiously. The wall of steel was still there, but not quite so solidly. You could glimpse the huge disk spinning with a band of daylight encircling the hub now. They'd blown a hole through the wheel near the hub: the rotary motion made it look like a continuous band.

And the wheel had been blasted back against the far side of the trench it was cutting.

Before anyone could say a word, there was a roar like a rocket-plane taking off. Suddenly, a great cloud of black smoke materialized with a splintering concussion somewhere behind them. Shell fragments ripped fiercely through the air.

It was uncomfortably close.

Freiburg abandoned the bazooka. "Take cover!" He was first into the nearest crater.

Then hell broke loose.

Whole salvoes of shells came shrieking down. The ground vibrated like a beaten bass drum. The three men were shaken in their crater like dice in a box. Thick clouds of pungent yellow gas came swirling into the depression and made them cough helplessly. The smell of burnt powder was everywhere. The shrapnel fell like hail.

It stopped at last, but their ears went on singing from the battering they'd received. Only slowly they became aware again of the sound of the wheel. It had fallen in pitch to a mere whirring drone.

George wiped tears and sweat from his cheeks.

"Welcome to Venus, Planet of Love," he said, hoarsely.

Sparks said nothing. He'd bitten his lip badly and was dabbing at it with a bloody handkerchief.

Freiburg inched his nose over the lip of the crater, and tried futilely to wave some of the yellow gas away. "Can't see a damn thing . . ."

Presently: "It's clearing a bit now . . . There's something moving out there. Got your telescope, George?"

George handed it up to him. There was a distant grinding sound, audible above the wheel's drone.

"Tanks," said the skipper, peering. "Well, that beats everything. Old-fashioned tanks, with guns on 'em—straight from the Dark Ages."

He swung the telescope slowly, scanning every direction.

"We're surrounded by them," he reported. "They're closing in on us. Coming in for the kill."

II

GEORGE SHOUTED "I'll get the bazooka."

"No use," mumbled Sparks, indistinctly. "It got a direct hit. It's in fifty pieces."

"There's another in the ship," said George, starting up.

"Stay where you are," said Freiburg. "Or you'll be in fifty pieces if that barrage comes down again. It's not worth a try. I've counted twenty-five tanks out there, and there's a real monster of a fighting machine in back of them. Take a look."

George squinted through the telescope. The wheel, continually passing across the line of vision like the shutter of a movie projector, made everything look flickery. But he could see the circle of tanks, less than a kilo off. They were low built, with wide caterpillar treads and squat turrets, and gave the impression they were hugging the ground. They were slowly converging and every one of their gun muzzles was aiming straight at the ship.

Behind them a sort of huge torpedo on wheels was skirmishing around. It was quite fifty metres long. The nose of its cylindrical body was sharply pointed. The thing was made of some dull metal, had back-projecting fins, and the wheels on which it moved so swiftly were sheathed.

A thin and short streamer of white hot gas kept shooting from its tail.

"Rocket-propelled," George observed. "At a guess I'd say it's a highly mobile armored H.Q., directing operations well forward on the battle-field. Why, the darn thing looks almost as big as our ship!"

"Think you're right, George," said Freiburg. "We're up against a whole mechanized army. We haven't got a chance. We'd better raise the flag of truce and try for a parley. I'd like to know what they've got against us before they wipe us out, anyhow . . . Hey, they've all stopped advancing. What's the idea?"

They waited, tensed up. The wheel's note, which had been falling, died away to nothing. Even the secondary swishing sound, made by the wheel's keen edge slicing the air, fell to a mere sighing. The wheel was bowling ever more slowly around. It began to wobble as it ran. They could see the hole in it distinctly now.

Then it keeled over and fell on its side, all momentum gone. It lay still.

"It's served its purpose," said the Captain, taking off his jacket. "And that was to keep us pinned down in the target area until all the guns could be brought to bear on us at close range. Did you notice the air flutes on the hub? We blew them off on the near side, but the ones on the other side stayed intact. That's where the howl came from—to petrify and demoralize us: the old Japanese war-cry—*Banzai!*"

"I don't think I'm gonna like these Venusians," said Sparks, slowly and with care—his lip had stopped bleeding and he didn't want to start it off again.

"Nor me," said Freiburg. "All the same, we have to be reasonable. Like it or not, we've got to try to be friendly. Getting tough isn't going to help us get any place."

George was skeptical. "That's a purely terrestrial gesture. It can't mean a thing here."

Bang! Bang! Bang! Three tanks shells, on a flat trajectory, arrived before the sound of their passage. They burst near the base of the ship.

The skipper snatched his shirt back. "It means something. Obviously, the wrong thing."

Sparks made an inarticulate noise, and gasped: "The ship!"

They swung around. The shells had burst near the battered fins of the ship and loosened them from the earth. The ship groaned and began to cant. It was like the Tower of Pisa pulling away from its foundations.

"Timber!" exclaimed George. But they were lucky. In relation to them it was falling sideways. It came down with an almighty crash, bounced once and rolled a couple of metres. The dust billowed up around it in a wide, brown cloud, then slowly settled. After that, nothing moved. The fallen ship lay as still as the fallen wheel.

The skipper used his shirt more effectively to mop his brow.

"The finishing touch," he said. "You might as well write off your set now, Sparks."

The radio-op. nodded. His lower lip was bleeding again; he'd bitten it in the same place.

Then they all jerked their heads the other way, because a roaring sound had started way out on the plain.

"Gosh, this is no place for a rest cure," said Freiburg. "I'm beginning to get the jitters. What the hell is it now?"

George said, looking hard: "It's the armored H.Q. It's coming this way—like a bullet."

And indeed the great torpedo was hurtling head on towards them with its jet roaring. They could see only its blind, sharp nose. It sped through the ring of stationary tanks

and the ground began to shake under its spinning metal wheels.

"Down," said Freiburg, dazedly, wearily. He was getting tired of existence in a sort of recurring earthquake, bobbing up and down like some kind of jack-in-the-box; of continually being assailed by ear-shattering noises and uninvited missiles. The collapse of the ship, his once proud charge, had brought the last of his failing spirits down with it. That was the last straw. He fell into a state of cynical despair.

The roaring ended, was supplanted by a nerve-tearing squealing, like powerful brakes being applied. Came a silence. And then the grinding of twenty-five tanks moving in unison grated through the heavy air.

George caught Freiburg's glazing eye. He grinned at him wryly. Frieburg tried to respond in kind, but failed. His expression asked dismally: *How long can this go on?*

Events answered with another change of tempo. Silence fell so abruptly that it seemed to have a noise of its own.

But now the skipper had become too apathetic to investigate. He merely lay waiting dully for whatever manifested itself. Sparks had given up, too, and lay resignedly at his side with a red-soaked handkerchief pressed to the lower half of his face.

Temperamentally different, George was alert and interested. He gazed boldly at the next surprise item on the program—and was duly surprised. For each and every one of the tanks had performed an about-face. Now they were facing outwards, their long gun barrels radiating like the spokes of a wheel. To the ship and men from Earth they presented only their apparently unprotected backs.

And the great horizontal ship on wheels had also swung around to offer them a view of its rear. It stood there not two hundred metres distant, ignoring them, facing an unseen enemy, patiently waiting. The only thing moving appeared

to be the slight heat haze rising from its tail. For the rest, it was a still-life picture, painted in low tones, with the motionless grey clouds hanging over all.

George spurred his reluctant skipper into taking a look at it.

The Captain gazed from under lowered, cynical eyelids. He grunted: "Oh, I see, it's all only a game, after all. They want us to chase them now. To hell with them! I'm going to see how the other guys are."

He shook off George's restraining hand and climbed out of the pit. He walked at his own pace to the craters where the rest of his crew had gone to ground. But one crater was no longer there. It had become a filled-in double grave.

The mate and one other crew member were lying full-length at the bottom of their crater, face down. Shrapnel was strewn around like so much street rubbish, but none of it appeared to have touched them.

"Come on, you men," said the skipper. "Time for chow."

He stood on the crater rim careless of the array of mechanized might not so far beyond it. There had been just too much of everything, and he was beyond caring any more. Egotistically, he looked on it as a personal attack. Fate had always used him as a football, and now he could only accept that and shrug it off.

Slowly, the mate raised his grimy face. The shells had fallen closer to his refuge and the tide of thick, sooty gas had washed over it many times. There were tear furrows down his cheeks. He might have been crying. It might have been only the gas making his eyes stream.

"Milman's dead, sir."

The skipper frowned. "Are you sure? He doesn't look it."

"No, it was just one small splinter. In his right eye."

Captain Jonah Freiburg sighed. "Barker and Heinz are

dead, too. And buried. Which leaves only four of us. Four is just right for bridge. Got a deck of cards on you?"

The mate sat up. "No, sir." He was puzzled by this off-hand remark.

George got there in time to hear it, and wasn't puzzled. He realized Freiburg had thrown in his hand. And he knew he would have to take over.

He examined Milman, who was stone dead and cooling fast. He clambered out of the crater and took a careful survey of the whole area through his telescope. It was still as lively as a graveyard on a wet afternoon threatening rain.

Freiburg had perched himself on the rim of the pit, and was swinging his legs idly as he filled his pipe.

George said: "You just rest there for a while, Skip. I'm going over to that H.Q. set-up to see if I can make contact and learn who's on who's side against what."

Freiburg nodded absently, busy with his pipe.

The mate asked: "Can I come, Mr. Starkey?"

"Surely, friend."

The two men started out towards the long, dully gleaming hull of the thing like a mounted torpedo. Sparks came doubtfully, at a diagonal, to join them. The blood was drying on his chin.

"Trying for a truce?"

"Trying for something," said George. "Just be ready to duck if anything starts up."

Nothing did. They came alongside the wheeled monster. There was no sign of hatches or portholes, and when they'd walked clear around it they'd established that the hull was a completely unbroken surface save for a couple of short, flexible rods, near the nose, back-flung like antennae.

George reached up, on his toes. He grabbed one of the rods and pulled at it. It waggled loosely, then sprang back when

he released it. The monster didn't seem offended or in the least perturbed. It ignored him.

He picked up a rock and banged it several times against the hull. Circumspectly, the mate and Sparks stood a little way back lest the wheels started turning. But they did not.

"There's no one at home," said George, tossing the rock away. "Or else they're playing possum—maybe watching us through that hull—some kind of one-way vision."

Just in case that were so, he made what he considered to be friendly signs at the ship. It remained totally unresponsive. He threw up his hands.

"Well, maybe the tank drivers will have something to say. Let's go see."

They plodded over the cracked earth to the nearest tank, half expecting it to swivel and cover them with its gun. (The long guns protruded from the tanks' bodies, not their turrets, which were too small to carry them) But all the tanks remained static in their arc.

Still, they had slightly more promise than the seamless torpedo craft. Each turret had a lid with a handle to it. George screwed up his courage, clambered onto the first tank, and tried to open it up. It proved easy enough. The lid lifted after a single twist of the handle.

George looked straight down on the breech of the gun. Plainly, it was self-loading, with an automatic ammunition feed. There was radar apparatus, with a tiny screen. And there was a man-sized driving seat, with an elaborate instrument panel, including an inset TV screen, facing it.

Everything was there—except the driver.

Meanwhile, Sparks and the mate were similarly investigating other nearby tanks. They came back with the same answer. All the tanks were obviously driverless.

"So what happened to the drivers?" asked Sparks. "They couldn't have got out: we'd have seen them go."

"They can be folded up small and slipped into a dashboard pocket," said the mate, attempting humor after this anti-climax.

"Although these tanks have provision for manual control, they must have been operated by remote control," said George. "Question is, where are the controllers? Lying low in that cigar on wheels? Or maybe in some General Headquarters way over the horizon?"

"I'll take a bet they're in the cigar," said the mate. "And they're stuck in there because the power's failed. Look, that hot-dog on wheels came charging at us bent on murder. Then it changed its mind and turned to go back. Found its batteries were running out or something. And all the tanks had to turn around, too, because they're powered from that thing. Then they were stuck because it had run out of gas. Could be it's re-charging its batteries right now. We'll know about it soon if it is—they'll all turn on us."

"That's a nice theory," said George, scratching his head. "Got any theories about that mark?"

He pointed to a white O painted on the side of the nearest tank.

"Sort of regimental sign," said the mate. "All the tanks have got that same letter O."

"Or zero," said Sparks. "More probably, it 's just a circle: you can't expect Venusians to share our alphabet or figuring system."

But the mate wasn't listening to him, but to something else. There was a distant heavy droning.

"It's coming from the sky," George decided. "Airplanes—of a kind."

The mate said: "We'd better get back to the craters."

They started back. The droning swelled behind them, ballooning up over their heads menacingly. They looked back

and up over their shoulders and saw only the grey blank mask of the sky.

Freiburg was still sitting in the same spot, smoking his pipe reflectively. If he'd heard the droning, he didn't appear bothered by it.

"Hello, boys, you're soon back. Learned anything?"

"Yes and no," George replied. The droning worried him. He gazed up.

"They're just above the clouds, or in them," he said, at large. "Doubt if they can see us or even know we exist. They'll pass over."

This opinion was brief comfort to anyone. With a shriek which rose to a crescendo, the first sheaf of bombs dropped on a section of the arc of the tank perimeter. Two tanks went flying through the air like discarded toys. The blast sent the men reeling. They scrambled into the crater alongside the body of Milman.

The skipper, rocking and looking surprised, still sat on the edge of the crater. George grabbed his legs and pulled him in.

"My pipe!" exclaimed Freiburg. sounding injured. He scrabbled for it.

The meaningless war began again. All around the distant skirts of the plain unseen anti-aircraft guns and rocket batteries opened up, firing at the equally invisible enemy in the sky. But this time the tanks and the big wheeled vehicle took no part in it—except as sitting targets for the bombs.

The men in the crater, although they heard plenty, saw little of the action. They were huddled in a petrified heap. They felt horribly exposed to the objects dropping from the grey and poisonous clouds. Mostly these were bombs, but among them were shapeless chunks of flying machines

which the ground defenses had hit. Earth and sky thundered, the rain of destruction went on, and there was nothing you could do except lie still and pray.

Then the droning, somewhat weakened, passed away to the west. The bombing in this vicinity had ceased, but far off to the west there was a dull rumbling and the thudding of guns.

Until at last all was quiet again.

George got to his feet and counted heads. Then sighed with relief, because Milman was still the only dead man among them. There were some nasty bruises, but the only blood was coming from Sparks' tender lip, which had opened up again.

Freiburg was looking thoughtful, and George hoped that was a good sign.

Sparks said, thickly: "What I really need is a gum-shield, but has anyone got a spare handkerchief?"

George gave him one, then took stock of the situation outside. All the tanks were still there, but some had been shifted around by blast and four had been overturned. The wheeled torpedo stood squarely and impassively in the same spot, showing no signs of damage: possibly its armor was impervious to bomb splinters.

In the obscure distance George glimpsed moving shapes. He turned the telescope on them, and groaned aloud. Another tank attack was developing.

He warned the others. The Captain shrugged, the mate glowered, and Sparks swore.

Then, all at once, the tanks nearer to them, which had originally attacked them, showed evidences of life—except the four overturned ones. Their engines started up, and they jockeyed slowly backwards, forming a smaller, tighter circle. They then stopped. The HQ vehicle, however, hadn't budged.

"Well, what do you know?" said the mate.

"It's crazy," said George. "Know what, mister? I don't think your theory about the power-cut was right. I don't believe the power was ever off. They formed a laager around us to defend us. The bombs blew gaps in it. Now they've just tightened up their defenses again."

The mate scratched his head. "I don't get that. They started in to shoot us to hell. Why should they turn their coats?"

"Search me," said George.

Freiburg made no comment, but he had listened and was becoming interested in events again. He looked intently at the advancing tanks.

But it was the tanks in their own circle which opened fire first, beginning a rapid drum-fire.

There was a reason for this. The attacking tanks, it soon became clear, were smaller and swifter but carried correspondingly smaller armament. So the bigger tanks were taking advantage of their own greater range.

However, there were at least twice as many of the smaller tanks. They whirred around like desert beetles, making themselves difficult targets. They began a policy of darting close in to take quick shots with their small guns, then zig-zagging off. But they didn't always get away with it—several were knocked out and brewing up.

It was exciting to watch, but dangerous. Shells were flying all ways. But the men in the crater believed that this time they were neutral. Therefore, illogically, they felt safer.

That feeling was short-lived. A small enemy tank dashed in past one of their own (the Earthmen were beginning to look on them as their own) knocked-out tanks, and once inside the defensive ring came charging on towards them, squirting shells as it came. The small shells whizzed harmlessly over their heads and over the fallen space-ship behind them.

The tank started to depress its gun elevation. But before

it opened fire again, the great torpedo-shaped ship on wheels suddenly came to life with an angry roar of rocket vents.

With astonishing acceleration it bore down on the small tank and shouldered it out of its path as a maddened bull charges a hapless, dismounted picador.

There was a sound like the clash of giant cymbals. The tank rolled helplessly on its back, like a turtle. Its tracks churned the air uselessly. The wheeled monster pulled up within its own length with a shrieking of brakes. It became quiescent again.

George cheered and, becoming aware of Freiburg beside him, a fellow witness, bawled in the skipper's ear: "Those guys in the HQ are right on their toes!"

Freiburg nodded, and pointed to the helpless tank. He shouted some reply, but the din of battle drowned it save for the word "Triangle!"

George took another look at the tank, and noticed the big green triangle painted on it—just where their own tanks carried the white circle. Sometime, he thought, if he lived, he would try to solve this puzzle. Without provocation, the white circles attacked the terrestrial camp. Then, for no apparent reason, turned to defend it against the green triangles. What was the fighting about, anyhow? And who were the combatants? Did it go on like this all of the time all over Venus, or had they happened to drop into the middle of some local war?

It the midst of his bewilderment, and adding to it, all the small tanks wheeled around simultaneously, as if obeying a single voice. They clattered swiftly back in the direction from which they'd come, leaving behind them dust trails and the dozen of their number which were disabled and burning.

The defending tanks ceased to fire.

Freiburg said, triumphantly: "We've beaten 'em off."

"We?" echoed George. "What are 'we?' "

"A leading question," said Freiburg, peering at the fleeing tanks. He became suddenly rigid. "Uh-huh. Telescope, George."

George gave it to him.

"There's no end to it," said Freiburg, presently. "Unless this *is* the end coming. It sure looks like it."

George strained to try to see what the Captain could see. He could make out, somewhere near the blurred horizon, a dark spot that hadn't been there before.

"What is it, Skip?"

"It's the grandfather of all tanks, my boy. About five times the size of our friends here. It's taller than that damn wheel—anything up to ten metres high, I guess. Must be hellish heavy: can't think why it doesn't just sink away into the ground. It's coming this way. Rather slowly. Looks formidable—downright grim. It seems to be alone, though. Hope it hasn't got any brothers."

"Maybe it's coming to our rescue. Maybe that's what's frightened the triangle corps away."

"I'd like to think that, too, George, but I'm afraid it just ain't so. Those beastly little tanks are rushing towards it like kids running to greet their mother. Perhaps it *is* their mother. Anyhow, it's not firing at them. What a sight—reminds me of a big, fat, female spider and her brood. They're forming up behind her now—hanging onto her apron-strings, as it were . . . Yes, it's no use, George. It's carrying their sign: the jolly old green triangle. We're in for another big headache. Do you have any aspirin on you?"

He relinquished the telescope to George with a slight smile. George looked at him curiously.

"You seem to be perking up again, Skip. For a while there I thought you'd given up."

"I had, George, and I have again—now I've seen what's coming. That first time I felt that everything and everybody was against us. But when the boys in the HQ over there started carrying a gun for us, I felt a whole lot better. It's nice to know you've someone on your side. But I'm afraid the game's really up this time."

"I see," said George, and thought he did see something of Freiburg's strange psychological make-up. Freiburg hated being out on his own, bearing the whole responsibility when he was helpless to do anything about it. He was still helpless now, but not alone; the unknown commander of the wheeled HQ had taken over their defense. He'd acquired an ally at his own level. He seemed to have forgotten that two of his crew had been killed by the white circle tanks. Or else he regarded it as just a mistake.

Sparks and the mate crouched at the bottom of the pit, beginning to look pale and battle-fatigued.

A heavy boom sounded from the distance. It was the first ranging shot from the monster tank. The large-caliber shell screamed through the air. George flung himself down beside the mate. He could feel the man trembling in anticipation of the burst.

It came, an over-shot, some three hundred metres behind the hull of the space-ship. With a sound like the crack of doom, a tremendous gusher of brown earth squirted towards the dreary sky. Black smoke boiled up around it.

Seemingly untroubled, Freiburg remained up on the rim, observing.

The white circle tanks began firing, their guns cocked at extreme elevation.

Presently, Freiburg reported: "Our shells are falling short. We can't reach him. He's stopped just out of range. He's going to shoot us up from there."

Another boom, another wail rising to a scream. Another cracking explosion. It was still plus, but nearer this time.

Sparks looked sideways at George. His eyes were round and scared above the red-blotched handkerchief he pressed to his face. They confirmed silently what George was thinking: the range was being corrected and it was only a matter of time . . .

A new sound tore at their nerves. The rockets of the armored HQ were blasting. They felt the vibration of the ground as it began to move off. They all—even Sparks—scrambled up to see whether it was abandoning them, moving out of range.

But, vents roaring, wheels racing, it was shooting straight as an arrow towards the dim bulk of the giant tank.

Far from abandoning them, it was championing them.

Emotionally wrought up as he was, George felt an odd lump arise in his throat. It was David against Goliath, but mad, useless courage in this case. The monster tank was far too big and heavy to be overthrown, as the midget tank had been, by the sheer impetus of the HQ. If it tried that, the HQ would only smash itself to pieces like a boat splintering on a rock.

George thought, no, it won't do a fool thing like that. It's just aiming to be of nuisance value. It'll worry the monster, like a dog worrying a bear. It'll keep throwing it off its aim, using its own far superior speed to keep itself out of danger.

Using unsuspected small quick-firing guns, the huge tank opened up on the thing rocketing towards it. The HQ drove through this crackling gunfire unchecked. It veered out to the right, as though it were going to by-pass the big tank. Then it swung around sharply and made a flanking attack.

Its sharp nose caught the tank squarely in the side.

There was a flash of white light which seemed to rive both heaven and earth.

While the watchers were temporarily blinded, the blast wave hit them and bowled them over like so many ten-pins.

They picked themselves up, dazed. Thunderous echoes of explosion were repeating themselves endlessly around the horizon.

Sparks needed immediate medical attention. His lower lip was just raw flesh now, like a burst tomato. He was moaning with the pain of it. Off came Freiburg's shirt again. This time he ripped it into rough bandages. Between them they made a good job of binding the radio-operator's jaw, though it meant gagging him.

When they took a look at the wreck of the giant tank, it was blazing like a great bonfire. Both its tracks had been blown clean off, and its turret lay in two pieces maybe half a kilo away. Its gun was broken off short as though it were a stick of chalk. There was a jagged crack down the thick frontal armor-plate. It was just a mass of scrap metal.

By some freak, one wheel of the HQ had been blown back in their direction. It lay out there in the middle distance isolated from other general debris. It appeared to be the only remaining trace of the HQ, and to George at least there was a poignant touch about this.

The small tanks which had sheltered behind their champion had been scattered like rubbish in a gale. Those which had survived intact had fled out of sight.

Their own guard of white circle tanks had lapsed into silence and disinterestedness.

The skipper turned from surveying the battlefield, and was obviously moved. He said to George; "They were really great guys. They were riding a cargo of dynamite. They knew it and didn't care so long as they knocked out the big fellow. Their fuel tanks burst, I guess."

George said: "And we'll never even know who they were . . . if they existed."

"What's that?" said Freiburg, sharply.

"Well, we're only surmising that the thing had a crew, aren't we?"

"I'll stake my life there were people in there who knew just what they were doing," said the skipper, stubbornly.

George didn't argue. For one thing, you can't argue without knowing the facts. For another, it was obvious that Freiburg had an emotional need to believe that there were Venusians on his side, faithful unto death, that the whole planet wasn't hostile towards the men from Earth. That belief had lifted him from despair, had given him some faith back. What did it matter if the belief was right or wrong, so long as it sustained him? He could be right, anyhow.

They inspected their space-ship inside and out. Things had been pretty badly shaken up, but the only thing beyond ultimate repair was the radio apparatus. The fins were grotesquely crumpled, but could be straightened out on the portable workbenches, given time.

After that, the great problem would be to get the ship back to standing vertically on its tail in the blast-off position.

"If only we had some winches," said Freiburg.

By now the mate had recovered his nerve and demonstrated that his wits were back in good order. He suggested: "Maybe we could use the tanks to haul the ship up . . . somehow."

Frieburg pondered. "H'm. I rather suspect these tanks were directed and powered from the vehicle we called the 'HQ.' As that's been atomized, the odds seem against the idea. Besides, we'd need cables—and we don't have any cables."

"I remember reading in old war books about tank warfare that tanks sometimes got bogged in mud-holes," said George. "And that they carried cables and winches for getting them-

selves out. It could be worth taking a close look at those things . . ."

They found that each tank had a cable locker at the rear, containing some fifty metres of oiled steel cable—thick, tough stuff.

"It's like an answer to a prayer," said Freiburg. "We can join the cables together. The if—*if*—we can get eight or nine of these tanks working somehow . . ."

George said: "You know, I've been wondering about those driving seats. Seems to me they point to the fact that the tanks weren't always remotely controlled. Maybe they don't always have to be, even now. There could be alternative provision for manual control. That panel facing the seat certainly has manual switches on it. I'm going to try everything. Keep clear of the treads."

He climbed into the nearest tank.

None of the switches or levers was marked, and he began a game of trial and error with them. He hit the forward movement lever at the second try. The engine burst into life and the tank jolted and ground forward.

It went quite a way before he discovered how to stop it. He experimented some more, and found the controls simple to use once he'd mentally labelled them. The TV screen provided a sharp view of his surroundings.

Twenty minutes later, he was giving Freiburg driving lessons.

The skipper mastered the tank almost as quickly, brought it to a halt, then sat thoughtfully regarding the image of the fallen space-ship on the TV screen.

He said, presently: "We've a fortnight's work to do on those fins. Even if the triangle gang doesn't attack us again, and we're left in peace to finish it, there's always the danger these tanks may take it into their heads to wander back wherever they came from—before we have a chance to use

'em. Wonder if there's any way of switching off the remote controls?"

"We can try," said George.

They experimented, and found eventually that if one of the antennae was removed, the tank's engine stopped and all its instruments went dead.

George said: "Well, there you are, you can do it that way. But it also means the manual controls become useless, because you aren't getting any power. So, while you're actually using the tanks, you'll just have to accept that they may be taken over by remote control at any moment."

"Fine if that happened just as we were raising the ship," said Freiburg. "It could cause a first-class catastrophe. Look, George, I want you to try to contact the white circle General Headquarters, whoever and wherever they are. I know you're itching to scout around in your helicopter and see more of Venus. So you might as well make it a definite mission."

"I'd like to, Skip. What do I tell 'em, provided they haven't scalped me first?"

"Tell them we appreciate the way they've defended us, and we hope they'll continue to act that way. That we come in peace. Ask 'em if they mind our borrowing their tanks just for a while to set up the ship. Tell 'em we'd be grateful for any help they could offer in effecting our repairs—maybe they've got mobile workshops. And tell them how enormously impressed we are by the magnificent action of their comrades in sacrificing themselves to save us."

"Sure, Skip, I'll do that. I didn't aim to quit Venus without meeting the Venusians or having a wider look at the place. Let's unload the 'copter now."

It was easy to do that. The helicopter had been very carefully packed in sections, and was undamaged. Normally, it would be lowered piece by piece from the hatch near the

ship's nose. But now that hatch was almost at ground-level, and it was like unloading from a railroad box-car.

The Earthmen assembled the helicopter and adjusted the variable pitch vanes to cope with the denser air. The trail flight was wobbly, but a further adjustment got the pitch right. George circled the area widely and saw no signs of any other tanks, friendly or enemy.

Meantime, the others packed his concentrated food rations, and tested the Teleo components.

The Teleo had helped to make Earth One World with one tongue. It looked simple but wasn't. There was a light-weight skull cap connected by twin cable to a small box fixed on a belt. The solitary control: a push-pull switch.

Two or more people could communicate via the Teleo, even if they spoke different languages. A thought, in essence, was a measurable electrical discharge from the brain cells. The Teleo precisely measured that discharge and transmitted it on a short-wave. Or it could receive such an impulse; it was a two-way radio. The discharge was reproduced in the receiver's brain, became a thought which was interpreted in the recipient's language.

Only the frontal lobes, concerned with deliberately conscious thoughts, were affected by the cap. Subconscious or unconscious thoughts remained screened. If a sender had difficulty in controlling or clarifying his thoughts, he merely switched off until he was good and ready to communicate.

The effective range of the Teleo was but three metres, and this had both advantages and disadvantages.

George decided to take six sets, packed in a satchel. He said; "If I do meet up with the Venusians, I hope they've got heads to fit these things on."

He checked his supplies, then shook hands with the others, and said goodbye.

Freiburg warned: "Keep away from the ceiling. Remember,

those clouds are poisonous. Look for that white circle—and steer clear of the green triangle. Good luck, George."

George took off, and climbed slowly. The faces below became white dots and then imperceptible. The space-ship shrank until it looked just like an old stick lying on the ground. The stick floated away behind and was lost in the distance. Ahead, the blur on the horizon was revealing itself as a range of white-peaked mountains.

Soon, he was passing between those peaks and staring down into desolate, twisting valleys. Beyond, the plain resumed, and went on and on. Visiblity continued to be poor.

He came down pretty close to the ground, looking for friendly vehicles or signs of the white circle. All at once he glimpsed a great metal wheel, similar to the one which had created a barrier around the ship and its crew.

It was bowling busily along upon a secret errand, cutting its path as straight as a bee-line. It was all alone on the spreading plain but seemed confident of its mission. He swooped down to follow it. The ultimate target, more likely than not, would turn out to be white circle elements.

However, from directly behind and above it was so thin that he soon lost sight of it. Circling, he caught a glimpse of it later, so far off that it looked no larger than a silver dollar. It was too distant and moving too fast for him to have a hope of catching up with it now.

He kept a look-out for another, but that was the only moving object he saw until a jet plane dropped from the clouds and came screaming down at him. It shot past and banked widely. In those moments he saw it clearly: a stubby craft, gray as the clouds, with swept-back wings. On each wing was a white circle.

His heart leaped. A friendly plane. Perhaps it would guide him to the G.H.Q. Perhaps it had come for that very purpose.

The friendly plane, having zoomed around a semi-circle,

now drove straight at him, spitting unfriendly rocket missiles. The confusion in his mind was mirrored by the noisy physical confusion without.

There were ear-splitting bangs and widening smoke trails. He lost control of the helicopter. It was taken from him and bounced about the sky like a rubber ball. Sometimes the greeny-brown plain usurped the place of the cloud layer. Sometimes it turned itself into a wall, standing first on this side of him, then on that. Smoke blotches stained all aspects impartially.

He pressed the ejector button—voluntarily or not, he never decided. But suddenly he was flying without the doubtful benefit of the 'copter. Then he was falling. His parachute opened automatically, and he began to rock under its see-sawing canopy.

The 'copter, with only air where its tail had been, was side-slipping away and below. Its assassin had vanished, presumably back into the clouds.

Angry, bewildered, feeling betrayed, he watched the helicopter crash on the plain. Why had the white circle plane shot him down on sight?

A mistake? But surely the white circle crowd had radio. Surely information about the Earthmen had reached all their fighting forces by now? If not, then the white circle G.H.Q. wasn't up to its job, and its help could only be regarded as a doubtful quantity.

Or perhaps they'd changed sides yet again? In which case they could never be trusted for a moment.

He landed with a foot-tingling jar. It looked much the same as the place where the space-ship had landed. The murky plain was pitted with similar shell or bomb craters.

But now he was alone and unarmed, and both sides appeared to be gunning for him.

He threw off the parachute harness, and plodded off in

the direction of the crashed 'copter. He must try to salvage the food. He was less concerned about the Teleos. There didn't seem much point to them now. Venusians, with or without heads, were clearly people to avoid.

III

Mara returned with a bundle of the succulent loogo stalks even before Dox had missed them from the well-guarded store. Swift as she'd been, it was already too late. Mother sat up in bed with her mouth open as if eager to be fed at once. But she'd never eat again. Her mouth was open this time merely because her jaw had dropped.

Mara looked at the fat, still body, shrugged and thought: Well, that servitude is ended. She fed well. None can say I failed in my duty.

Absently, she nibbled a stalk herself. She felt no sorrow, only relief. She was free from the onus of feeding that insatiable appetite.

Now she wished to be free from Fami itself. It was a problem. The only known way to leave Fami was the way her mother (most reluctantly, she was sure) had gone: along Death's road.

Maybe Leep knew another way. He knew most things. Still nibbling, she went along to his cave. He was squatting outside writing painfully upon a strip of bleached cloth.

"Go away," he said, without looking up. "Even my disciples aren't allowed near me when I'm composing."

She sat down silently, watching him, and eating.

"Give me a loogo stalk, and you may stay."

She would have stayed, anyway, but she gave him a stalk.

"Your mother is dead," he said, with his mouth full.

She nodded, not questioning his source of knowledge. Leep was often aware of events without being told of them. He was a mystic, a seer, a versifier, and very lazy. Because of his rare qualities, he had a circle of devotees who stole for him.

"You may have this." He passed her the cloth strip.

She read it, as slowly and painfully as he'd written it.

It's all a pointless game,
Played by a forgotten name,
The warlord and child,
Immortal, bored Senilde,
In a house of tricks,
A box of bricks,
Beneath the verdant tower.
Who commands the power
To stifle his breath
And bring him death?

"Become my artist now, and I shall write you many such verses," Leep said.

Mara tucked the strip carefully in her one pocket. It was worth preserving. Cloth was scarce. This was good cloth. She could use it for patching.

She shook her head. "I wish to leave Fami. Which is the way?"

"There's only one way: to follow your mother."

She nodded in calm agreement.

"All ways lead to death," he said, sententiously. "Even the way of acceptance, of remaining here. All shall die soon, for soon the glacier will flow over Fami."

Again she nodded, and left him. As she walked back

through the village of Fami, she looked around. This wide, fertile ledge, with its caves, shacks, and vegetable patches, this odd fault on the margin of the great glacier, was the only world she or its inhabitants had ever known.

Their ancestors fled here in the mountains for refuge from the pitiless, unending war sweeping the greater world.

But the war followed them.

Flying machines dropped fire and thunder on them, blowing great masses away from the mountain-side. The path had vanished in those rock-falls, leaving a sheer precipice on that side of the village.

On the other side, as always, was only the steep glacier, with its arm extended to overhang the village. It was so steep and glassy that if you went down it, you'd never be able to climb back—if you survived the descent.

Above the glacier, snow-slopes reached up into the perpetual clouds. You might, possibly, climb them to the clouds. But only to meet death—for to breathe in the clouds was fatal.

There was good earth on the ledge. The survivors decided to remain there and make the best of things. They built shacks from the material residue of their caravan, hollowed out caves, tilled and sowed the earth, and called the place "Fami," which simply meant "Home."

Most of the men were Army deserters. They brought the Army code with them. They'd lived so long by looting that they'd come to accept it as the primary method of acquiring food and property—indeed, the only honorable method. To do it properly, especially among fellow soldiers, required all one's wits and ingenuity.

If you were too stupid, weak, or fearful to make a good thief, then you had to labor to grow the food and make the utensils for living. To have to fall back, thus, on merely

producing was a confession of failure and carried a social stigma.

Mara was lucky, in one way. Her father's father's father had been in charge of Army provisions, knew all the tricks, and taught his family well.

Her father had taught Mara well. She had, in fact, surpassed him, never fumbled it once.

But he did get caught once, at Filo's granary. It was the law that if you caught a thief in the act of thieving, you had the right to kill him. It was justice: bungling must be punished. It was the only way to keep the standard of performance high, worthy of the name of art—for a professional thief claimed the title of "artist."

So he was executed. His last words to Mara were: "Now my burden of duty falls upon you. See that your mother never goes hungry—I charge you."

But mother was always hungry. It was her natural state. Mara earned and gave her twice as much food as anyone else in the Fami received, but she always wanted more. Mara began to suspect that her father had allowed himself to be caught on purpose.

So when in the evening the neighbors ceremoniously placed the naked (cloth was short in Fami) body of her mother on the edge of the glacier, and equally ceremoniously gave it a push, she was not sad when she saw it slide down and become a fast-moving speck which the mist swallowed.

She went home and worked on the big, cloth-stuffed mattress she was fashioning from her spoils. (She was one of the reasons for cloth being scarce.) She finished it late at night, then dragged it through the sleeping village to the glacier. She balanced it on the hallowed spot, lay on it, pushed hard. She worked the ponderous thing away from the edge . . .

Then suddenly she was riding it at gathering speed down through the complete darkness.

She was following Leep's advice—and her mother—literally. She was a simple girl, and something of a fatalist. What no other inhabitant of Fami had dared do even in daylight, she was doing casually at night—for no other reason than that this happened to be the time when her carrier was completed.

She lay spread-eagled on the lumpy thing at an acute angle, the air rushing over her like an upward gale. She had no idea of what might lie only an arm's length ahead of her.

This swift glissading went on for a long time. She'd adjusted herself to it and was even beginning to doze, when the mattress began to slow with a series of jerks.

It stopped. She knelt, and groped around with an exploratory hand. Her fingers dabbled in cold water in most directions. She knifed the mattress up the middle and snuggled down inside it. Soon she was warmly asleep. The main object was accomplished: she'd escaped from Fami. She was content to await the morning to discover where she'd escaped to.

She awakened some time after dawn and found her bed poised on a narrowing spit of hard snow. Several longer tongues of the glacier reached out into the shallows of the wide lake formed by its melting.

She found four shrunken but fairly well preserved bodies lying along the margin of the lake and recognized them as people of Fami who'd died in the last few years. Her mother was not among them, and she surmised that the greater weight of that gross body had carried it far into the lake. The bones of her ancestors and many old friends must lie around here, beneath the ice-snow or the water.

Beyond the leaden level of the lake were hills. She skirted the lake to reach them, passing through valleys which wound

ever downwards until she emerged, toward evening, on a wide plain where the air was warm, even oppressive. She slept there in a hollow. Next morning she ate the last of her loogo stalks, and set out across the plain.

She heard spasmodic rumblings and bangings in the far distance, and once the heavy drone of unseen aircraft passed overhead. But these were sounds one often heard from Fami. They'd never hurt anyone during her lifetime, and so she wasn't afraid of them.

She still wasn't afraid when she saw two strange birds fight briefly high in the sky and one fall dead to the ground. But she was curious when she saw a man floating down from the heavens swinging beneath what looked like a big white sheet. The man might have some food with him—and that sheet looked like a nice piece of cloth. So she started making for the spot where she judged he'd come to earth.

Presently, she came upon the abandoned parachute, and was rapturous about the thin, smooth, incredibly clean silk. She gathered it, tied it in a bundle with its own cords. She could see the man in the distance walking toward the broken body of the fallen bird. She balanced the bundle on her head and walked after him.

George delved in the wreckage of the helicopter. He found the box of provisions and helped himself to a food bar. He bit off a sizeable chunk, laid the remainder on the splintered fuselage while he investigated the state of the Tellos. They seemed okay. He reached for the residue of food bar. It was gone.

He looked on the ground. It hadn't fallen there. But nearby was his parachute, bundled up like a cushion. Sitting on it, watching him and eating the last of the bar, was a young girl with a solemn but beautiful pale face. She was

wearing only a very tattered frock. Her arms and legs were bare, her hair jet black, her eyes brown and expressionless.

"Well, hello there," he said, very surprised and very interested.

She continued to sit and chew and watch him.

"Hungry?" He tossed her another food bar. She caught it neatly and eyed the provision box speculatively.

In his turn, he inspected the first live Venusian any Earthling had seen. If they're all like this one, he thought, it's going to be all right. She not only had a head, but a nice head; and all of her other members were not only in the right places, but most pleasingly arranged there.

He got out a couple of the Teleos, and went into an elaborate miming routine to convey what they were for and to assure her that the apparatus wouldn't harm her. She sat there finishing the second bar calmly, her gaze wandering away from him and back to the provision box. Indifferent, she let him adjust the cap over her raven hair.

With practice, this thought projection became as automatic as speech, and could be described as speech.

"What's your name?" asked George.

"Mara," she said, exhibiting no surprise to find a voice other than her own speaking in her mind.

"Where are you from, Mara?"

She waved sticky fingers in the direction of the misty mountains, then stuck the same fingers in her mouth and sucked them.

"I see. I'm George. I come from another planet, Earth."

She was incurious about him. The words "another planet" were meaningless, creating no mental image. She was much more interested in the texture of the parachute, which she fingered again.

"You may have that," said George, kindly.

"Naturally. It's mine."

"Finders keepers, huh? Mara, what's this war all about? What side are you on—white circles or green triangles?"

She remained expressionless. Not a thought came across to him: it was as though her Teleo were switched off. When she didn't understand, or was uninterested, her mind seemed to become a complete blank.

"You don't get it? Circles. Triangles. See here."

He seized a sharp splinter from the wreckage and carved specimen circles and triangles in the turf. When he looked up, she was raiding the provision box, grabbing handfuls of food bars.

"Hey, what's the game, Mara?"

She paused. "Game?" She pulled a piece of cloth from her pocket and tossed it to him. The strange marks on it conveyed only that it was something in another language. He gave it back, telling her to read it.

She read the whole verse beginning: *"It's all a pointless game . . .*

When she'd finished, he switched off his transmitter for a while, did some private thinking, took the food bars away from her, and said: "Mara, these are strictly rationed. However, I'll give you another one if you tell me what this doggerel means."

She said she didn't know what the verse meant any more than he did, but Leep was a man of strange perception and . . . She told him about Leep, and her mother, and Fami and its history, and the glacier and her escape.

He gave her the promised bar, and said: "It's a pity my helicopter's completely smashed. Otherwise, we could have flown up to Fami and interviewed your friend, Leep. He seems to know a lot of things."

"Oh, yes, he does. He has made many cloth books of verses of this kind. They foretold many things which have come to pass."

"The village Nostradamus, huh? A useful guy to have around." He pondered, then said abruptly: "Well, it's the only lead I can see. We'll call on him, anyhow, using our flat feet."

"But the glacier is too slippery to climb."

George fished around in the fuselage and extricated a pick-ax from the bundle of implements he'd brought along. He tapped it, and said: "We'll cut steps. Come on, now. My time is limited."

He couldn't persuade her to leave the parachute behind: It was too precious a find. He carried the provision box, the pick, spare Teleos, and his telescope. She followed sedately, carrying the bundled 'chute on her head. They both continued to wear their Teleos.

The glacier was a bigger affair than he'd imagined: wider, higher, steeper. This he decided on the fifth day of paihful step-cutting, inching up a slope that seemed to mount forever. Every night they'd hacked out a niche in which to sleep, enfolded in the silken layers of the parachute. Even so he, in his thick air-suit, slept poorly because of the cold.

He marveled at the hardihood of Mara. Clad only in her thin frock, placing her bare feet unhesitatingly in the ice holes he'd chipped out, she climbed behind him without complaint or obvious fatigue. Nor did she question why she should have to retrace so tediously the route of her escape from Fami. There were no infantile regrets or crying for the moon in her make-up. She dealt only with facts.

Her simple line of reasoning, George suspected, was: This man has food. He is a fool, and gives it away. Therefore, if I stay with him, I shall have food.

That night, as they lay in their small, artificial cave, he accused her directly: "Mara, you're not interested in the

war, are you? You don't care whether we find the white circle G.H.Q or not?"

"No."

"And you don't want to return to Fami?"

"No."

"You only come with me because I feed you and there is no food on the plain?"

"It is nice to be fed. I always had to feed others."

He sighed, and felt oddly regretful. He would have preferred that she kept him company just because she liked him. He'd certainly grown to like having her around in this cold, dreary desolation. She was, for instance, less unsettling company than Captain Freiburg, for she was uncomplicated, self-controlled, unfearful of the present or the future. And, underneath, deep down, he'd found a queer little streak of quiet humor. Not the purely surface kind of facetious humor, the cover-up for uncertainty, but the genuine vein, seeing things for what they were and smiling at them, unafraid.

Suddenly, she said: "Of course, if I wished, I could take the food any time I wanted to."

"No, Mara, not now. The box is locked and the key is in my pocket."

She made no answer, but presently fidgetted about as though she were trying to get in a comfortable position for sleep. George lay there dozing lightly and wondering formlessly about the men back at the space-ship. Had there been any further attacks? How was the work on the fins going? He'd been away almost a week now, and almost anything might have happened back there.

Again, how was he going to get back to the ship? If he contacted the white circle Venusians soon, and they happened to be in a cooperative mood, they might provide transport. If not, if he never found them, then it wasn't going to be easy.

The automatic direction-recorder in the helicopter had been pulverised in the crash. So he'd small notion of where the ship lay from here. He only knew that out on the plain were mountain ranges other than this one, and the ship was somewhere over the other side of them. Even if he attained the general locality, the ship, laying flat as it was, wouldn't be easy to spot in this poor visibility, even through the telescope.

He might wander past it and get utterly lost.

Again, at this rate, it could be weeks before he got back there. By which time, if they'd got the ship operative, and Freiburg with his will-to-quit complex, they might well have given him up for dead and taken off for Earth, licking their wounds.

He started out of his gloomy reverie when he heard something—or rather, some things—fall onto his rough pillow. He identified them by touch; half a dozen food bars.

He sat up and stared into the freezing dark. He reached out and touched Mara's quiescent form. With the other hand he fumbled in his pocket: the key was still there.

"Yes?" she said, without moving.

"Did I leave the box unlocked?"

"No. I don't need keys. I have my own methods."

"Oh." He lay back. There was something wrong with this analysis of Mara's reasoning. She could have helped herself to the food at any time, of course, and disappeared into the night. That should have been her natural course, thieving being her profession. They'd argued over the ethics of honest labor as opposed to honest thieving. He had explained the social code of Earth, but she had not been impressed. They'd agreed to differ about that.

"Mara," he said, "you could have stolen all the food and left me. Why didn't you?"

"Then I should have to carry it, and that box is heavy."

He was disappointed. "So that's all. It's not because you like me?"

"I like you."

"Why?"

"Because you don't want me to steal for you. Everyone I knew, except my father, thought that the only point of my existence was to be their artist. You make no such demands on me. So I like you."

"Um." It still wasn't quite satisfactory. He said: "I like you, too, Mara. Good-night." And turned over to go to sleep. But he couldn't sleep for a long while. He kept thinking about how he liked Mara.

In the morning they reached a point on the glacier from which they could see Fami. Rather, could have seen it had it been there to see. George, through his telescope, searched the region indicated by Mara, and could discern no trace of the ledge. The outflanking arm of the glacier had swept over it and now hung, like a huge, torn, white lace drape, for a kilo or more down the sheer precipice.

"Leep said that would happen soon," said Mara, unperturbed.

"Then more of a fool he is for staying there," said George, feeling vindictive through frustration. "He and his rag-books will have to stay there for ever now. One small pick isn't enough to shift *that* weight of ice. I guess the war will just have to remain a mystery."

He was furious at the waste of time and effort, dismayed by the prospect of a long, cold, slow climb down the glacier so soon—to go where? Where was the white circle G.H.Q.? How could he get a line on it now?

While he wasted still more time, in a clouded fury, kicking childishly at the side of an ice-step and swearing aloud, Mara accepted and handled the situation in her calm, mature way. She made a wide, flat cushion of the parachute. Then

she seized the heavy provision box and shoved it off down the glacier. George grabbed at it and missed. It gathered momentum down that fearslome slope, and soon vanished with the speed of a bullet.

He switched his anger to her.

"Why in hell did you do that?"

She sat deliberately on the silken cushion, clinging to the step with one hand and patting the space beside her with the other, motioning him to join her. Then, smiling faintly, she pointed the way the box had gone.

He got it, together with a tremor of apprehension. It hadn't crossed her mind to waste time in climbing down the glacier. She'd go the way she went before and she expected him to ride with her. For a moment he contemplated talking her out of it. Then his fear was killed by the greater fear of her surprise and contempt. Carefully, he crawled to her side.

"Sure, let's go. I always had a yen to shoot Niagara."

They slid together, flat on their backs on the cushion, for a short way. Then it felt as though they were no longer sliding, but falling. He glimpsed high ramparts on either side sawing rapidly, actively, at the clouds. His stomach seemed to be climbing up into his chest. The airflow chilled his cheeks.

He realized there was no way of applying the brakes, and felt rather sick. He found himself clinging more tightly to Mara than to the cushion material. He shut his eyes and waited for it to end.

After a kind of lifetime, it ended—abruptly.

A wall of freezing cold water came tumbling down over his feet and buried him. He choked and spluttered and thrashed around. He'd lost all sense of direction, and the water seemed to be poking icicles into his eyes, ears, and nostrils. Then, somehow, he discovered himself standing breast-deep in the lake gasping like a landed fish.

Mara, neck-deep, was near-by, pushing her wet hair back. The cap of her Teleo had been washed off. Her solemn face split suddenly into a grin when she saw him. He tried to speak but could only continue to gasp—the water was paralyzingly cold. He beckoned her to follow, and floundered to the shore. When he looked back, she was still out there, walking slowly around, seeming to feel about with her feet.

Then suddenly she did a little duck-dive and disappeared.

He waited over half a minute and she didn't reappear. Half frightened, half angry, he started sloshing out towards the spot. Then she bobbed up, metres nearer the shore, bending, and dragging something out of the shallows. It was the provision box. He went to help her.

"You c-cold-blooded little f-fish." His teeth were chattering.

She didn't understand. When they were ashore, he fixed her a new cap from the waterproof satchel. But before she dried off, she wanted to go back in the water and recover the parachute.

"Leave it there, darn you," he said. "The friction will have worn it full of holes. Anyhow, it's saturated—it'll weigh a ton now. I'll give you a brand-new one when we reach the ship."

The promise made her so happy that her face became radiant. The wet frock clung to the curves of her form. A sudden hunger came upon him. He caught hold of her, pressed her to him, kissed her roughly, almost brutally. She responded fiercely.

Between kisses he babbled more promises, mostly foolish. "You shall have the best Paris can offer . . . Dresses of silk and coats of fur . . . Jewels and such things as you have never dreamed of . . ."

She giggled like a child and caressed him like a woman.

The shells of her ancestors lay all around them, long past love, or memory, or the promises of life.

In the afternoon, they struck off in a new direction.

Instead of returning down the valleys to the known emptiness of the plain, they toiled over the hills to the west, seeking a viewpoint. They found it on one crest, and for a space they stood hand in hand surveying the panorama. Then George's grip tightened. He pointed.

In a place of rocks and cliffs there stood an isolated pinnacle. Unlike the other stone spikes, vegetation clung to its nearly perpendicular sides. It dominated an apparently artificially leveled area, in which the traces of a pattern showed through the undergrowth. And in which, also, there was a long box of a house, dun-brown, flat-roofed, many-windowed, with a beetling portico of disproportionate size.

"Beneath the verdant tower . . . The house of bricks, a box of tricks," said George, slowly. Was it mere chance they'd stumbled on the house described in Leep's verse? Or had Leep really glimpsed a future event?

"Come on, Mara," he said. "Let's see if Senilde is at home today."

She nodded, smiling, and plunged gaily down the hill with him.

"This," said George, when they reached it, "was once a cultivated garden."

She said, "Yes," and let her gaze rove over the mold-encrusted stone seats, the weed-grown paths, the stagnant ornamental ponds, and the wilderness which was choking them all. At the far end, the house stood as silent as the towering rock-pinnacle behind it. She saw that the greenness of the latter was due to a wide-leafed creeper swarming over it. But the house and its ridiculous portico were free from any such green parasites.

George noticed that Mara was getting two steps ahead of him up the main driveway to the house. But she hadn't

quickened her pace: he'd slowed his through caution. His pride made him catch up.

They neared a big, wrought-metal fountain. It was covered with verdigris and its basin was empty and bone-dry. He was surprised by the similarity of terrestrial and Venusian ideas of landscape gardening. He thought: this could be a corner of Versailles after centuries of neglect.

Then, without warning, the fountain squirted a wavering umbrella of dirty water. It spread well beyond the circumference of the basin and soaked them from head to foot.

George thought he heard a thin, high laugh from the direction of the house. He glowered as he wiped his face. He loathed being made a fool of. Mara just giggled.

"There's a practical joker around," George growled. "When I'm through with him, he won't be quite so practical."

The water was sour and evil-smelling. His feet squelched in his shoes. There was a solid stone seat just off the driveway. George sat on it with the intention of removing his shoes. The seat sank silently and smoothly into the earth and he was flat on his back with his feet in the air.

The faint laugh from the house was drowned by a howl of laughter from Mara.

Red with mortification, violently angry, George jumped up, threw a withering glance at the convulsed Mara, and strode purposefully toward the house. He'd find this joker and wring his neck.

The moss-grown path was hard under his feet. For a time. Then, although its surface texture looked just the same, it became soft, sticky, gooey, like molten rubber. He sank ankle-deep.

Grimly, he tried to plod on. But the stuff clung. Soon, he was walking slow-motion, lifting one enlarged blob of a foot after the other with care, striving to keep his balance. He

realized that the accumulation was becoming so heavy that presently he would be incapable of movement.

So he abandoned the frontal assault and floundered to the solid ground bordering the driveway. His dignity had been hurt. Mara trotted along to him on the verge, and he wouldn't look at her. He tried to pull the stuff off his feet. It stretched and stuck like chewed gum. He got himself into a fine mess.

The unseen watcher was cackling continually. Mara, grinning, pulled out her knife and cut or scraped most of the stuff off.

As she finished, a man emerged from the house into the dull daylight. He was short and broad, in a monkish gown corded at the waist. He was red-cheeked, healthy-looking, seemed to be around fifty. His mouth was sensual and hung half open, giving him a vacant look which was enhanced by his pale eyes, which appeared to comprehend only part of what they saw.

He looked stupid and harmless. He said something in a weak, cracked voice to George, who merely scowled at him. Mara answered him in his own language. They had a chat.

Then Mara said: "This is Senilde."

"I had gathered as much," said George, morosely. He'd been reflecting that as he needed information from this fool, it would hardly be politic to start by screwing his head off. He made an effort and swallowed his gorge.

He took a spare Teleo from the satchel and told Mara: "Explain this to Senilde."

"I have explained," she said, taking it. She was still two steps ahead of him.

Through the new medium, Senilde said: "Once, long ago, I invented a gadget like this."

"Indeed?" said George. "Where is it now?"

Senilde made a careless gesture. "I threw it away. I

throw all my toys away in time. One gets bored . . . Still, I'm glad you came and let me play with my garden again. I haven't been able to find a victim for years now. There are very few people left on this planet, you know. Maybe I overdid it."

"Overdid what?"

"The war. It's a game I used to play."

"A *game!* For Pete's sake, you call it a *game?*"

"'It's all a pointless game . . .' " Mara quoted.

George remembered the men who were killed, and controlled his anger with difficulty. "A game you used to play? Seems to me the game's still in full swing."

"Oh, yes, it'll run on for a century or two, I suppose, until the last of the things have smashed themselves," said Senilde. "I became tired of them, and just let them run on. They're purely automatic, you know."

"You mean, *all* of those tanks and planes and things are unmanned?"

"Naturally."

George thought of Freiburg basing his faith on his white circle "allies." He recalled his own moment of emotion when the wheeled HQ seemingly rushed off to defend them. It was dismaying to have it confirmed that they'd been kidding themselves. He felt he'd been played a dirty trick.

He said, truculently: "Why the hell do you let them go on smashing up everything?"

Senilde shrugged. "Why not? None of it means anything."

"Well, it does to me. You nearly killed me. You did, in fact, cause the death of some of my companions—and for all I know, the rest of them may have been killed by now. Can you stop it?"

"Yes, if I want to."

"Then stop it right now, damn you."

Senilde said, petulantly: "Why *should* I stop my game just because of you?"

George snatched Mara's knife. "Because I'll stick this through you if you don't."

"My dear fellow, that wouldn't embarrass me in the least. I'm a good healer. In fact, I heal instantly. You can't hurt me and you can't kill me: I happen to be immortal."

"We'll see about that," said George, grimly, and started for him with the knife.

Mara grabbed his arm, held him back. "No, George, violence won't help. There's always a way to get what you want without making trouble. Brutality is no substitute for brains."

Senilde looked at her with some approval. "You're sensible besides being beautiful, young girl. George (what a queer name!)—let me have your girl, and I'll switch off the war."

George let him have a hay-maker instead. It hit the solar plexus more by luck than judgment. Senilde rebounded like a rubber man. His pale eyes lit up, and he smiled slobberingly.

"Oh, a new game! What do you call it? What do I do now?"

George groaned. "Okay, Mara, he's all yours to use your brains on."

She said: "Would you like to show us around your house, Senilde? Do you have any more gags like that fountain?"

"Yes, lots of them. Such fun when I used to have visitors. Of course, I can't show you *all* of them—that would spoil it. I'd like you to discover some for yourselves—that's much the best way to do it. You'll be *so* amused. Come on."

Mara began to follow him back to the house. George shrugged, then followed her. He watched carefully where Senilde trod—then as carefully trod in his foot-prints. He wanted to avoid any more gooey patches.

The doorstep behaved perfectly normally for Senilde and

Mara. But it swung down like a trapdoor under George's feet. He found himself sliding down a chute into darkness, with the echo of laughter following him.

There was more sticky stuff awaiting him at the bottom.

He reclined, helpless, in the dark, stuck like an insect on fly-paper, thinking: There must be *some* way to kill that old maniac.

He began wondering if Freiburg were still alive. If the skipper was still hopefully awaiting his return, maybe with some friendly and intelligent Venusians, willing to help. Thank heavens Freiburg didn't know what was going on, that the intrepid explorer, George Starkey, was actually falling and fooling about like a slapstick comedian, getting no place at all in a crazy Lewis Carroll world.

A light went on. He was in a cellar which was bare save for some benches over by the wall. Presumably they accommodated an invited audience in Senilde's halycon days—to watch the fate of unfortunate fellow-guests.

Senilde entered, with his foolish grin. Then Mara, who again went into peals of laughter.

George frowned at her. "Mara, you disappoint me. I thought you had an adult sense of humor. There's nothing remotely funny in this childish clowning."

"Maybe not from where you sit," she gurgled.

George turned to Senilde. "As for you, you silly little fat fool, why don't you be your age? How old are you, anyhow?"

"Let me see now—three thousand, maybe four thousand, years. My memory isn't what it was. Venusian years, that is—slightly shorter than your own."

George said, gruffly: "I don't believe a word of it. Get me out of here."

"By all means." Senilde pressed a button. Liquid bubbled from small holes in the floor. It was a solvent which melted the gummy substance and freed George.

The tour continued. The whole house was full of fool tricks like that. There were door handles which came off in your hand, or stuck to it, or gave you an electric shock. Stairs which changed into smooth inclines and shot you to the bottom again. Flowers sprinkled with sneezing powder. Passages where the floor began to move backwards under your feet, whichever way you tried to go, so that you remained perpetually on the same spot.

George went through the gamut sullenly. It was a little easier to take when Mara also fell for some of these creaking gags. All the same, it palled—like the goings on at some convention for dim Babbitts.

At last it ended. Having seen no other soul around but themselves, they came into a lounge furnished with Eastern luxuriousness. The chairs, the carpet, the divans were all deep and soft. It was many-colored and cheerful because bright sunlight smote in through the windows and made the silks and satins glow.

"The sun—out at last?" said George, wonderingly, and went to a window. It was as though the window were frosted: he couldn't see the sky clearly—it was just a flat whiteness. In the center of it was a very bright but hazy disk, like the sun shining through a high mist.

Senilde said, thinly: "It's my own private sun. Quite a small thing, really, but it's perpetual and emits all the qualities of sunlight. You know, as I grow older I find I don't want to do much else but bask in here in the sunlight. Apart from today, I've not been out of this room in years. It's too dull out there under the clouds. I often regret I cut the planet off from the sun like that, because I made it rather a depressing place for myself."

"What are you running on about now?" asked George, irritably.

Mara sank into one of the divans, and a trick cushion squeaked under her. Senilde giggled fatuously.

George's irritation intensified. He gripped Senilde's shoulders and shook him. "See here, I want to know just what you've been getting up to on this planet. I want a detailed report, and no more monkey business. Don't hold out on me, don't think I can't hurt you. I can. I'll burn this house of yours to the ground. Where would you be then, you old sybarite, without your playthings and your sunlight and your soft cushions?"

One moment he was standing there bawling out Senilde and shaking him like a man emptying a sack. Next moment he was flat on his back on the carpet, with his mind cloudier than the sky.

He regained his senses gradually. Mara was lying near him, apparently unconscious. He crawled over to her. When he touched her, she raised herself on her elbows, looking dazed.

"Are you all right, lass?"

"I guess so. George, I thought he'd killed you. So I stabbed him clean through the heart. And then . . . I don't know what happened then."

A knife dropped onto the carpet between them. They looked up.

Senilde stood over them. He'd closed his mouth and didn't look quite so foolish. He said: "There's your little toy back, my dear. I told you that sort of thing was useless. So many people have tried it at one time or another that it became tiresome. I discourage them with a gadget I wear which creates an electrical field at a touch and stuns anyone who touches me. Life's so flat without a little fun."

But he didn't smile, and neither did they.

Senilde said: "Don't ever threaten me again, George (silly name!) Don't try to use violence on me or my possessions. It'll

never work and you may kill yourself. Everything I have is protected in some way. I'm a cautious man. Now I suggest you make yourselves comfortable, and I'll tell you a story. My story. You'd never have gotten away from here without having to hear it, anyway. Every man needs an audience. and I've been without one for far too long . . ."

IV

"NATURE MAKES many blunders," Senilde said, "and one of them, I always thought, was that men should have to die. Simple cell creatures keep splitting in halves, and the halves in turn split, and so on. But the original portions still live. Any one of those creatures could truly be said to be potentially immortal. You can take a tissue of man or beast and keep it alive indefinitely in a suitable culture.

"Single protoplasmic cells or small groups of them survive. But if they grow into a large, multi-celled body, like that of a man, that large group dies. Why does it die? The only different factor is—*size*. The size of the group. Once a group grows beyond a certain size, it seals its own doom."

"Critical mass," Geroge murmured.

"You know about atomic energy?" asked Senilde, mildly interested. "Yes, I suppose you would. Tell me, have you ever made any of those delightful atomic bombs?"

"Not personally," said George.

"They were my favorite toys at one time. Such a spectacle! But one wearies even of that . . . My instruments tell me that they still go off in various parts of the planet sometimes, but I never bother nowadays to go out and look at them. I've still got a pretty large stock of them around somewhere . . . I think."

"Our astronomers saw some of your explosions, I guess," said George. "Great atmospheric disturbances concentrated in various small spots. One in November, 1985. One in June, 1927—photographed at Mount Wilson. Another back in February, 1913."

"Indeed?" said Senilde, indifferently.

Mara said: "I don't know what you're both talking about. Why don't you keep to the subject, which was immortality?"

"I find these days a growing tendency of my mind to wander," said Senilde. "Where was I?"

Mara told him. He went on: "The reason, I found, was that the duration of life was directly linked to the permeability in that part of the living cell exposed to the radiations of the universe around it. As growth—that is, accumulation—proceeds, so the inner cells suffer a natural and inevitable decrease in that permeability.. They're entombed, choked, cut off from light, denied invigorating contact with exterior radiation."

"I still don't know what you're talking about," said Mara pouting.

George said, thoughtfully: "Half a century or more ago, on Earth, a fellow named . . . er . . . Benedict—yes, H.M. Benedict—came to that conclusion after studying the senility of plants."

"Did he go on from there?"

"How could he?"

"I did. Nature made an error in the colloidal degree of protoplasm. I corrected it. Just a matter of the injection into the bloodstream of a perpetual solvent, which, as it circulates, thins out the too dense, too clinging proteins. The cells of your body are specialists. Either they travel a fixed, confined circuit in your bloodstream or else they're gummed immovably in place in your flesh and bones. Except the white blood corpuscles, that is.

"Fixity and specialization spell death. My body-cells are free, fluid, adaptable, amoeboid. When they feel the need to come to the surface, they do so. They move slowly—but they *move*. Also, they're versatile and continually change their functions. I could make you immortal, too, if I chose to. But I shan't. You are harmless, simple people. Why should I condemn you to the nightmare of boredom I endure?"

"Is it that bad?" asked George.

"Young man, I've tried every kind of pleasure a million times; from the common pleasures of sensuality to the rarer ones of labor and asceticism; intellectual pleasures and bodily pleasures; the pleasures of lust and power and humility and martyrdom. And I have exhausted them. My palate has lost nearly all sensation. Repetition of a pleasure does not increase the pleasure: it makes it pall. Looking back, I see that the happiest time of my whole life was when I was a child, absorbed in play. I seek in my sad way to recover some of that pleasure in the childish devices you deprecate. You should not be angry with me, but sorry for me."

"I'm sorry for you," said Mara.

But sorrow didn't come so easily to George. What the hell did Senilde have to beef about? He hadn't missed a thing.

"Mara, you have a sweet nature, besides being sensible and beautiful," said Senilde. "You're something rare. I don't like people much. When you've lived as long as I have, you've lost all your illusions about people. Under the skin, most people have hard little hearts, and they're always dancing to the tune of self-interest."

"George isn't like that—he gives me food," said Mara.

Senilde didn't hear; he was thinking about himself.

He mused: "As a boy, I loved playing with toy soldiers and staging little wars. When I became a very bored immortal, I thought it could be fun to play those wars again—with

people. For most people are just puppets. How easy it was to play on their fears, vanities, and power-lusts! I had a fine time inventing new weapons and methods of attack and defense, then watching the little men applying them—in the name of this or that. First, local wars, then national wars, then ideological wars, then one great planetary civil war. So you were looking for the white circle headquarters, George? This is it. And I'm the commander."

"I presume this is the green triangle HQ, too?"

"Correct. Again, I'm the commander. The Generals used to come to me for orders, thinking I was commanding their side only. It amused me no end: they were so stiff, serious, conscientious, keen, high-minded. And they always thanked me for my guidance. Now I've quite forgotten what their silly symbols were supposed to stand for—some kind of 'ism, the One and Only Way of Life."

Senilde laughed his wet laugh.

"I'd put new weapons in the hands of one side, and then the other. Match tanks against tank-torpedoes, atomic bombs against nerve gases. At last I grew tired of them and their pretty intrigues. I was sick of their jealousies and the way they curried my favors. I respected the machines more: they didn't fight among themselves like rats. Anyhow, so-called human beings were becoming redundant in this mechanized warefare. I'd invented weapons which could detect, recognize, and engage targets by themselves. People were becoming just nuisances hiding behind them, ducking and hoping they wouldn't get hurt. They merely got in the way. And when they didn't duck in time, they were liable to clog the machines with their messy bodies."

"You *do* love people, don't you?" said George, sarcastically.

Senilde ignored him. "So I decided to dispense with people altogether. I presented both sides with Meknitron gas. They saturated the planet with it and obligingly wiped themselves

out almost completely. Odd spots escaped, like the village of Fami, where a perpetual up-draft kept the ledge clear. The mechanical war went on—still goes on. But I lost interest even in that. Now I mostly sleep and sun-bathe, and wait for the real sunshine to return."

"The real sunshine?" Mara echoed, questioningly.

"The clouds of Meknitron have been slowly losing substance for a long time. They've lifted from the ground so far that only the highest mountains touch them. They'll continue to rise and disperse. In less than a thousand years, the sun should begin to break through. This was once such a sunny little planet. I do miss the sun."

"Your Meknitron," said George, heavily, "killed one of our crew as the ship passed through it."

"Really?" said Senilde, and yawned.

"I didn't expect you to burst into tears. However, before you go to sleep you might explain why some white circle tanks should first attack us, then suddenly switch to our side and defend us against green triangle tanks."

Senilde frowned. "A strange incident. Give me full details of what happened."

George complied.

"I see," said Senilde. "Well, maybe you noticed that the circle and triangle tanks and vehicles are of different designs and sizes. They're deliberately so. Each fighting machine has a memory bank of the outlines of the machines, including aircraft, belonging to its own side. If a tank, say, detects by radar or vision another approaching, it searches its memory bank to try to match the pattern of the outline. If its file contains no such pattern, the tanks act on the assumption that the other is an enemy."

"So?"

"When your space-ship landed, it was vertical. White circle tanks have no vertical shapes of that kind on file. So

they opened fire. But their fire caused your ship to topple to the horizontal. In that position it much resembled the body of the white circle torpedo-on-wheels—sufficiently so to pass muster as a friend. Similarly, the green triangle tanks registered it as an enemy. You understand?"

"Yes, I get it. But who's side are the big steel wheels pitching for?"

"Neither. They're just fighting mad—they'll go for anybody. I threw them in just for a bit of spice. They really date back to the days of the humans. Used to cut people to pieces or frighten 'em to death or just pin 'em down until the artillery shot them up."

"You have a great sense of humor, Senilde. If I were—"

George broke off, for an uneasy thought crossed his mind. "Look," he said, urgently, "when I left my friends they were planning to try to haul the ship upright again—using white circle tanks to do the hauling."

Senilde laughed slobberingly. "That's just the kind of thing which appeals to my great sense of humor, George. What a happy surprise for them! The moment the tanks finish the job, they'll register the ship as an enemy again, and turn around and blast it point-blank."

George felt sick in the stomach. Not merely on behalf of the skipper and the others, although he thought of them. Senilde had a point about people and their self-interest. For what was worrying him most was the prospect, if the ship were destroyed, of being marooned on this soulless planet at the mercy of an omnipotent and amoral dotard.

He snapped: "You said you ran the war from this headquarters, here. Are all the war machines powered from here?"

"Yes. They're powered by radio."

"Then for Pete's sake cut the power—right now. If it's not too late, that'll save the ship and my friends."

"Oh, I can't do that."

"What? Why not? You said the war doesn't mean anything to you any more."

"It doesn't, George. But I would have to climb to the upper floor and mess about with switches and things. Tiresome. Besides, I hate climbing stairs."

George felt like hitting him, but remembered in time the old man's protective thunderbolt.

Instead, he stormed: "Then I'll go. Where is it? What do I do?"

"You'll never find the control room—there's a secret panel or two and all kinds of complex safety devices. Besides, I don't want you prying—"

A bell rang sweetly high on the wall.

"Ah!" exclaimed Senilde. "This is my lucky day—I have another visitor. Who can it be? Let's see."

He walked out of the lounge. George and Mara stared at each other. George threw up his arms. "Isn't it maddening to want to kill a man you can't kill? Where's the old fool gone now?"

"The best way to find out is follow him," said Mara, practically. She went out. George tagged along behind; he was curious about the visitor, too.

Senilde was in the gloomy cavern of the hall staring out at the garden. A distant figure was approaching the fountain in the driveway. Senilde was shaking with anticipatory glee.

George unslung his telescope and leveled it. The newcomer was a mere stick of a man, old, shriveled, knock-kneed, in a one-piece tunic so dirty its original color was unplaceable. However, he seemed at ease, walking slowly and calmly. When the fountain duly performed, he walked steadily through the shower, not changing his pace but only his expression, which became one of disgust.

Mara wanted to look through the telescope. George gave it to her.

"It's Leep," she reported, without surprise.

Senilde looked at her and asked what instrument she was using. Either he'd not seen telescopes before or else they'd passed out of use on Venus so long ago he'd quite forgotten them. Mara passed it to him. He was fascinated and watched Leep closely through it.

Leep sat on no seats, and when he neared the sticky patch he seemed to divine its existence and walked carefully around it. Senilde sighed with disappointment. Then he whispered: "The step will catch him."

It didn't. Leep avoided the step and entered through the side of the portico.

Mara greeted him in their own language. It came through the Teleo simply as "Hello, Leep."

Leep replied casually.

Mara said: "No, I've only just come. I've been back to look at Fami. How did you escape?"

George had dug out another Teleo outfit. He handed it to Leep. Mara explained its function, and the seer put it on. Senilde watched Leep sulkily, his expression saying that this ultra-cautious fellow promised poor sport.

Leep said: "I warned everyone the overhang was about to fall. They believed me, naturally, but hoped irrationally it wouldn't be too bad. They talked themselves into sticking it out in Fami. But I didn't want to die, so I came down the glacier in the way you did. Then I wandered around the foot-hills looking for this house. I knew it existed, but I could divine only its rough location. I've been walking for a long time and I'm hungry. Very hungry. Is there any food here?"

Senilde had lost interest in Leep, and was playing with the telescope.

George said: "I've a little food. Come on in."

Senilde made no protest, even if he heard. He walked out into the garden and began to survey the area through the telescope. George led the way into the lounge and opened up the provision box. Leep munched food bars appreciatively.

"What made you come here?" George asked.

"I thought Mara might be here. I wanted to find her."

"Why?" asked Mara.

Leep addressed her directly: "When my foolish disciples disappeared under the ice with the others, I had no one left to steal for me. You were the best artist in Fami, Mara, and I hoped you'd agree to steal for me. Senilde must have plenty of food in this house someplace."

"Maybe, but we've not seen any of it," said Mara. "And why should I steal for you? Why don't you steal for yourself?"

"My talents are solely of the mind," said Leep, sadly. "I live only to think. My ideal existence would be endless meditation. I'm quite unpractical, as you know. I shall starve to death unless somebody finds and gives me food."

"What can you give in return?" asked George.

"The fruits of my knowledge. I was born with a gift for knowing things, a kind of second sight. It's erratic, patchy. I can't command it. Odd fragments drift into my mind as I meditate. Sometimes they're useful to me, sometimes to others. Often they're connected to nothing and of use to nobody. I can only accept what is vouchsafed me. Sometimes information is vague, like the location of this house—and no effort of mine will focus it."

"So you're a sensitive?" said George. "Your faculty is known on my planet. Some Earthlings possess it. It's been verified by controlled experiments. But, as you say, it's fitful."

"You come from another planet? So much for my faculty—I wasn't ever aware of that."

George always warmed towards people who possessed the virtues of frankness and a sane humility. He found himself telling Leep about Earth and its people, about the journey to Venus, and what had happened since the landing. He concluded: "So, as Mara and I are in love, I want to take her back to Earth with me. Therefore I regret that you can't have her for your personal 'artist.' I've a better suggestion. Come to Earth with us. Real, live Venusians are rare specimens. You would be a fine capture for me—but not a captive. Understand, you would be perfectly free to meditate or do as you wish. I promise you the terrestrials would make much of you, respect you, listen to you, and most certainly feed you."

The old man pondered, then said: "There seems very little choice. I must go where the food is. Being hungry is terrible, and completely spoils my concentration."

"Good," said George. "Now listen, Leep. Hidden somewhere in this house is a room containing the master switches controlling the power behind this idiotic war. See if you can divine where it is, and then—"

He dropped his voice and broke off as Senilde came in.

Senilde said, genially: "This telescope is a most intriguing toy, George. What can I trade you for it? Are you prepared to deal? Do you really need this girl Mara? There are other lovely girls still around on this planet, you know, and I could find you any number—"

"Shut up!" said George, savagely.

Mara pinched him hard. He looked at her inquiringly. Covertly, she went through the motion of turning a switch. He got it. He turned to Senilde, and said, curtly: "Switch off the war and you can have the telescope."

"Is that all?" asked Senilde, eagerly. "Very well, that's a bargain."

"I want to make sure you keep your end of it," said George. "I want to *see* you do it."

"Of course," said Senilde, off-handedly.

George rose from the couch. He was still holding a food bar. He proffered it to Senilde. "Here, I'll throw this in, too."

"What is it?"

"Food—good food."

Senilde waved it aside. "I never eat. Haven't eaten for thousands of years. I don't have to. Bodily immortality changes one's metabolism completely. I draw sufficient nourishment from my environment, without recourse to that rather disgusting—if you'll forgive me—procedure."

Leep sat up straight, his ears pricking up like an animal's. George, misreading the reaction, tossed him the food bar, and remarked to Senilde: "Well, aren't you the lucky man! Now let's climb those awful stairs."

Mara joined them. George asked: "Coming, Leep?"

"Not just now—I feel a thinking spell coming on. I'll just sit here a while."

Senilde made heavy going of the stairs. However healthy his cells might be, centuries of lack of exercise had done nothing for his muscles or his wind. He was right in another respect, too: George would never have found the room. The upper part of the house was like a Chinese puzzle box: sliding panels behind sliding panels, secret passages within secret passages, concealed springs which could only function after other concealed springs had been pressed.

The room itself, revealed at last, was full of control panels. Tiny lights winked everywhere and an electric hum permeated it. Things like ticker tapes were clicking out printed messages, and rows of spools revolved jerkily, winding them on. Senilde indicated them, grinning asininely. "All in different codes, and I can't remember one of them now. Once, I could read them all."

"Does any of them give the location of my ship?" George asked.

"Almost certainly. But how would I know which one? I can't decipher a word, nor even a figure."

George grunted, between disbelief and disappointment.

Senilde began snapping switches. One by one at first, then in whole banks, the little lights went out. The message machines stopped. The hum slowly faded from hearing. Then all the apparatus was still, silent, dead.

"There you are," said Senilde.

George relaxed. Relief came like a warm current of air. He'd achieved all that was possible to save the skipper and the others—and himself.

"Thanks—let's go."

They threaded their way out through the maze of secret ways. Senilde methodically closed the panels behind them. When they reached the lounge, Leep was still sitting there quietly.

George said, lightly: "How now, soothsayer, have you been visited by any inspirations?"

Leep regarded him thoughtfully. "Yes. I was thinking about your space-ship. And all at once, its exact latitude and longitude flashed into my mind."

George glowed. "Great! You're real smart, Leep. Where's the ship?"

"The Teleo conveys an ambiguous meaning to that word 'smart'," said Leep. "You're correct in the sense that I have a strong instinct for self-preservation."

"Sure—haven't we all? Naturally it's in your interest to help locate the ship so that you can come to Earth with us."

"I don't particularly want to go to Earth now," said Leep. "If I go, I shall be well-fed—granted. But also I'll be constantly harassed and importuned to use my gifts for others, to become a common fortune-teller. I'm an old man and in

the normal way shan't live much longer. I resent any limitation on my time for meditation. I've always resented the time wasted on the necessity for getting food. No, I'm quite willing to give my place in the ship to Senilde here."

"To go to Earth?" said Senilde, surprised. "What makes you imagine I should want to go to Earth?"

Leep said, calmly: "You've exhausted all the pleasures of Venus, and you're bored sick. On Earth there must be innumerable new pleasures you've never tasted, never even imagined. Again, the Earthlings are very short-lived. With your wisdom, knowledge, experience, authority, and invulnerability you would soon become their ruler. It's inevitable that an immortal should rule mere mortals."

Mara laughed at the cool cheek of it.

But George stammered with anger: "Why, you two-faced pocket Machiavelli, I wouldn't l-let you come aboard the ship now to save my l-life!"

Leep said, softly: "You can't go aboard the ship yourself if you can't find it. I'll tell you this: it's very far from here. It would take weeks to walk there, even if you walked in the right direction. If you didn't, it might take years."

Mara said, shrewdly: "In return for directing us and Senilde to the ship, so that we can go to Earth, you wish Senilde to give you the secret of immortality, don't you?"

"That's it," said Senilde. "I said before you were intelligent, Mara. Obviously more intelligent than this cracked visionary who imagines he can strike bargains with *me*."

"I have set my heart on becoming an immortal," said Leep. "To meditate, forever, without distraction, without ever having to worry again about finding food!"

"Rubbish!" snapped Senilde. "You'd become as bored as I am, and long for death, as often I have done. Immortality is a curse. I'll be kind, and save you from it."

"Ever the altruist," murmured Leep, sarcastically. "The

real truth is that you're jealous of your uniqueness, Senilde. You fear to have a rival. In point of fact, you would have nothing to fear from me. The only power I seek is over myself, over the labyrinths of my mind. The whole universe lies in every man's mind. Every man could discover that through mere contemplation—if he could live long enough to do so."

"I've lived long enough," said Senilde, "and I've discovered nothing worth eternal life."

"I spoke of a *man's* mind," said Leep, scornfully. "Yours is the mind of an infant—it never became anything else. A clever, tinkering infant, with certain technical aptitudes. Emotionally, spiritually, morally, intellectually you remained immature, with only one aim: pleasure—crude, immediate pleasure. There's nothing in you of timeless serenity, the spirit of contemplation. No wonder you're bored. The boon of immortality is wasted on you. Let me have it. I know how to use it. You go to Earth and have your childish fun. Maybe they'll appreciate your surprise fountains and squeaking cushions there, and put you in the kindergarten where you belong."

Senilde's slack mouth had been slackening still more. But now, suddenly, he shut it grimly. His pale eyes shone with hate. Leep had spoken truth, and the truth hurt.

He spat at Leep: "I would never perpetuate a snarling, spiteful creature like you. Earth couldn't offer me any pleasure to compare with just watching you starve to death. Which I shall do. No one can speak to me like that and expect to get away with it. You fear hunger and death more than anything. All right—you shall now suffer both . . . slowly. And to show you how worthless your so-called bargaining counter is, I'll find the ship myself. George, Mara—come with me."

He led them to a wing of the house which they had not previously visited. They followed him through a doorway into

a great covered space like an airplane hangar. Almost filling it, looming over them so that they had to crane their necks to see the top of it, was the largest tank George had seen yet. It was bigger even than the green triangle one which the wheeled torpedo had destroyed. But it carried no distinguishing mark and no gun. Also, it was of a different design, with a high turret crowned by a railed observation platform.

"My war chariot," said Senilde. "I used it to travel around and observe the battles. Its outline is filed by both the circle and the triangle forces—which means that it's registered as a friend by both sides. But just in case of accidents or stray shells, it's very heavily armored. It'll stand up to almost anything—except a wheeled torpedo. But I never ran into any trouble with it. Usually, I stayed aloft on the platform, in the juiciest battles, too."

"You seem to have gone to a lot of trouble to safeguard your immortality," said George, dryly.

Senilde said seriously: "If a shell blew me apart, I might take a long time to grow together again."

George's imagination boggled at the vision. He wondered if Senilde were trying to fool himself or them. There must be limits to this immortality proposition.

Senilde pulled a lever. The whole of the far wall split into two massive doors opening to reveal the gray Venusian landscape.

"We shall probably have to go searching for some days," said Senilde. "I almost forgot—you two have to eat. You'd better go and bring some of your food along, George."

George left. When he returned, carrying the provision box, the great tank was standing outside the doors in the overgrown garden; its engine beating steadily. Senilde and Mara were up on the observation platform, waiting. He clambered up steel rungs to them, carrying the box awkwardly.

Mara inquired: "Did you leave any food for Leep?"

"Of course not," said George, irritably. "What, after he tried to sell us down the river? Besides, we've no guarantee we'll find the ship on this trip. If we fail and have to return, the chances are hunger will have softened up Leep some. If we dangle a few food bars in front of his nose, he might give in and tell us where the ship is."

"Leep isn't the sort to give in easily," said Mara.

"Neither am I!" snapped George.

Senilde was listening and idly fingering pointers on a dial. He said: "All we require from Leep are two numbers–the numbers of the cross-lines to which to set these pointers. Then we'd only have to sit back, for the chariot would take us to the spot automatically. Maybe, in the end, I shall have to torture him."

His washed-out eyes began to glaze and his tongue began to lick his thick lips.

"Let's go," said George, hastily.

V

For days on end the great tank, quartering areas methodically, rumbled about the land. And there was an awful lot of land. The poor visibility made it necessary to beat back and forth across wastes which, had the light been better, could have been seen at a glance to be bare. Senilde treasured his telescope and used it all the time.

They skirted mountain ranges, forded rivers, circled over endless plains. Occasionally they saw other tanks, static and silent, frozen in their tracks.

The slow pace of their own tank was frustrating to George. He said to Senilde: "Damn this ponderous thing! Why didn't you choose something faster, say one of those wheeled torpedoes?"

"Because they've no accommodation for passengers, Because, unlike this tank, they're not self-powered: to get one moving, I'd have to start the whole war up again. Because the torpedo shape is a target for all triangle forces. Reasons enough?"

After a fruitless, eventless week, Senilde became bored and headed the chariot home. They expostulated but Senilde said: "I don't want Leep to die while I'm wasting time out here. I want some fun out of him first."

George thought maybe Leep had had enough by now, too. Maybe he would be willing to talk.

But he wasn't, even though he was skeleton-thin and very weak. Senilde and George tempted him with food, but he only smiled faintly and said: "You know my terms."

Senilde said: "You have until sunset tomorrow, if you don't die before then. After which, I'll show you some old toys of mine. The electric rack. The eye magnet—it pulls your eye out slowly. The manicure set—it cuts your toes too. Have you ever been filletted hydraulically? It can be done artistically, and I assure you I'm an artist."

George was disgusted, but made no comment. He hoped Leep would talk first, but if not, he would never allow him to be tortured.

Mara regarded Senilde thoughtfully, but likewise said nothing.

That night George slept, using the provision box for a pillow. Mara had a soft spot for Leep, and George didn't trust her.

In the middle of the night Mara crept to Leep's side with a double handful of food bars. He murmured, "Thank you, child," and ate the lot without pause.

Afterwards: "Oh, Mara, this cursed servitude of mind to food! Why weren't we designed to live on air, as Senilde does? Why did you steal for me, child?"

They were speaking softly in their language, Teleos off.

"I'm a woman. I'm not hard, like a man. And I'm not ungrateful. In Fami, you often gave me good advice—for nothing. I can't let you die. Why don't you try stealing for yourself, Leep? It's so easy."

"George was sleeping with his head on the box. It was impossible—"

"Far from impossible. I merely held his head up while I slid the box aside."

"I haven't the touch for such feats . . . Mara, would you steal again for me?"

"I'm . . . not sure. There are only a few bars left, and George must not go hungry—"

"I don't mean food. While you were all away, I searched the house, both physically and with my mind. There's a room upstairs all of steel, and inside—I divine it—is a sealed bottle containing the preparation which bestows immortality. Senilde has preserved it all this time. One needs such a tiny dose! But the steel door is locked. And it's ringed with protective devices—toothed traps that would bite off your hand, poisoned needles which shoot from hidden sockets . . . I know where they are. But I don't know how to make them harmless. Such things were used in Fami, as you know. A skilled thief like you, plus my knowledge, could defeat them. Then we could both become immortal, and defy that wretched Senilde."

She said: "I don't want to be immortal. On the other hand, I don't want to be dead. And Senilde will try to kill me when he discovers what I've done."

"If you could cover your traces, he may not discover it for a long time. Meantime, you must escape."

"Why should I run these risks for you? No!"

"I'm not asking you to do it for nothing. In return I would give you the position of the spaceship. Then you and George can escape in Senilde's war chariot—it's his only available conveyance: he can't overtake you. Go to the ship; go to Earth with George—Senilde can't reach you there."

"Maybe he can."

"No, Mara, you over-estimate him. His body may be immortal but his mind is nearing second childhood. It shows all the symptoms: frequent memory lapses, wandering attention, fits of petulance . . . People who never really grow out of their first childhood are prone to early mental decay. In a

few years Senilde will be become a witless and vacant-minded fool, forgetting even his own identity, wandering aimlessly round, never able to die."

Mara shuddered. "Horrible!"

"But a fact. Well, Mara?"

After a few moments: "I'll do it," she decided.

Characteristically, she began right away. Leep took her to the door of the steel room upstairs. He indicated the positions of the murderous safeguards. She felt around the door with supersensitive finger-tips and probed cautiously with her knife.

At last, she said: "I'm sure I can nullify these traps and open the lock. But I need some lengths of thread."

Her knife flashed. Before he realized it, Leep lost one sleeve of his grimy tunic. Expertly, Mara began pulling threads from it.

Leep said, unexpectedly: "And I need some water."

He disappeared quietly downstairs.

When he returned, some time later, he was carrying two small flasks, one empty, one filled with water.

Mara had rendered the thief traps impotent and was manipulating, like a puppeteer, some dozen threads she'd inserted in the lock. Soon, three almost simultaneous clicks sounded.

"It's open," she announced.

Leep sighed. He put the flasks in his pockets, grasped the door handle with both hands, and heaved with his enfeebled strength.

The thick door swung open. A cloud of yellow fog rushed out at them with a faint *whoomph*. Its acrid tang invaded their nostrils and brought tears to their eyes. For a few moments of strangulation they shared the same belief: that they'd sprung the ultimate death-trap, the room itself full of poison gas, under pressure.

Then the gas, heavier than air, settled to waist-level, then knee-level, and drifted slowly along the passage floor.

And left the alive, but gasping and semi-blinded by tears.

Leep wheezed: "Sorry, Mara, my faculty missed that trick. I hope there aren't any more."

She gasped: "Why didn't it kill us?"

"It may yet—by delayed action. But that could save us."

He pointed. In the room, now almost clear of the fog-like gas, was a grey metal table. On it stood a small glass bottle, three-quarters full of a liquid colorless as water.

"The elixir of life," said Leep, and went to examine it. Satisfied, he poured the liquid carefully into his empty flask. Then filled the bottle to the same level with water from his other flask, and recapped it.

He said: "This dodge was to make it appear nothing had been touched if Senilde happened to check up. Little point to it now, though—he'd notice the gas had been released."

He returned the flasks to his pockets and came out to watch Mara removing the threads from the door.

She said: "I can't leave these here or he *will* check up. When the door is shut and locked again, he should have no reason to be suspicious."

"Ah, but I *am* suspicious," said Senilde's voice right behind them. They spun around. He'd climbed the stairs silently and was grinning at them.

"I was always a suspicious man," he continued. "Hence my little mechanical watchdogs. You seem to have muzzled most of them, but I imagine the gas surprised you. It's harmless stuff, though—I didn't wish to have poison gas billowing around the house merely because of some stupid thief. Not that it would have harmed me, but I used to have guests in those days . . . No, it's only a scent to spread the alarm. Enough flowed downstairs to irritate my sense of smell and awaken me—I'm a light sleeper. Of course, I knew it meant

someone was attempting to steal my elixir. Now, just move away there."

They moved back, and Senilde came to peer into the room.

"Good," he said, seeing the bottle on the table. "I caught you before you—"

Mara's shoulder, with all her weight behind it, caught him by surprise before he had time to switch on his protective stunner. He staggered through the doorway, tripped and fell against the table. It overturned. The bottle smashed on the floor.

His cry of angry surprise was cut short as Mara and Leep together slammed the steel door. It locked itself automatically with rapid triple clicks.

Leep and Mara exchanged smiles.

"That," said Leep, "has simplified your escape greatly. Now Senilde won't be able to set any of the war machines hunting after you. He can stay in there and rot for ever."

"Oh, Leep, you couldn't be so cruel!"

Mara was aghast at the vision of Senilde, unable to die, imprisoned in that small room until his wits left him.

"Have you forgotten he intended to starve and torture me to death?"

"No, but you must make allowances for his age and mental disintegration. You said yourself he was never more than a child. Promise to set him free after George and I have gone to Earth in the space-ship."

Leep hesitated, then shrugged. "I promise."

"You made me another promise, too."

"You mean the numbers? Oh, yes. They are five-three-eight-two and nine-nine-four-five."

Mara memorized them. Then she hurried down to the lounge. The gas, of which there was now no trace, must have spread itself too thinly to affect George, who was still

fast asleep, his head pillowed uncomfortably on the food box.

Mara shook him awake. She outlined the situation, though George's sleep-dulled brain was slow to get it into focus.

The he said: "We'd better clear off now. Waiting for daylight could be risky. Senilde has a way of keeping tricks up his sleeve. He might pull another rabbit out of the hat yet."

"You're sure you can drive the chariot?" Leep asked, just arriving.

"I know how to start and stop it. It drives itself once the map references are set on the navigating control, and we know those now," said George. "Come on, Mara."

He picked up the box, then frowned. It was lighter than it had been. He opened it and stared at the few remaining bars.

"Mara!" he said, sternly.

She said quickly: "There's enough for us till we reach the ship. You have plenty more in the ship. And Leep won't need any more."

Leep held up his flask, and smiled. "This is all the food I shall ever need now."

The war chariot plowed on through the night, its searchlights stabbing ahead of it. Although it was cold, George stayed up on the platform. He knew there was a long way yet to go, and the chariot was slow. He couldn't expect to sight the ship until the next day, at least. But he was restless and uneasy.

Mara slept tranquilly in the cabin below.

Captain J. Freiburg rose at dawn and took a look around. Nothing had changed. There lay the ship, its fins straightened, everything repaired except the radio. All completed well ahead of his pessimistic schedule.

There were the joined lengths of cable spraying from the ship's waist to an arc of white circle tanks. All was set to begin the slow hauling of the ship back onto its tail.

There was just one hitch. Around a week ago, they'd discovered that none of the tanks was receiving any power. Since then, too, no plane had crossed the sky, no moving vehicles had been seen, no gunfire had been heard.

Every day, every hour on the hour, they'd tested the tanks. Still no power.

This morning Freiburg climbed into a tank and turned the engine switch. Then jiggled other switches. No sign of response. He was losing hope.

He had really lost hope of George Starkey's return. He was sure the explorer had crashed and was dead. Nevertheless, from force of habit he scanned the dull sky. No distant spot which might be a helicopter was visible.

The mate came up, yawning. "Nothing doing, sir?"

"No. The armistice continues. Or else the war has ended for good and all. In which case, it's ended us, too, I'm afraid. That's unless we can trace the white circle G.H.Q. I'll give them a couple more days to start up again. If they don't, then you'll have to take Sparks and go out looking for 'em, mister."

"Right, sir," said the mate, joylessly.

In the strong light of the artificial sun, Leep's skeletal body, motionless on a divan, looked like a corpse on a bier. In fact, it was burning with inextinguishable life and his mind was ranging far into the universe.

He was aware of the dark abyss which began where the stars of the galaxy thinned away to nothing. Of molten metal moving sluggishly through channels in Venus's crust. Of the circulating cells of his own flesh. Of electrons and protons,

electro-magnetic waves, and all the vibrations of the spectrum.

And of Senilde's wild and sudden irruption.

Senilde seemed the least important of these visions, and soon vanished. But presently he returned, this time making greater impact than all the wonders of infinite space.

For he jumped on the divan and kicked Leep off onto the floor. Then kept kicking him.

Leep found meditation difficult. He sat up, protesting.

"You dirty little schemer, you helped them escape!" roared Senilde. "They've taken my chariot, and my telescope was in it!"

He raged aloud about the split and lost (as he thought) elixir, about his imprisonment, and about the loss of Mara—it appeared he'd planned to have her for himself. But the thing which made him see the deepest red, the thing he harped on continually, was the loss of his new toy—the telescope.

"George broke the bargain!" he shouted. " 'Switch off the war and you can have the telescope,' he said. You heard him, Leep. And now he's taken the telescope back. Very well, then—he can have the war back. And what a war it'll be this time! I'll blow the whole planet apart!"

He stamped his way to the stairs.

Leep was disturbed. He, too, had made a bargain of a kind—offered escape to Earth for Mara and George. If the war was unleashed again, the spaceship would be destroyed before they could reach it.

He scrambled up and pursued Senilde, calling, vainly: "Wait!"

He overtook the fat man laboring up the stairs and grabbed his shoulders. And made a discovery, which he reflected upon as he went hurtling backwards down the stairs.

Immortality was not protection against the force of Senilde's electric repellant.

Senilde turned, glaring down at him, and aimed his pistol. "Meddler! Conniver! Interfering fool!"

Zip! A radio-active needle darted into Leep's chest as he lay at the foot of the stairs. This time he felt nothing. He got to his feet.

Senilde's eyes became large with surprise.

Zip! Zip! Two more needles ineffectually found their target.

Leep said, with controlled urgency: "You can't kill me, Senilde. We're on equal footing now, so let us discuss the matter rationally. Don't start the war again. I promise I'll get your telescope back for you somehow."

Senilde frothed at the mouth. "You stole my elixir! You *stole* it! Don't talk to me of promises. I want to hear no more promises. Oh, how I've been deceived!"

He continued up the stairs, groaning with self-pity.

"An old man like me—lied to, robbed, knocked down, imprisoned, betrayed on every side . . ."

Leep started after him again, but Senilde reached the top of the stairs and flicked a wall switch, still moaning with anguish. The stairs snapped together into one steep, smooth incline. Leep slipped back to the bottom. By the time he'd found another route to the upper floor, Senilde was secure within the Chinese puzzle box of the control room.

And already the sounds of war were beginning to thunder from the distances.

Leep squatted in the passage and tried to peer with his mind into the secrets of the hidden panels and false walls. Perversely, his ungovernable faculty showed him instead the camouflaged exit door in one wall to the steel room, where the elixir had been preserved. It even revealed to him the combination of the lock, which had eluded Senilde's failing

memory for many hours before at last he remembered it, and released himself.

But, obstinately, it refused to give him even a hint of the way into the control room. For it was subject to the basic psychological Law of Reversed Effort. Leep realized that he was trying too hard and defeating his own wish. He must relax and let the faculty take its own wayward course . . .

Yes, instead, he kept wondering: supposing I do find the way in. I still can't restrain Senilde. I can't even touch him. I can't end what he's begun. I can't end what I've begun.

He felt a flicker of apprehension. There could be no turning back now. He'd set his foot on a road which led on forever. And ever. And ever . . .

It was afternoon. The war chariot was trundling across a typical Venusian plain. George had found the telescope where Senilde had left it, in an open compartment, and employed it continually, hoping to spot the ship somewhere ahead.

Mara was up there with him now. Suddenly, she said: "Listen."

They both listened. Gradually rising above the throb of the engine and the clanking of treads was a booming hum.

"Planes!" George exclaimed. "The war's begun again. Senilde must have gotten free."

The sky became a great sounding board for maybe more than a thousand planes. Their droning chorus had an ominous refrain: *doo-oom, doo-oom, doo-oom* . . . It was the most menacing sound George had ever heard. It chilled his soul.

Howling, the bombs began to fall.

Captain Freiburg and his men heard the planes and the

far off bombing. They ran out to the tanks. Renewal of the war must mean the power was on again. They confirmed that it was.

Freiburg told them: "This is it—maybe our last chance. We can't afford to muff it. For Pete's sake stick to the drill I laid down. Never mind the fireworks—just concentrate on doing your own part of the job. Remember to keep your tanks in bottom gear. Avoid jerking: it might snap the cables. Watch my tank closely on your TV screens. When I raise this, start. When I drop it, stop—promptly."

"This" was Freiburg's old stand-by, his shirt, this time tied like a flag to a long cane.

They settled in their seats. All engines were performing smoothly. Freiburg thrust the cane up through the open hatch above his head. Slowly, the tanks moved forward in concert. The cables became taut.

The prostrate ship seemed to groan aloud. Then a widening sliver of daylight showed between it and the ground. All the cables held. Operation Hoist had begun well.

The war was hotting up in the vicinity of the war chariot, which didn't deviate in the slightest from its course. Nothing was deliberately aimed at it, for it was registered as everyone's friend. But the air was full of missiles and some came dangerously close.

A wheeled torpedo overtook the lumbering monster like an express train. Its jet glared white-hot as it shot past.

Small tanks weaved around, sometimes as thickly as bugs, and collisions seemed constantly imminent. But always they skipped out of the giant's path at the last moment. Gun flashes danced around the horizon like jumping squibs.

The bombing was the chief hazard. George got the impression that it was becoming quite indiscriminate. It was

as though Senilde, via the control room, was lashing out wildly, hoping to hit the space-ship by blind chance.

George made Mara stay below, while he confined himself to only occasional swift surveys of the storm-ridden plain.

The straining tanks, like so many dogs on leashes, were making heavy going of it, but none had failed or lost ground. The critical point was attained, with the ship canted at an angel of 45 degrees. If they got it past that, with the center of gravity moving in their favor, the task would become progressively easier.

. . . 46 . . . 47 . . . 48 . . . 49 . . . 50 degrees. And still the cables held.

The spidery legs of the landing gear were beginning to set down their flat feet, ready to bear the main load in their turn.

Shells from huge, long-range cannon now and then sighed overhead on their high trajectory, bound for unknown targets.

The bombing had gone marching off madly to the north. It became reasonably safe for George and Mara to resume the lookout from the high platform.

From somewhere way off on the half right quarter came a thin screeching. George swung his telescope that way. He sighted a queer erection standing solitary on the plain. It was largely a pyramid composed of innumerable gears. Strung along the axle at its apex were several of the great knife-edged wheels. They appeared to be spinning with the axle at an incredible speed.

As George watched, a forked arm reached up from the machine's interior and gradually edged one of the outer wheels off the free end of the axle. The wheel dropped to the gound, remained upright and darted off at terrific speed. As the slight earth drag began to slow it a little, the

note of the whirling flutes dropped from the almost ultrasonic screech.

When the wheel became small with distance, it began to howl. *Wheeeee-eeeee.*

George gave the telescope to Mara. "Take a look at that natty launching gear."

She did so. "So those are the dreadful cutting wheels you told me about."

"Yes. Fascinating to watch, so long as you happen to be in an armor-plated chariot. However, they're not bowling our way."

They watched alternately until the last dully-gleaming wheel dropped and rushed off. By then the launcher had become a misty blur. It faded from view.

"Darn it, I wanted to see how that thing gets its refills," said George.

Mara consoled him with a kiss. They hugged for a while. Then George returned his attention to the landscape ahead. Almost immediately: "Good grief!"

He'd seen the spaceship. It was still a long way off, looked no bigger than a splinter, a mere darkish stroke against the mist. The cables were invisible at this distance. To George the ship seemed magically held at an angle of some twenty degrees from the perpendicular.

Then, of course, he realized what was happening—the very thing which he had to prevent happening. It seemed a lifetime ago when he, Freiburg, and the mate had discussed using the cables to raise the ship.

More vividly he recalled Senilde's prediction: "The moment the tanks finish the job, they'll register the ship as an enemy again, and turn around and blast it point-blank."

He fought back his panic, and peered intently, trying to see beyond the limits of his vision. He just discerned the arc of tanks. Then, presently, he could see the hair-lines of the

cables stretched back from them. But he couldn't make out whether the ship was stuck temporarily at that angle or whether it was imperceptibly moving.

He thumped the platform rail with his fist. "If only we could make this blasted crate accelerate!"

"What is troubling you?" asked Mara.

He sketched the position.

She took the telescope. "My sight is keener than yours, George." Then: "I'm afraid the ship is still rising. Very slowly, but steadily. If it continues at the same rate, and if we can't better our speed—which we can't—then the ship will be standing upright before we can get there. It's just a matter of simple—"

The word came through the Teleo as an amalgam of "counting" (Mara's term) and "arithmetic" (George's term).

"How can we warn them?" asked George, in agony.

"They must be able to see the chariot coming now," said Mara. "Maybe they'll stop and take cover."

Before the skipper saw, on his TV screen, the huge bulk of the distant chariot, the instruments in his tank detected it with a flutter of nervous movements. But the tank made no attempt to take up a battle position. It continued to respond to his manual control.

Retrospectively, Freiburg wondered why. Did the other vehicle belong to some neutral force? To some sane Venusians coming at last to help?

Or was he kidding himself again with wishful thinking?

Could be it was a new kind of trick attack.

The spaceship was coming up faster now. If he halted the operation at this juncture, the cables might give.

He looked up at the white flag hanging limp in the air. He knew the crew, in their tanks, were watching it, poised to switch off the moment he yanked it down.

"Hell!" he swore, and left it.

First get the ship erect and balanced. Then he'd be free to give his full attention to this approaching monster vehicle, whatever it might be.

The ship continued to rise smoothly.

. . . 69 . . . 70 . . . 71 . . . 72 . . . 73 . . . 74 degrees

George and Mara were waving their arms to draw attention to themselves. Almost uselessly, they felt sure. They were still nowhere near enough.

George could see the ship still rising. He judged it to be less than 20 degrees from the perpendicular. Maybe only 15 . . .

Within minutes those friendly, helpful tanks would complete their task—then swiftly turn and rend. The resultant havoc on the ship would be quite irreparable. Any human survivors would, like themselves, be marooned on Venus, with small chance of rescue, less chance of finding food . . . Until either they starved or Senilde's mad war machine hunted them down at last.

The chariot plowed on at the same obstinately unhurried pace.

. . . 78 . . . 79 . . . 80 . . . 81 . . . 82 degrees.

Captain Freiburg was strained as tautly as any of the cables. At any second now the shifting center of gravity would cause the ship to swing to the vertical position automatically, without need of further hauling.

He glared angrily at the nearing armored vehicle, resenting its presence at such a crucial moment. He noted that it carried no visible armament. Nor could he see either a circle or a triangle sign on it. Perhaps it intended no harm, after all. All the same, it was an untimely disturbance.

But then, events had never timed themselves to suit him. Quite the reverse, in fact.

Was that something moving on the flat top of this huge, ugly intruder? A speck. Two specks. People?

Damn them, nothing was going to stop him now. He'd failed too often because of unexpected, ill-timed interferences from the extraneous world. He was in rebellion against the unjust treatment of a lifetime.

He'd see *this* thing through, anyhow. He set his teeth and kept the tank pulling steadily.

. . . 84 . . . 85 . . . 86 degrees.

Came a thin wail, very high, rushing by, and then it was gone.

There was an appalling jerk and Freiburg's tank was dragged back for some metres. He slammed on the brakes as it stopped, and yelled aloud with bitter anger and despair.

Fate was still against him, and had struck again.

He slumped in his seat, sunken in a private mental world of gloomy gray and funereal black. He fumbled for his pipe, and lit it. The infantile sucking soothed . . . Presently, he roused and took a look outside.

The towering spaceship had slewed around, dragging all the tanks, save one, back a little distance. The one tank remaining out in front was the mate's.

The mate himself was standing beside his tank, holding one end of the parted cable. He was white-faced, divided between apprehension of the chariot thundering towards them and realization of what had just missed his tank.

Childishly trying to shift some of the blame, Freiburg bawled: "Thought you said the cables would hold, mister."

The mate shook his head, disclaiming responsibility, and pointed to the ground at his feet. With a qualm, Freiburg

saw the brand-new, straight slice marking the path of a great steel wheel.

He jumped to the conclusion that it had been shot at them by the approaching juggernaut. He shook a futile fist at it, knowing it would be equally futile to open fire with their small guns against that immense mass of armor-plate.

Anyhow, it was too late: the thing was almost upon them . . .

It ground to a halt with a clangorous noise. Then he saw it was George Starkey and some strange girl up there.

There was too much to explain. This wasn't the time or place for explanations. A flight of bombers dropped its cargo three kilos away. Another steel wheel screamed by eagerly making for the bomb smoke.

George said, rapidly: "This is Mara. She's my girl. She's on our side. Nobody else is. Get this, Skip—all of the bombers, tanks, and war machines are out to get us. *All* of 'em—we have no friends. There's a crazy warlord behind it—tell you about him later. First, lower the ship to the ground again, pronto."

"*What?* We'd nearly got it up. Would have been up if that blasted wheel hadn't cut the cable—"

"Best bit of luck you ever had," said George. "My, Providence was sure on your side that time. Tell you why later. Look, trust me, do as I say, for Pete's sake. No time to lose. These damn tanks may get the order to move from the warlord at any moment. If they do, the ship will crash down and get smashed again."

Freiburg argued no more. He issued orders. The crew slowly reversed their tanks, let the ship down.

"Now," said George, "disconnect the antenna from every one of these tanks. Then they'll be powerless to turn on us."

"Also powerless to raise the ship again," the mate demurred.

"Yes," snapped George. He pointed to the great war chariot. "But that won't be—it's self-powered. And it's got more traction power than all of those tanks put together."

"Jump to it, mister," growled Freiburg.

Even when, at last, they were all sealed in the ship, the racket outside was scarcely muffled. Waves of planes were methodically pattern-bombing the whole area. It would only have been a matter of time . . .

The ship's vents roared a defiant answer. The ship rose vertically amid a cloud of dust and smoke that was not all of its own making.

Gathering speed, it drove up into the grim Meknitron cloud belt. It got through unscathed and emerged like a leaping salmon into the powerful sunlight above.

When they were far enough into space to see both Earth and Venus as globes, the occupants of the ship were still exchanging their stories. Earth was distant and minute, and gleamed like a tiny ball-bearing. Venus was near, and looked like a ball of lamb's wool: white, fluffy, innocuous.

Mara alone was silent, wrapped in wonder at the sight of her planet as a sphere floating in nothingness.

Suddenly, she exclaimed and pointed. Tiny black spots were beginning to speckle that pure, dazzling cloud-surface.

Everyone watched the sullying spots spread slowly. And tried to visualize the immense catastrophes causing them.

George said: "Senilde has gotten well into his stride now. That's a full-scale atomic war. Immortal or not, I can't see how he or Leep can possibly survive it."

"Maybe some Earthman will go there again someday and interview the winner—if any," Freiburg remarked. "Know something? It won't be me. I'm a pipe and slippers man after this."

"What does he mean, George?" asked Mara, baffled by an inexact Teleo translation.

George drew her closely to him. "You may find out for yourself soon, dear. You know, I never really had a home of my own before. I'm looking forward to it."

She responded, as ever, passionately. Freiburg, slightly embarrassed, turned away to regard dwindling Venus and its dark stains of disaster.

George and Mara had already forgotten it.