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By CHARLES W. HARBAUGH

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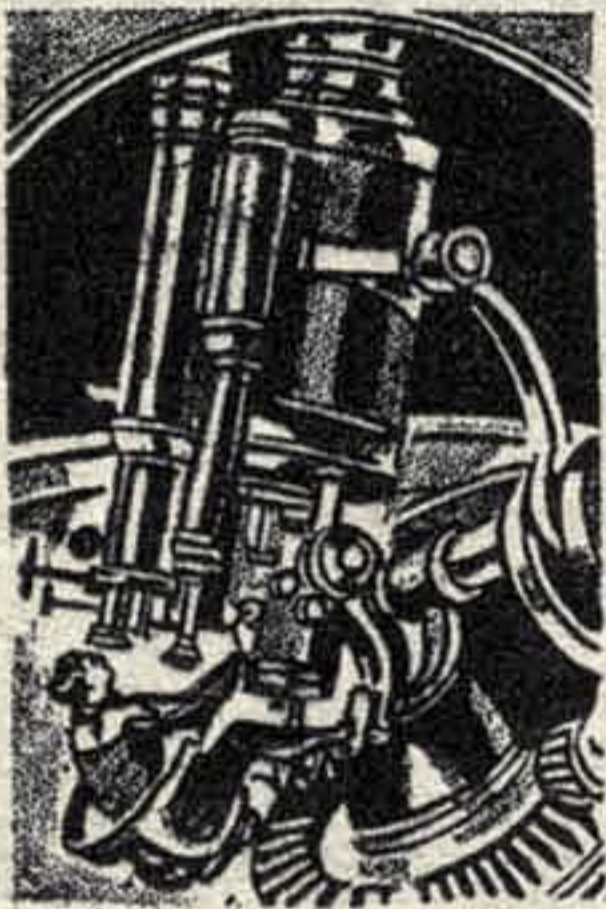
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The Magazine of Prophetic Fiction

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May, 1944, issue

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Crosse lifted the girl with his left arm and fired at the mud beasts with his ray gun

STAR OF TREASURE

By **CHARLES W. HARBAUGH**

In Quest of His Pirate Grandfather's Hidden Wealth, a Valiant Martian Rebel Encounters Adventure and Romance on Sirius!

CHAPTER I

A Night in First City

PROFESSOR PERICLES OLIPHANT saw the red flash from the guard's octangle and felt his little airship slow as its power was cut off. He pulled in beside the platform and switched to parking beam. A truculent, heavy-featured guard waited there.

He stood on an octangular platform, power-suspended at the thousand-foot level

over New York City. Behind him lay the glittering wealth of the greatest city in two worlds. It was night and, like a sea of unimagined proportions, the city reached from horizon to horizon, washed with waves of light. Tall slim buildings reached skyward through the netted groundwork of highway levels, their sides glowing with luminescent material. Other buildings hung in the sky like the guard's octangle, some at the five-hundred-foot level, others at the thousand. Pillars of pure radiant energy poured up against their foundations from

projectors on the ground, holding them firmly in place.

Superimposed over this rich scene were the darting lights of countless private and commercial airships, weaving intricate leit-motifs against the symphonic background of the city.

As the professor nudged his airship alongside the platform, he felt a keen sense of regret, for the beauty he saw spread before him was a captive loveliness. Standing before it, the figure of the guard seemed to overshadow it. He and the forces he represented did actually overshadow any beauty on Earth, for he was a minion of the harsh, inhuman government of the Ninth Diktor.

"Title and number?" the guard barked, thrusting his head through the lowered window of the professor's airship.

"I am Professor Pericles Oliphant," the small, grey-haired pilot replied quietly.

The guard's face darkened.

"It is not permitted to use decadent personal symbols! What is your title and number?"

Professor Oliphant grimaced.

"I am Pog one-three-four-nine. Dash it all, why did you cut off my power?"

"I ain't supposed to tell no one," the guard said, "but if you was to go down to the main traffic level you could hear the news coming over the amplifiers. It's bein' broadcast all over town by the Stapo. There's a rebel loose in First City!"

"Rebel? Indeed!" the professor said curiously. "I wasn't aware of any revolution. Who is he?"

"Lance Crosse," the guard replied. "The Martian. He got past the Space Patrol and landed somewheres. The Stapo is trying to find him. There's a reward for his body if anyone's lucky enough to shoot him."

The professor's manner had changed strangely during the guard's speech. He reached for his controls quickly.

"Thank you, my man," he said. "If you'll shut off that neutralizer, I'll be on my way."

Sliding from the octangle, the professor's thoughts were busy. A week ago he did not know such a person as Lance Crosse existed until the name appeared in his thoughts. Appeared was the right word!

He had been working over his lecture notes on basic energy when suddenly "Lance Crosse—Lance Crosse" resounded through his brain. Another man might have thought himself mad, but the professor had merely laid aside his work and adjusted his glasses.

"Amazing!" he'd commented. "A thought injector actually in operation. I wonder who is operating it?"

Once every day since then, the same name had been forced into his brain. Finally, one night before, a more complete message came through.

"Lance Crosse wishes to meet Professor Pericles Oliphant at the National Museum at midnight on the fourth day of Solter—Solter fourth, at midnight. This is Lance Crosse of Xanadu, Mars, calling Professor Oliphant of New York City, renamed First City by a recent tyrant government."

No further explanation or clue was given to reveal the identity of the person Lance Crosse. However, the professor knew quite well that he would do as requested. He had not quite perfected his own thought injector, and professional jealousy demanded he be present. But if Lance Crosse were a rebel—the situation became more delicate.

When he swung away from the guard's octangle at moderate speed, he could lean out of the cabin window and hear the rumble of the powerful Stapo amplifiers far below. They shouted their warning to all citizens, forbidding them from meeting or aiding the Martian rebel on pain of instant death.

THE National Museum loomed ahead, and the professor cut his speed. Like most municipal buildings, the museum was power-hung at the thousand-foot level. Since the development of cheap power from liquid oxygen and its catalysts, no scheme was too fantastic. The world of the Ninth Diktor reveled in a wealth of power that, in another age and under another form of government, might have created a true Nirvana on earth.

The professor dropped his ship to the spacious landing roof of the museum. It was an ugly building, a great rectangular box around the middle of which ran a balustraded balcony. The airship had barely touched the roof, when the professor's brain rocked with the impact of a foreign thought thrust suddenly into it—Crosse's thought injector!

"Crosse speaking, professor," the words ran. "I am lying five hundred yards north of the museum in an unlighted ship. Can you make some sort of signal we can see from here?"

Professor Oliphant stepped from his ship. There were three other airships resting on the broad roof. A museum guard lounged up and told him the place was closed.



"Father!" Nancy called. "They're catching up with us. Hurry!"

"I know," the professor replied. "I just came up to let the wind blow the cobwebs out of my thoughts."

The guard left. Oliphant descended to the balcony. He sought the protection of a corner where he could watch the guard on the roof from this position. When the fellow sauntered out of sight, the professor produced a stubby pipe from his pocket, packed it, and lit it with a chemical lighter of his own invention.

In the wind, the lighter glowed red and hot. After he had his pipe going, the professor waved the lighter high above his head. Instantly his brain sang with injected thoughts—their strength and clarity indicating a short distance of transmission.

"Is the red light yours? Dip it! Thank you, professor. As soon as it is safe to come alongside, wave the light again."

Professor Oliphant watched the guard narrowly until the man disappeared into the museum. The red pipe lighter swayed back and forth through the darkness.

Out of the night, a great black shape bulged. It was a huge warship, fully as long as the museum itself. Professor Oliphant gasped as he made out its lines.

A port opened in the side of the ship. For a moment, the faint glow of blue battle lights was visible. Two men leaped to the balustrade, then the warship drifted back into the night.

Both were clad in Earth clothes with Martian cloaks about their shoulders. One, a tall muscular giant, stepped up to the professor.

"I am Lance Crosse," he said simply, holding out his hand.

The faint reflected glow from the city outlined a powerful body and lean, heavily tanned face. His hair was snow white, result of a rash landing on the mysterious, clouded planet of Venus, where the cold light does strange things to human pigmentation.

White teeth flashed in a sudden, fleeting smile as the young man squeezed the professor's hand.

"Glad you came, professor," the rebel continued. "This is Peter Zember." He gestured toward the man who had leaped from the spaceship with him—a man not quite as tall as Crosse and lanky to the point of gauntness.

"Delighted," the professor acknowledged. "Now, Crosse, I'd like to know about that thought injector of yours—"

"Sorry, professor," Crosse interrupted. "No time for that now."

SILENTLY, the professor indicated where the man had gone. Crosse nodded.

"We'll use the plan agreed upon, Zember," he said swiftly. "Wait for us on the landing roof, professor."

Before the old man could ask another question, the two men melted into the dark shadows along the walls. Shrugging, he started up the stairs to the roof. Halfway up, he heard the sound of shattered glass. A siren began to moan.

"Quickly, Zember! Inside!" Crosse shouted.

The professor knew that the burglar siren was radio-equipped. Soon a cruising Stapo ship would be on their necks. He mounted quickly to the roof and hastened toward his airship.

The guard appeared on the roof.

"You, there! Stop!" the man shouted.

Knowing he was no match for a younger man, the professor sighed and halted.

"Now, then! What's this all about?"

Professor Oliphant pursed his lips.

"Mice?" he suggested helpfully.

The guard snarled and grasped him by the collar.

"Playing games, are you?" he roared. "Wait'll the Stapo gets here!"

A thin high wail cleaved through the deeper note of the burglar siren. A flashing red searchlight appeared against the pale skies, and, seconds later, a slim patrol ship slid to the landing roof. Stapo men poured out of it.

"What is this, guard?" one of them cried. He wore the cape and cap of an officer, but he looked even more brutal.

The guard swiftly recounted the professor's appearance at the museum and the subsequent smashing of a window.

"Ah!" the Stapo officer snapped. "Attempting to steal the property of the state—traitor?"

With the back of his hand, he struck the professor a powerful blow across the mouth that sent the frail little man reeling.

"Symbol and number!" the officer barked. The professor glared at him.

"My name is Professor Pericles Oliphant!"

The officer took a step forward and raised his hand threateningly again.

"It is a crime to use names!" he thundered. "Answer!"

"I'll be hanged if I'll use that silly title!" the professor cried stubbornly. "It's undignified." But he saw the officer loosen his bolt gun in its scabbard and knew his life

hung on a perilously slender thread.

"Pog," he sighed. "I am Pog one-three-four-nine."

The officer was evidently surprised at hearing so important a symbol. He stepped back, uncertain of what to say.

"We must be on the alert," he cried defensively. "The treacherous rebel Lance Crosse is in First City."

A bolt gun went off in the museum below, echoing hollowly. Another shot followed the first, then someone uttered a triumphant shout. One of the Stapo men appeared on the stairs, shoving before him the caped Martian rebel, Lance Crosse.

"Ah!" the officer of Stapo said in vast satisfaction. "Crosse was here! You, Pog, what do you know of this man? Confess! Your symbol will not help you now."

"Crosse? Crosse?" the professor repeated vaguely, as if trying to remember where he had heard the name before.

The officer struck him again.

"Do not trifle, Pog!" he roared. "I am a man of short temper!"

CHAPTER II

Pirate's Grandson

THIS admission was the last he ever made. Crosse ducked low and sent his captor flying over his shoulder. In another moment he was at the Stapo officer's throat.

"You rotten little tyrant!" Crosse grated. Steel fingers clamped about the man's neck and tightened. The officer's eyes bulged frantically, and he clawed at the young giant who held him. Then a quick snap ended the struggle.

The remaining Stapo men leaped on Crosse, struggling to beat him with their weapons. They did not dare discharge a bolt at such close quarters. Stepping back from the fight, the professor fumbled for his pipe lighter and waved it frantically in the air. The dark bulk of the Martian spaceship appeared in response to the signal.

Zember came bounding up the stairs from the museum and threw himself into the battle. As the spaceship came alongside, ports opened and dozens of cloaked rebels leaped to the balcony. They obliterated the struggling Stapo police. Soon the fight was over.

"Are you all right, sir?" Crosse called, striding toward the professor.

"Yes—I guess so," the little man replied. The Stapo officer had injured his pride more than his face. "Brutes!" he added bitterly.

Crosse smiled grimly.

"A mild word for their kind, sir. Do you blame us for being rebels?"

"What are they doing?" the professor asked, pointing toward the Martians who were busily lining up the beaten Stapo men.

"Giving them a taste of their own justice," Crosse replied harshly. "The Stapo is noted for its trial without jury, so—" Raising his voice, he shouted, "Druff! Come here."

A young man in the simple dress of a Martian colonist hurried to Crosse's side.

"Meet Captain Druff, professor," Crosse said. Then to the Martian, "You're in command of the spaceship, Druff. The professor and I are going to his laboratory. We'll use his airship. Take a position at thirty thousand feet over the museum and wait for us."

"Sure thing, Crosse," the captain replied with characteristic Martian informality. "What'll we do with these Stapo hounds?"

"Whatever you like. Oh, yes!" He reached under his jacket and drew out a heavy, leather-bound volume. "Here's Tragg's diary. Guard it with your life."

"Right!" the captain said and swung away to supervise the execution of the Stapo crew.

"What is the meaning of all this, Mr. Crosse?" Professor Oliphant asked. "Why are we going to my laboratory?"

"You'll want to take your papers and books and few clothes with you when you leave for Mars," the rebel told him gravely.

"Mars!"

Crosse nodded.

"I came to Earth for two things—one is the book I just gave Druff—you're the other."

"But I—"

"Shall we go?" He took the professor by the arm and ushered him toward the little airship. He unlatched one of the doors to the cabin of the airship and swung in, motioning the professor to take the pilot's seat.

"Confound it!" the professor cried irritably. "I won't budge an inch until you tell me what this is all about."

"Please, sir," Crosse interrupted. "I'll answer all your questions, but we must leave immediately. There are more Stapo patrol ships on the way."

The great warship had already taken its crew aboard and was swinging away from the museum. Professor Oliphant glared at Crosse, but his anger melted.

"Very well," he chuckled. "Whoever you are, young man, you're fighting the Ninth Diktor and his secret police and that's to your favor."

The thin wail of police sirens caused him to take his seat hurriedly and put the little airship into a quick climb. As they swung clear of the roof, the airship dipped suddenly and began to fall.

"They've cut off your power!" Crosse cried. "I'd forgotten you operated on transmitted power, curse it!"

The professor winked broadly and reached under the regulation instrument panel for another set of controls.

"I'm hardly the man to trust the government power supply, Crosse. This ship has an atomic-powered auxiliary."

"Atomic-powered!" Crosse gasped. "I didn't know that an efficient motor had been built on the atomic principle."

Professor Oliphant peered at the blinking red lights rising to intercept the falling airship.

"I've never bothered to market it," he explained. "I've been too busy with my research, so I just built this one motor for my own use and then forgot about it."

STAPO ships were closing in, and the neutralizing ray with which they cut off the flow of transmitted power was stronger. A bolt gun set in the bow of one patrol ship barked, and blue flame made the night livid.

The professor touched a plastic-handled lever that looked as innocent as a cowl adjustment and moved it ahead. Crosse felt his seat leap forward as the airship accelerated. The blood left his head, but the sensation soon passed, and he peered eagerly out of a window. The pattern of city lights below had merged into a confused blur.

He turned to the professor in admiration.

"How fast are we going?" The professor pointed at the air-speed indicator. The needle was jammed at the stop post where the last calibration read one thousand miles an hour.

"I don't know how fast we're going, Crosse. I've never had occasion to use full power before."

Adjusting the plastic lever, he slowed the ship, and the pattern of lights became orderly once more.

"We're free of those Stapo ships now," he remarked cheerfully. "Suppose you tell me why you're here. I warn you, my daughter will have something to say about going to Mars! But what is it you want of me?"

"I want you," Lance Crosse replied, "to build a ship that will take me to the star Sirius."

Professor Oliphant's jaw dropped.

"You're joking!" he cried. "It's impossible!"

"I never joked less in my life, sir. I must go to Sirius, and I believe you are the only man who can take me there."

"You're mad," the professor declared. "No one has ever ventured beyond the limits of our solar system!"

"One man has gone out into space—as far as Sirius—and returned to tell the tale."

The professor snorted with disgust.

"Old wives' tales, Crosse! Look here, this nonsense you're prattling is incredible."

"Edward Tragg went to Sirius," Crosse insisted. "He made the trip seventy years ago in a ship of his own design and construction."

"My word!" Oliphant gasped. "Don't tell me you believe all the stories you hear about that old liar and space pirate!"

"Let me explain just why I believe this particular story, sir," Crosse begged. "I'm no scientist. I don't give a hoot about all the science in the solar system. At the moment, I am fighting for freedom. I'm fighting a rotten, archaic Earth government that bleeds the very life blood from its own colony on Mars."

"This revolution is my life—not dabbling in science or pirate stories. But there is one hope—and only one hope—that we can drive out the Ninth Diktor's governor, and that is the treasure of Edward Tragg!"

In spite of Crosse's fiery words, the professor broke into a hearty laugh.

"Tragg's treasure!" he cried. "El Dorado! You know, of course, that not less than a hundred expeditions have ransacked the solar system from one end to another with never a trace of it."

"Of course!" Crosse declared heatedly.

"They restricted their search to the solar system. Actually it was buried far beyond their reach—in a place inaccessible to their limited imaginations."

Professor Oliphant saw the light. Forgetting his controls for the moment, he stared at Crosse.

"You mean that Tragg buried his treasure on Sirius?"

"That's it, sir. Tragg took his swag and carted it off to one of the planets of Sirius. It's there right now."

The professor was disturbed. Crosse's sincerity could not be doubted.

"Are you trying to sell me a bill of goods, young man?" he asked sharply. "Do you want me to put up money?"

"Not at all!" said Crosse. "I'll put up the money for you to build a ship that will go to Sirius. There's my story in a nutshell."

PROFESSOR OLIPHANT inspected his companion through narrowed eyes. It was obvious he meant what he said. Moreover, his manner was engaging. The professor's suspicions vanished.

"I'm sorry, Crosse, but it's impossible. Yet I'm fascinated with the idea. What makes you think I could build such a ship?"

"Two things make me feel sure you can build that ship. One is the diary Zember and I just stole from the National Museum. It's Tragg's diary. The other is the speech you almost, but not quite, delivered at the last Science Forum."

"How did you know about that?" the old man asked quickly.

"We on Mars were listening to the radio broadcast from the Forum, and your introductory words caught our attention. Then that fool of a Diktor interrupted with one of his military displays, and we never knew what you were going to say."

"Pompous old ass!" the professor snorted indignantly. "Tergon 1-1 fancies himself a scientist, you know. Absurd!"

"Yet that one sentence of yours revealed to us that you knew a mighty secret," Crosse insisted. "You said, 'Gentlemen, I have discovered the secret of life itself.'"

"Vain of me, you think?"

"Not at all," Crosse assured him. "But it told us that you had rediscovered the one secret that all scientists strive for, whether they realize it or not."

The professor's smile faded.

"Rediscovered?" he asked sharply.

Crosse hesitated, casting a sidelong glance at the bearded old man.

"Yes, sir. Edward Tragg discovered it and put it to practical use in his flight to Sirius."

"Poppy-cock!" the professor roared, his face reddening. "I tell you the principle of basic energy is entirely new!" He paused, then sighed. "Did he really discover basic

energy, Crosse?"

The Martian nodded.

"He called it life flow, but I believe they are one and the same. In searching through the accounts of Tragg's life, I found vague references to a trip through outer space. Wherever such mention was made, there was always a veiled reference to this strange, all-powerful force called life flow."

An expression of doubt appeared on the professor's features.

"If Tragg knew of basic energy, it's barely possible that he may have— No, no!" He interrupted himself violently. "It's incredible!"

Crosse rubbed his chin.

"Of course," he said with studied casualness, "the fact that Tragg discovered basic energy before you does not detract from your achievement. Tragg never published his findings. As far as future historians are concerned—you will be the only discoverer."

"Do you think so, Crosse?" the professor asked eagerly. But he was a man of humor, even when the joke was on himself, and a smile crossed his lips. "I suspect you of plying me with a little flattery. Crosse."

"Certainly, but only to convince you of the absolute necessity of your coming to Mars with us."

"I'll go to Mars with you," the professor agreed slowly. "I must know how much Tragg discovered. How did you first learn of this—this life flow of his?"

"My mother was Edward Tragg's daughter," Crosse replied in a strangely soft voice. "She died when I was very young. But she left me all her writings and what she could save of my grandfather's after he was trapped by the Space Patrol and put to death. Among them was a book of sonnets Tragg had written in which one poem was carefully marked."

"Good Lord!" the professor cried. "Was Tragg a poet, too?"

"The world has much to learn of Edward Tragg," Crosse replied seriously. "My grandfather was undeniably a pirate and acquired an immense, ill-gotten fortune from the Martian trade, but he was nonetheless a great scientist."

"Pirating was only an avocation of his—and perhaps a supreme gesture of his contempt for the world of the Eighth Dikter. I can show you some excellent paintings he did, and everyone knows the stirring music he wrote."

"But little of his written work, including his poetry, is known. His diary is—or rather

was—at the National Museum for all to see. But I needed that diary as a link in the chain that will lead me to Tragg's treasure."

"This book of sonnets—" the professor reminded.

"My mother left me the volume, marking one verse for my particular attention. I know it by heart—

"Hold me locked within thine heart's
embrace;

My words of love inscribe in thy chaste
Diary of lover's deed and words.

Over heart with roses Cupid girds
A love-enticing woman for his mate.
Flame meets flame and, burning, strikes
a Fate.

Read well, oh cherished darling, love's plea,
Marked importunately, as you see.

Words are these: but words not wild or
free."

CHAPTER III

Getaway

PROF. OLIPHANT wrinkled his nose with distaste.

"Rather vague isn't it?"

"Precisely," Crosse agreed. "Even if my mother hadn't marked that verse, I'd have noticed it. It stands out from the other brilliant pieces like fire in the night. It's not even a sonnet.

"The words mean exactly nothing—and Edward Tragg never wrote words without meaning. But if you take the first word of each line, you find the true meaning of that verse. They read, 'Hold my diary over a flame. Read marked words.'"

The professor was silent as he turned his attention to maneuvering the swift little airship down toward the scattered suburban lights below. Finally he turned to the young man beside him, just as they were poised for their landing.

"What you have told me is absolutely preposterous, Crosse," he said. "Why should Tragg take his treasure to Sirius? Such insane avarice doesn't jibe with the character of the pirate, seems to me.

"And more important—what good is Tragg's treasure going to do your blessed revolution? If you want money, why don't you go out and pirate for it the way your grandfather did?"

Crosse flashed his swift smile.

"I knew you wouldn't be taken in by superficialities, sir! First, I want to explain Tragg's treasure, as you ought to know, has been the El Dorado for adventurers throughout the past generation. Those words — 'Tragg's treasure' — Mean something!

"My people on Mars are convinced success will be theirs if they only can lay their hands on it. Druff and I have plied them with careful propaganda to insure just that.

"But Tragg's treasure is more than wealth. There are vague tantalizing references through his writings of a strange new weapon—and that weapon is connected with Tragg's trip to Sirius."

"I thought there was more to it," the professor nodded. "Very well, Crosse, I'll go to Mars with you. You may be a lying scoundrel, but if what you say is true, I want to go along."

"I knew it, Professor Oliphant. No man with half a heart could resist the temptation. We can leave as soon as you have packed what things you need."

The airship descended lightly to the private landing stage over the professor's laboratory. The two men stepped out.

"What's that, professor!" Crosse asked sharply, pointing at another airship emblazoned with official emblems.

"Possibly my daughter is entertaining a visitor." He shook his head. "A problem, that girl. It's my own fault, really. Never had the time to raise her properly after her mother died. She has delusions of grandeur. Likes men of rank and power. Very easily swayed by superficialities."

Muttering these regretful words, the professor led the way to an elevator. He and Crosse descended to the ground floor where the living quarters were located.

"Come in here, Crosse, and make yourself comfortable while I get my things together," the professor said, indicating a large informal room.

"You'd better hurry, sir, the Stapo will—" Crosse's words died in his throat.

Two people already occupied the room. One was a slender girl with light brown hair and vibrant eyes. Beside her sat a man whose face was known to every citizen on Earth.

He was tall—almost as tall as Crosse—and heavy. In an inflexible, granite way Carro Blake was handsome.

Blake rose, his heavy-lidded, suspicious eyes fastened on Lance Crosse.

"Excuse me, Nancy," the professor said

mildly. "I didn't mean to interrupt."

The girl rose to her feet. Crosse noted her exquisite figure and delicately molded features.

"You're not interrupting at all, father," she replied in a low musical voice. "I am glad you're here because your house is honored by a very famous man tonight—Carro Blake. Ooh! I forgot! He says names are decadent personal symbols, daddy. We must call him Tergon One-Two."

"Tergon!" the professor gasped. Tergon was the symbol reserved for only two men. One was the Ninth Diktor, the other was Blake, head of the Secret Stapo police.

"Father!" Nancy Oliphant cried. "Mr. Blake—Tergon, is a great man. You should be proud to have him as your guest."

Her words rang hollowly in the profound silence. Glancing from one man to another, she faltered.

"What's the matter?" she whispered anxiously.

"You!" Blake said heavily, nodding at Crosse. "You're Lance Crosse, the rebel!"

FIRE flashed in the young man's eyes. Then a grave smile touched his lips lightly, and he bowed in mock homage to Blake.

"You!" he said, matching Blake's tone. "You are Tergon One-Two, the tyrant! Second only in personal corruption to Tergon One-One, our sainted Diktor, may his soul rot in perdition!"

Blake's face went white.

"You fool!" he growled. "No man can utter such words and live."

He strode confidently toward Crosse, sure of his bulky muscles and the aura of dread that hangs about any Stapo man. Crouching slightly, Crosse measured the potential capacity of the bulky muscles, but was not at

all aware of the aura. Blake stopped one pace from the Martian.

"You're under arrest!" he announced.

"Think so?" Crosse asked softly.

Blake was used to seeing men cringe and fawn before him, worshipping his life-and-death authority. This was something new, and the taunt stopped him. But his confidence was supreme, and he was no coward. Growling a curse, he went for Crosse.

The Martian evaded the first crushing blows, replied with light jabs, feeling his man out. Blake took the jabs with a grunt, and Crosse realized that his adversary was no sybarite. Blake was hard in body and mind, and he was clever in the way that hunting animals are clever.

His eyes narrowed to slits as he sought an opportunity to break through Crosse's guard and hammer him down. Crosse fought cautiously, knowing it would be hard to recover from such an attack once it got under way.

But Crosse had no intention of losing. He took a few blows, rolling with them to make Blake expend his strength. He waited with keen expectancy for a certain sign. When it came, a grim smile appeared on his lips.

Blake began to breathe hard. Blake was no match in endurance for a hard-bitten Martian colonist. Crosse closed in, driving blow after blow at Blake's face. The heavy man, in a wild effort to protect himself, lost his wind altogether. He panted like a dog as Crosse closed in on him.

He was far from out, however. One of his massive fists clipped the Martian's chin and set him back on his heels. Crosse shook his head, and a trickle of blood appeared at the corner of his mouth. But he could take punishment. He caught Blake with a strong

[Turn page]

TEST SIGHT

TASTE RIGHT

If the ladder is placed against building, how far up will it reach?



ANSWER.

It will reach exactly to the top of the building.



left to the face.

The blow glanced off Blake's nose, causing excruciating pain. It paralyzed him momentarily, and Crosse lashed out with an uppercut, putting all his weight into the drive. Blake's head snapped back, and he slumped to the floor.

Crosse stepped back. His breath was just beginning to come fast and hard, and the wild rage in his eyes made him terrible to behold.

"I wonder," Professor Oliphant remarked, gazing at the unconscious Stapo chief, "how many men would have given their souls to do that!"

Lance Crosse grinned, and the tension eased out of his body. He wiped the blood from his chin.

"That's a token payment for some of the official murders he commits every day."

Professor Oliphant's daughter still stood erect, her face drained of blood.

"They'll kill all of us for this. Why did you do it?" She stared at Crosse, and anger washed away her fear. "You rebel!"

"Nancy," the professor said sharply, "Lance Crosse may not wear half a ton of gold braid, but he's a fine young man, and I'd rather not have him insulted by my daughter."

"Father! You're defending this—this person? Do you know the things he has done? Mr. Blake—I mean Tergon—was just telling me of the property the rebels have destroyed on Mars, the looting and killing and burning they're responsible for!"

"Shut up," Crosse interrupted roughly. "We have no time for such discussions. You'd better pack some clothes, too, Miss Oliphant."

"Sh—shut up?" Nancy repeated in a whisper, staring wide-eyed at the Martian. It was the first time in her life those two words had been addressed to her. "I won't shut up! Why should I pack my clothes?"

"Because you're going to Mars with us," Crosse told her. "You're too close to the professor. It would give the Stapo a bargaining power over him."

Nancy sought her father's eyes.

"Are you really going to Mars?"

"Perhaps even to Sirius, my dear," the professor replied whimsically. "Run along now and do as Crosse says."

She hesitated, unwilling to believe what had happened. "Hurry!" Crosse snapped. For a long moment she gazed at him as if he were some loathsome beast, then whirled and left the room. Her father followed her.

When they had gone, Crosse went to the unconscious Blake. Searching his pockets, he removed all weapons, tied the man's hands and gagged him. Then he pulled the inert figure over his shoulder and carried him up to the professor's little airship. It was a four-seater, with plenty of room in the back. Crosse dumped the Stapo chief there. Then he snapped on the ship's radio.

The Stapo headquarters raged over its official wave length. It had learned of the destruction of the patrol ship crew on the museum roof and the subsequent escape of the rebels. Professor Oliphant's part in the adventure was known, and even as Crosse listened, patrols were being ordered to the laboratory.

Crosse waited impatiently until the professor and his daughter came out of the elevator. The professor's arms were loaded with papers and books, hastily bound into parcels. He had forgotten to pack any clothing, but the girl had done it for him.

"Get in the back," Crosse told her. "You'd better handle the controls, professor. Stapo ships are on the way here, but we ought to be able to make it to my spaceship without trouble. They'll never expect us to go that way."

The professor sent the airship soaring to the five-thousand-foot level, where there was little traffic. Levelling off, he advanced the throttle of the atomic-powered auxiliary as much as he dared.

"Miss Oliphant," Crosse said stiffly over his shoulder. "Believe me, you will be much safer on Mars than you would be on earth."

"Save your worry, Mr. Crosse," she replied frigidly. "You may need it when Tergon is free. I'm going to Mars to keep my father company, not in obedience to your commands."

CROSSE did not reply. Snapping on the radio once more, he tuned to the Stapo wave length. Confusion leaped from the amplifier. Orders were being issued and countermanded as fast as they were given. Without the final authority of Blake's word, the secret police were helpless.

When they passed over the edge of the city, halfway en route to the brilliant central district, a squadron of patrol ships flashed past underneath, headed in the direction of the laboratory.

"They'll be disappointed," the professor murmured.

Traffic grew heavier, and the professor went up to the ten-thousand-foot level which

was reserved for high speed emergency flight. But even there, private airships were being flagged down at the traffic octangles, their power cut off and their occupants questioned.

A neutralizing ray was turned on the professor's ship, but he fled past, operating on his free power. Instantly another voice added itself to the din on the Stapo band. The guard was calling frantically to warn of the ship he could not neutralize.

Orders crystallized quickly as the message went through. Red blinking searchlights began to appear below, struggling upward to take the pursuit. Sirens curdled the night air. But the professor knew he could outrun anything the Stapo put in the air. The danger lay ahead, not behind, for there would be other patrol ships lying in wait for them.

Crosse picked up the phone of the ship's transmitter.

"Calling Stapo headquarters," he announced. "This is Lance Crosse speaking. I have Tergon One-Two aboard my ship. If you shoot me down, you'll finish him, too."

Pandemonium broke.

"A trick!" the ground officers screamed. "Attack that airship anyway!" But the captains of the patrol ships hung back. None of them wanted the doubtful distinction of shooting down their own chief.

An abrupt silence blanketed the noisy radio. Then a terse announcement came on the air.

"Orders direct from Tergon One-One, our holy Diktor! Shoot down that airship!"

Like a hungry swarm of mosquitoes, the red searchlights rose in front of the fleeing ship, their commanders relieved of any further responsibility. Crosse glanced over his shoulder and saw that Blake had regained consciousness.

"See how your friends love you?" Crosse asked sourly. "They don't mind shooting you down. But we cannot risk Miss Oliphant's life."

"I'm surprised at such a tender sentiment, Mr. Crosse!" the girl said stiffly. "Murder seems to be your profession."

"You're mistaken," Crosse retorted. "Murder is Blake's profession. Mine is fighting."

A formidable pack of patrol ships had maneuvered directly on the course. Bolt discharges flashed blue lightning from their bow guns even though they were as yet far out of range. Beyond them lay the glowing heart of the city, the National Museum and, above it, the waiting spaceship.

"Calling Martian flagship!" Crosse barked into the transmitter. "Open your after cargo port. We're coming up."

"Lance Crosse!" the Stapo radio roared. "Land or be shot down."

Professor Oliphant continued his headlong flight. A bolt discharge exploded alongside, announcing that they were within range. The ship swirled in the disturbed air.

"Careful!" the professor shouted and sent his ship hurtling skyward in a mad climb over the Stapo ships.

"Stop him!" the Stapo radio blared. "He's getting away!"

The patrol ships climbed desperately, firing as they went, but they could not match the unlimited power the professor had built into his ship. At the twenty-five-thousand-foot level, the warship saw them and turned on its lights. Guided by this beacon, the professor slowed and began the difficult maneuver of entering the cargo port.

"Father!" Nancy called. "They're catching up with us. Hurry!"

The professor dared not accelerate. Grimly, he kept his eyes on the yawning port. A strong cross wind was blowing. It would be a difficult entrance under the best conditions.

"Are they near, Crosse?" he gasped.

The Martian nodded.

"Coming like blazes! If only this ship was armed!"

A bolt discharge exploded directly behind the little airship, shoving it dangerously near to a collision with the spaceship. The professor applied reverse power desperately to ward off the disaster, and they shot away. The Stapo ships, seeing they had separated their two enemies, circled triumphantly for a kill.

"Lance Crosse!" a strange voice boomed over the radio. "Stand by and we'll volley!"

CHAPTER IV

The Secret Weapon

"THAT'S my ship!" Crosse shouted. "Clear out, professor!"

Gladly, the professor yanked the plastic lever, and his airship screamed away. The bewildered Stapo ships circled aimlessly, unable to follow the swift flight. Impervious to the small-caliber bolt guns of the patrol

ships, the great spaceship's ugly turrets swung broadside.

A blinding flash of ray and bolt discharges whitened the pale night sky, and the tremendous roar of the guns reverberated across the arches of space like thunder. Not a single patrol ship survived that terrible volley.

"All clear, Professor Oliphant," Lance Cross said gravely. "You may board at your leisure."

The professor nosed his little ship gingerly toward the gaping cargo port and slipped through. Inside, the hold was glowing with soft cadmium lamps. The Martians were there, waiting for their leader. When he stepped out, a cheer went up, and Captain Druff ran to shake his hand.

"Glad to see you, Crosse," the captain said heartily. "You had us worried."

Crosse grinned briefly and jerked a thumb toward the rear compartment of the airship.

"Got a surprise for you in there, Druff. A fellow by the name of Blake—or should I say Tergon One-Two."

"You mean it?"

"Look for yourself."

Druff thrust his head and shoulders through the door of the rear compartment. His shout of laughter rang through the cargo compartment.

"Crosse, you're a wonder! How did you do it?"

Crosse shrugged and led the professor aside.

"We're on our way back to Mars with the things we came for," he told the old man. "Thanks for your help."

Then he glanced at Nancy Oliphant. Perhaps it was only the effect of the cadmium lamps, but at that moment she seemed beautiful beyond belief.

Her light hair glowed and her eyes—the spell was broken as Crosse realized that those eyes held nothing but distrust and hatred for him.

"We shall do our utmost to make you comfortable, Miss Oliphant," he offered politely.

"I want nothing from you," she told him stonily. "I shall never forgive you for placing my father in such danger."

A man might have died for speaking such words to Lance Crosse. He merely grinned.

Immediately after seeing Professor Oliphant and his daughter to their cabins, Crosse hurried to the control room. Captain Druff was already there, his eyes glued

on the array of vision screens that gave a view from every quarter of the spaceship. Blake, his bonds and gag replaced by handcuffs, was in a chair at the rear of the room, guarded by Zember and another rangy rebel.

"Any signs of pursuit yet, captain?" Crosse asked.

Druff nodded.

"They're sending up every blasted warship they have in First City. They can't travel any faster than we can in atmosphere, though, without burning up their hulls, and once we're in free space no one can catch us."

Crosse pursed his lips and studied the vision screens intently. "Change the course, Druff. Make it two hundred seventy-fourty-five degrees. We'll pretend we're making for the asterite belt so long as they see us. The moment we get completely free of Earth's atmosphere, change over to two hundred thirty-five-fifteen."

"You won't get away with this, Crosse," Blake rumbled in his heavy, ominous voice. "We have ships on Earth with speed you've never dreamed of."

"I'm no scientist, Blake, but even I know how unimportant speed is in space warfare."

"They'll catch you," Blake insisted. "When they do, I personally will supervise the torture."

Crosse strode over to the chief of the dreaded Stapo. Blake still bore the marks of their recent battle.

"Citizen Blake," Crosse growled. "The age of torture is over. You and your Diktors will soon be wiped off the earth. But we are still so near the end of the age of torture that I might easily practise it upon your person—with my fists."

"Think you can frighten me?" Blake sneered. "Your revolution will never succeed. The government of the Diktors is too strong, and the appointed governor on Mars is too capable a man."

"The Diktors are old and senile," Crosse retorted. "His government is awash with corruption. We rebels will succeed—do not fear."

Blake's eyes narrowed.

"Tergon One-One may die a sudden death," he said slowly, his eyes growing sharp with cunning. "Then I, Tergon One-Two, will be the only man strong enough to seize control of the government. The planets of Earth and Mars would know the strength of sure and powerful hands once more."

"So that's your game, Blake? Murder

the Diktor and make yourself the Tenth Diktor? However, you will spend the rest of your life in imprisonment on Mars."

"You won't dare hold me," Blake taunted, his lip curling. "You fear the Stapo too much."

Lance Crosse's hot temper flared up instantly.

"I said that we Martians do not torture, but I didn't guarantee to control myself. I would like nothing better than to forget my own principles."

BLAKE slumped back into his chair, growling under his breath. Still fuming, Crosse returned to the vision screen.

"We've lost the pursuit," Captain Druff told him. "We still have to pass the Space Patrol, but they'll never see us on this course."

Professor Oliphant entered the control room at that moment, looking fresh and neat in a change of clothing.

"About that diary of Tragg's," he suggested.

"I put it in the safe in Zember's study," Druff said.

Crosse led the way to a small book-lined cabin. Opening the safe's magnetic tumbler lock, he produced the heavy, leather-bound volume he had stolen from the National Museum. It was written partly in duro-type and partly in Tragg's all but illegible scrawl.

"What were the directions?" the professor asked.

"According to Tragg's acrostic, we're supposed to hold the diary over a flame and look for marked words. I guess Tragg used invisible ink of some sort."

"Heat of any sort should do the trick," the professor muttered, producing his pipe lighter and snapping it on. He paused. "If there are no marked words in this diary, Crosse, I'll be a disappointed man."

Crosse's lips tightened.

"It will mean the end of the Martian revolution. Without that treasure, we're sunk."

The professor opened the diary and began waving the lighter carefully under the first page. Miraculously, dozens of little black check marks appeared. The professor pulled out a large handkerchief and blew his nose as if to indicate his relief.

"Take it down, Crosse," he ordered briskly. "We're on our way to Sirius."

"T-h-i-s-v-o-l-u-m-e-i-s-d-e-d-i-c-a-t-e-d-t-o-t-h," he read.

The professor paused.

"Can you break that up into sense?"

Crosse frowned, pencil poised over his pad. Then he made a few quick lines, dividing the words.

"This volume is dedicated to th—" he read.

"Excellent!" the professor cried. Hurriedly, he dictated the remaining letters marked on the first page. When he had finished, Crosse laid aside his pencil and read aloud.

"This volume is dedicated to the man who solves its secret. To all common intent it is my diary, but actually it is of far greater value than an account of my life. It is here, in this collection of notes, that I reveal the secret of life flow, that I describe my journey to the Sirius system, and that I give an inventory of my fabulous treasure and an account of its—"

"Simple enough," the professor pronounced. "All we have to do is jot down each letter Tragg has checked. My apologies to you, Mr. Crosse, for having called you a liar. I shall be glad to know how Tragg engineered his flight to Sirius!"

"Since we're going to be several weeks on the way to Mars," said Crosse, "I suggest we get some sleep."

"Sleep? Not now, Crosse. I'll transcribe a few more pages—just to see if any mention is made of that secret weapon."

Crosse made his customary rounds of the ship. Close to four hours later, he passed by Zember's little cabin and saw the light was still glowing within. Through the half-opened door, he saw Professor Oliphant working busily over the diary.

"Hadn't you better get some sleep, sir?" he asked with some concern.

"Sit down, Crosse. Have something to tell you!"

Crosse took a chair.

"Shoot!" he agreed.

The professor shoved his glasses down to the tip of his nose.

"I think I've found what we wanted," he said simply.

"The secret weapon?" Crosse cried.

"Well—no," the professor hesitated, glancing at the foolscap on which he had been jotting his notes. "But listen to this—"

"Yesterday, from my observatory on airless Deimos, I made a discovery that might prove valuable. Employing the new spectroscope built according to my design by Haeckel Bros., Omaha, I have photographed Sirius.

"To my astonishment, I discovered a foreign pair of lines in the range below

Gamma four thousand. Can this be a new element? This morning I inspected the sun and Alpha Centauri, but found no comparable lines. Since lunch I have been smoking my pipe, pondering over the problem of life flow.

"If this new vital force, as I think it will, lends itself to interstellar travel, I shall certainly choose Sirius as my first point of destination."

"A new element?" Crosse said slowly, knitting his brows. "Wouldn't that spoil a lot of scientific theories?"

"Theories are made to be spoiled," the professor murmured as he thumbed through his notes. "Listen to this now. Tragg has arrived on Sirius—one of the planets, of course—and he is about to return to Mars—

"The quantities of crude ion-element are baled and stored with the rest of my treasure. It occurred to me, as I made my ship ready for the return, that ion-element would not exist in an environment where carbon also exists.

"There is no carbon on this planet (I have been eating from the provisions brought with me), and consequently the unstable ion-element has been formed in abundance. I asked myself the question—what would happen if ion-element were placed in contact with carbon?

"A hurried experiment revealed dynamic results. I delayed my departure long enough to try ion-element against common CO, and found the results tremendously enhanced. It was a short step thence to the other experiments.

"But I was so appalled with the machine I had created that I certainly will not take it back to Sol with me. If any of Earth's diktors should lay their hands on such a weapon. . . ."

Crosse slapped his thigh.

"I knew it!" he cried excitedly. "What do you suppose the weapon is?"

"Don't know," the professor yawned. "Think I'll take your advice, Crosse. All right if I bunk here?"

"Certainly. I have a cabin for you beside your daughter's." He glanced thoughtfully at the professor. "You know, sir, I didn't want to drag her into this, but I simply could not leave her on Earth. She's a lovely girl."

"Lovely, but a nuisance," the professor amended. "I never will forgive her for setting fire to my laboratory when she was six years old. Then there was the time she had the measles and I wasn't allowed to attend the Science Forum."

CROSSE nodded, silently mulling over what the professor had said.

"Lovely nuisance!" he muttered, then laughed.

He returned to the control room. Blake was still there, but since the Space Patrol now lay far behind, Crosse ordered him confined. Then he and Druff supervised putting the spaceship into shape for the long flight ahead. It would be two and a half weeks before they would reach their destination.

During the voyage, Professor Oliphant spent much of his time putting his notes in order.

A more tedious job was that of deciphering the diary. Each page had to be heated carefully.

Mars was looming large and ruddy in the bow vision screen when Lance Crosse, stopping by Zember's book-lined cabin in search of the professor, found his daughter working busily over the extremely important diary.

"For shame, Miss Oliphant," he chided gently. "Do you realize you are abetting the Martian revolution? Your friend Blake would be forced to condemn you to a painful and lingering death."

"Tergon One-Two is aware of my loyalty, Mr. Crosse," she said icily.

"Tergon One-Two!" Crosse replied contemptuously. "Whenever I want to make myself angry, all I have to think of is those symbols and numbers the Ninth Diktors tacked on you terrestrials. They're the basis for the cruelest caste system Earth has ever known."

"Being a Martian barbarian, you wouldn't understand," she said. "Mr. Bla-Tergon told me that symbols and numbers brought efficiency into the classification of citizens."

"Did he, though!" Crosse growled sarcastically. "What is your symbol—Lala? Lina?"

"Lila," the girl replied coolly. "I am Lila One-Four Hundred Seventy-One a Three. I wish you would address me in that way if you have occasion to address me at all."

"I'll call you what I darned well please," Lance Crosse said roughly.

"You're a Lila, are you? That means you are an unmarried young woman of some beauty, weight between one hundred ten and one hundred twenty, light brown hair and blue eyes.

"The number one means you are a citizen of First City, and the other numbers identify you among all the other Lila types in that

district. It's a wonder you didn't let them give you a number to describe the condition of your teeth and the position of your vaccination! Do you actually call yourself Free?"

"I don't know that I care to be free," the girl replied gravely. "Would I give up the security offered by the Diktor's government for the freedom to starve or die uncared for?"

"Security!" Crosse groaned. "You have security only if you live like a beast, controlled, herded, milked, bred by the whim of a rotten officialdom."

"Please, Mr. Crosse," she cried angrily. "You needn't shout at me as if I were one of your native women!"

Crosse stopped abruptly, his mouth open.

"Native women!" he shouted. "My stars, what an opinion you must have of us Martians! You forget we were all descendants of the hardy space pioneers who first landed on Mars and colonized the planet. You have much to learn, Miss Oliphant."

She dropped her eyes to the diary over which she was working, a faint flush on her features. Crosse paused at the door.

"Thanks for helping with that diary," he said.

"Not at all," she replied primly. "I was doing it to help my father."

That was the only opportunity Lance Crosse had to speak to her alone during the voyage to Mars, and it did little to reduce her animosity toward him.

The spaceship was nearing Mars, and they picked up a storm of radioed messages from Earth to the capital city of Mars, Xanadu, ordering the governor to make sure Lance Crosse did not reach that planet alive.

The Ninth Diktor himself sent word that the valuable position of Chief Tax Collector on Earth awaited the governor if he captured or killed Lance Crosse—disgrace and death if the rebel ship got through.

Neither Captain Druff nor Crosse were worried about the landing. Mars was their home and they knew it well. Moreover, the rebel fleet was there, capable of blasting a hole through the ring of Earth ships and seeing them safely in.

CHAPTER V

Progress on Mars

XANADU itself, the great sprawling commercial capital of Mars, lay in the

center of the fertile steppe region where the Oder and Delon rivers joined to form the Greater Delon. West of Xanadu, the steppes rose gradually toward the Brozzian mountains.

The stronghold of the rebels lay deep among the Brozzians, buried in granite caverns. The factories and shops were there, turning out warships as fast as they could be built. Women and children labored in munition shops willingly for their own freedom.

Communications in code with the rebel fleet gave Crosse the benefit of their scouting observations. The position of each of the governor's warships was known and plotted on a chart. Professor Oliphant pointed out that the Earth ships were bunched on the side facing Earth.

He advised Crosse to radio his own men to stage a feint attack at that point as if to open a hole for the flagship. The governor would immediately order all his ships to bolster the defenses there, and Crosse could circle the planet and come in from the opposite hemisphere.

The plan worked perfectly, and Crosse made his landfall over the desert of Thara with only a single squadron to see him safely through. Before the nervous governor realized what had happened, the spaceship was in its hangar at the Brozzian stronghold.

The rebel commanders of the fortress welcomed their leader enthusiastically. A council was called immediately. All of the general staff not on actual combat duty attended.

They met in a severely plain room. Crosse and his officers wore no uniform but the jumper suit universally worn by Martian colonists. As he seated himself Professor Oliphant recalled that a similar convention of the Ninth Diktor's generals would have been a gaudy display of gold braid.

"Fellow rebels," Crosse began, "our mission to Earth has been a success. We have brought back with us both Tragg's diary and Pericles Oliphant. In the bargain, we have a valuable hostage in the person of Blake, head of the secret police.

"We have been warned that lack of materials and financial resources would doom our fight for freedom. But if we can retrieve Tragg's treasure from Sirius, we shall have precious catalysts needed to change our steel supply into metals durable enough for war machines.

"We cannot win without Tragg's treasure, but I guarantee that we will have it. I might add that we will fall heir to all the designs and inventions of Edward Tragg, possibly the most valuable part of the treasure, for Tragg was the greatest of all scientists—"

Here the professor interrupted with a deprecatory cough. Crosse paused and winked solemnly at the assemblage. "—up to the time of Pericles Lore."

The professor looked pleased, and Crosse continued.

"For the past months, since Zember brought us those documents that inspired our search we have had only one end in view—to secure that treasure for our own purposes.

"Without it we cannot hope to keep the people of Mars behind us. Dread of the Stapo is stamped too deeply into their blood for them to fight in a hopeless cause."

Lance Crosse's eyes glowed as he spoke of the hardships and dangers confronting their cause, and warned them not to belittle the obstacles, but to glance ahead and see the shining victory waiting.

"I tell you we must devote all our energies to the task of finding Tragg's treasure. The people of Mars must know we lead them wisely. Give Professor Oliphant your wholehearted cooperation. Henceforth he is to be complete master of our laboratories."

That little man rose beside Crosse, scratching at the back of his neck.

"I've learned much since I met Lance Crosse," he said quietly. "I learned that a life in a laboratory is a life wasted unless the ultimate end of such work is to the good of mankind.

"No achievements of mine could have benefited my fellowmen under such a rule as that of the Ninth Diktor. Therefore, I suggest," he paused and stared amiably about—"that Zember assemble his engineers now, and we all get to work."

A cheer rose from the assembled warriors. Crosse dismissed the council hurriedly and went off with some of his officers, including Zember, to clear a hangar for the construction of the new ship. Captain Druff and a few others remained behind with the professor. Druff cast a worried glance at the professor.

"Do you want to tell me something, Druff?" the professor asked.

"Well, sir," Druff began hesitantly. "It's Zember. He's been with us only half a year and his record before that was none too

good. Some say his father was a native Martian—one of the last of that race of true Martians. They had no sort of character or will power to speak of."

"Do you want me to keep an eye on Zember?" the professor interrupted shrewdly.

"Right!" Druff grinned. "Zember has some sort of influence over Crosse. We're all for Crosse, but we don't like Zember."

The professor agreed to keep his eyes open, but Druff's words set his mind to work. Surely Crosse would never allow a man of inferior quality to gain so high a position in the rebel forces if he were not sure of him!

Lance Crosse, meanwhile, got the work started in the clearing of the hangar. Zember went to get his drafting instruments, while the rebel chief returned to get Professor Oliphant. His path lay through the dim, hewn corridors from which opened the social rooms and living quarters of the rebels.

Blake, the Stapo chief, had been confined in one of those rooms for lack of a cell. He was shackled to the wall, and entrance to the room was forbidden to all but a specially nominated jailer. But, as Crosse hurried past, he heard the sound of voices within the room. Surprised, he stopped and listened. Someone was talking to Blake.

STRAINING his ears, Crosse tried to identify the voice, but he could not. Then Blake's rumbling bass came clearly.

"But I offer you complete amnesty and more wealth than most Martians see in a lifetime! I warn you, do not refuse what I ask!"

The other replied briefly in words that Crosse could not hear. Then the door to the room swung open. Crosse just had time to flatten himself against the rough wall to avoid being seen by the man who came out. It was Peter Zember.

Crosse waited until Zember was out of sight before he resumed his walk in search of Professor Oliphant. He found the old man still with Druff and took him back to the hangar. Zember had returned and was directing the workmen. Overhead cranes were bringing materials from the ware-rooms and depositing them in convenient depots. The professor glanced at the busy scene and then inspected the little office set aside for his use.

"Crosse," he said. "I'd like to have a talk with you before we start work. Is Zember

to work with me?"

"Of course," Crosse replied quickly, not meeting the professor's eyes.

"How much do you trust Zember?" the professor asked candidly.

Crosse met the older man's eyes fully.

"I trust him—as much as I trust any man," he replied quietly.

"Good! Call him in while I read a lecture to the two of you."

When Zember entered the cubicle with Crosse, the professor was packing his stubby pipe.

"During the last days of the flight from Earth," he began, "after the transcription of the diary was completed, I went over Tragg's notes and compared them with my own. I am now fully convinced that he actually made the trip to Sirius and returned. Tragg not only discovered basic energy, but he put it to work."

"This basic energy you speak of," Crosse interrupted. "Precisely what is it?"

"I'm glad you asked that, Crosse," said the professor. "I was just about to explain it anyway. Basic energy may well put an end to all scientific investigation, for the simple reason that it is the end."

"I discovered it in the way many planets have been discovered—because of the mathematical necessity for its existence. Life, I told myself, is basically conflict—forces working against one another, creating frictions, heat, motion, power, light—and life."

"What are the forces concerned?" Zember asked.

"When you strike an archaic match, the match head is in conflict with the abrasive. The material of the match itself is unstable. Yet it might as well be made of lead if no abrasive were to provide the necessary friction.

"There are in existence a bewildering number of millions of 'matches' that constantly strike the flame of existence. Let us say that I, because I am alive, am a 'match.' On what am I being struck to produce this life?"

"Of what am I composed? Atoms. Atoms, in turn, consist of protons and electrons. And what are protons and electrons? Energy, gentlemen! There's our clue. Nothing exists but energy! Now we have dealt with the material of the 'match.'

"What of the abrasive on which the match must be struck? If there were nothing beyond the electron and the proton, those two basic units would be lifeless. Space exists between the integral parts of the atom in an

unexplained way. That space, I believe, is filled with the greatest, most fundamental life force—basic energy.

"Basic energy is inert energy. It is an endless sea of force too stupendously powerful to be comprehended by the intellect of man. But basic energy is the abrasive material that acts upon the atom to give it its life."

"Excuse me, professor," Crosse said impatiently. "I warned you that I was no scientific wizard. It's Tragg's treasure I want. Tell us how this basic energy will help us get it!"

PROFESSOR OLIPHANT smiled as he relit his pipe.

"That's a question your grandfather asked himself. Where can I bury my treasure so no meddling fool will ever find it? Another star would be best, but how to get there? He had just discovered basic energy, and it occurred to him that if he could only harness its incalculable flow, he could cross outer space to any star system he selected.

"Tragg's problem in his original flight to Sirius, was to create some sort of alliance between the spaceship and that river of basic energy. He found it by overcharging the outer hull of his ship with as intense a potential of energy as he could build with his atomic generators.

"This broke down the atomic structure and reduced it to inertia—a kind of atomic ash—which then was washed along on whatever flow of basic energy happened to be passing along at the moment the power screen was sealed about the ship."

"How did he know he was headed for Sirius?" Zember interrupted. "Suppose his ship was carried by another flow to some other star?"

"A pertinent question, Mr. Zember, and a difficult one to solve. Tragg's genius enabled him to construct a coupling instrument that would select the proper impulse of basic energy. You see, the flow of basic energy through Mars at this moment is in all possible three-dimensional directions.

"Obviously, the coupler anticipated the flow, because basic energy travels at such an incredible rate that if the coupler threw in the power screen as the correct pulsation was passing by, the mere mechanics of the operation would seal the ship's screen after the flow had gone by and another had taken its place."

Lance Crosse, who had been listening with mixed admiration, incredulity and impatience, leaped to his feet.

"What you're telling us is amazing, but Zember and I still want to know—can you build us a ship that will make the trip to Sirius?"

"Yes, Crosse," the professor replied promptly. "As a matter of fact, I can do better than that. Give me a standard spaceship, and I'll adapt it for the job."

Crosse's face lit up.

"Perfect! That means precious days will be saved. How soon will it be ready?"

"We'll give you action, Crosse, but you've got to give us time. Shall we go to work, Zember?"

The lanky Martian rose quickly, starting for the door. He had not taken two steps, however, before he staggered and fell. Crosse leaped to his side and lifted him into a chair.

"What's the matter?" Professor Oliphant cried, alarmed at the sudden collapse.

"He gets these spells. I thought he was over them for good. This is the first in six months. Don't let anyone in. No one must know of this."

"I'm afraid I don't understand," the professor said.

"Never mind," Crosse muttered. "It's a strange affliction, but the others wouldn't understand. They don't like Zember."

CHAPTER VI

Treason!

PROFESSOR OLIPHANT knelt beside Crosse. The young man was rubbing Zember's wrists and temples. Several minutes passed before the man opened his eyes. The professor almost cried out in alarm, for the eyes were not those of the man who had just been with them. They were paler, tinged with yellow. Half-lowered lids gave them a strange oblique, crafty appearance.

Zember muttered something under his breath and struggled to his feet.

"Feel all right, Peter?" Crosse asked anxiously. Professor Oliphant noted a touch of despair in the young man's voice.

Zember stared at his leader vacantly, as if he had never seen him before. But the voice that issued from his lips was still Zember's voice.

"Must have tripped on something. Sorry, Lance." He swayed a moment, then lunged out of the office.

"Professor Oliphant," said Crosse, "I know you would like to ask questions about Zember, but I can't answer them for you. Believe me, when I say that the situation is best kept private between Zember and myself."

"My job is to get you to Sirius, not to ask questions," the professor replied calmly. "Do you trust Zember?"

"As much as I trust any living man," Crosse repeated.

"Good enough. Let's get to work."

They left the office together. The hangar outside was busy with men and machines, but the work was still in the preparatory stages. Some of the workmen were standing idle.

"Where's Zember?" Crosse asked one of them. The workman shrugged.

"He came out of the office a few minutes ago and went on across the hangar."

Crosse bit his lip.

"Professor Oliphant," he said hastily, "have these men bring out warship JJ-Three. It'll be best for your purposes. I'll be back shortly."

Crosse left the hangar at a swift stride. He hurried through the testing laboratories and bolt gun arsenals, across a slim causeway that hung between two jagged mountains and plunged into the maze of living quarters.

From the main corridor, others branched off, and Crosse took the first of these. He found himself facing the block of rooms where Blake was kept. The door to Blake's room stood ajar.

Yanking the door wide, he saw the room was empty. With a savage curse, he entered. The shackles that had confined Blake hung empty from the wall. The bed was neatly made, but a chair lay on its side.

The single word "escaped!" exploded from his lips. Then he turned to give the alarm from the wall transmitter, but a sudden roar of pain and blackness descended upon his head. Blinded by the crushing blow, he staggered and fell to his knees.

A lesser man than he might have been felled, but it was no weakling the Martian people had chosen as their leader. His brain reeling and throbbing, he forced himself to his feet just in time to see Blake step out from behind the door, a shattered chair in his hands.

"The traitor does not like the strong hand of the Stapo!" Blake sneered.

Dimly, through the bloody haze that clouded his vision, Crosse saw the burly

Stapo man come at him. Behind the Earthman, he saw the pale oval of Nancy Oliphant's face, her eyes wide with horror, her lips parted.

"This will teach you to utter treacherous speeches and to incite rebellion against the Diktor!" Blake hissed.

He struck Crosse a crushing blow on the side of the head.

Crosse reeled back, grasping at the table for support, in no condition to defend himself.

Blake came at him again.

Faintly Crosse heard the girl scream, but Blake struck him full in the face with a heavy right fist, and the rebel leader knew no more.

A dawn of pain and gray light brought him consciousness once again. Stifling a groan, he pushed himself up from the floor and leaned against the wall, holding his battered head in both hands. Discordant noises thundered through his brain.

A thin, high wail persisted even after the other noises subsided. Vaguely he recognized it as the alarm siren. Breathing deeply, he forced himself out of the room and into the corridor. Beyond, in the main corridor, many Martians were running past. An amplifier was droning a repetitious message.

"The prisoner Blake has escaped in a fast airship. Two guards have been killed and one seriously wounded. Our warships at the front have been notified. Pursuit is in progress, but it is feared that Blake will be able to reach Xanadu. Blake was in the air fully ten minutes before the injured guard could sound the alarm."

The announcement drove the confusion from Crosse's brain. With a shake of his head, he joined the thronging rebels, made his way toward the observation balconies. Ascending in a private elevator to the topmost of the balconies, he found Captain Druff and his other officers.

"Crosse!" Druff shouted. "Where have you been? Blake has escaped!"

"I know that!" Crosse snapped. "He almost did for me before he left."

"You were there? Who let him out of his irons?"

Crosse hesitated, and Druff's face darkened.

"Zember!" he cried. "Zember did it!"

A growl rose from the other officers, but at that moment Professor Oliphant's voice was heard from the elevators.

"Where is Lance Crosse?"

"Here, professor," the young man called.

THE old man appeared on the balcony dragging his daughter behind him. Nancy's face was scarlet with rage as she fought to free herself. Crosse noted an ugly bruise on her left cheek.

"She let Blake go!" the professor shouted, beside himself with indignation. "My own daughter! She came to me just now, whimpering that she had done something dreadful. A moment later the announcement of Blake's escape came through. To think that I sired this—this"

"Father, I didn't—" the girl cried. Tears streamed down her cheeks. "I had nothing to do with it. I went to his room and he was already free!"

"Likely story!" the professor snorted. "When will you learn that this is not a game of hide-and-seek, but war! People will die and suffer torture for what you've done today!"

"Father, believe me!" the girl sobbed. "Ask Mr. Crosse—he was there!"

She turned imploringly to Lance Crosse, but the words died on her lips. He was staring at her coldly, offering no sympathy.

"Yes, I was there," he admitted grimly, fingering his jaw. "I saw you with Blake!"

The girl shrank from him. Then she glanced about at the harsh accusing faces of the Martian fighting men. The tears stopped flowing, and she straightened up defiantly.

"Very well!" she cried, her voice trembling. "Believe whatever you like! I have done my last act of kindness for your blessed revolution."

One of the rebels ground his teeth, muttering words that sounded strangely as if they ended with "death!"

"Put that woman under arrest," Crosse ordered quietly. "But do not harm her. Anyone who hurts her must answer to me."

"Don't be so blamed noble, Crosse!" the professor snapped. "Throw her in a dungeon—a damp, nasty one. Feed her bread and water."

These ridiculous words dissolved the tension. Captain Druff laughed shortly and spanked his thigh. Blake was gone, and there was no use crying over spilt milk.

"Lance Crosse!" the amplifiers blared. "Blake has reached Xanadu. He wants to send you a message. Shall I put him on this speaker system?"

Crosse lifted a wall transmitter from its hook and barked an order in the affirmative. Moments later, Blake's familiar voice emerged from the amplifier.

"Lance Crosse! I have taken personal command of the Martian Colonial government. All revolution on this planet will be stamped out ruthlessly and completely.

"If you surrender now, your people will be permitted to resume their normal lives. You and your leaders, of course, will be executed. If you insist on fighting, every man, woman and child will be condemned to death.

"For the good of Mars, I call upon you to give up your struggle and stop this flow of precious blood. Powerful warships from Earth are already on their way to reinforce the Colonial Fleet. Once they have arrived, this offer of amnesty will be revoked. Your fate will be sealed."

No sooner had the radio gone dead than Captain Druff whirled and shook his fist toward the eastern horizon, beyond which lay Xanadu.

"Fine words, Blake!" he shouted derisively. "But it takes more than words to scare us, and we don't like the smell of your proposals."

Crosse did not join in the confident roar of laughter that followed these words.

"Don't underestimate Blake," he warned. "He's a powerful enemy."

"But, Crosse," one officer cried. "It will be three weeks before those reinforcements can arrive!"

"And in that time," Professor Oliphant cried, "we can go to Sirius and return. I'll have the ship ready in a fortnight."

"A fortnight?" Crosse asked. "But that will only leave one more week. How long will it take to reach Sirius?"

"It took Tragg six hours," was the professor's amazing reply.

Even Captain Druff, who would not have known basic energy from rocket ash, goggled at that. Crosse forgot about his battered head.

"In that case," he grinned, "Blake is out of luck. We'll have the treasure back on Mars before his reinforcements arrive."

IN the days that followed Blake's escape, the government radio at Xanadu poured out a continuous stream of threats against the rebels. Blake took command of the fleet and threw it recklessly against the rebels in an effort to break through before the arrival of reinforcements.

But Lance Crosse and Captain Druff allowed an occasional spearhead to enter, then stiffened and pulverized the attack. The steppe between Xanadu and the Brozzians

was littered with the wreckage of warships.

Professor Oliphant and Zember worked day and night in the hangar underneath the rebel camp. Although he was absorbed in his work, the professor sensed a change in Zember. The man was rabidly curious to know the secret of Tragg's coupler, scarcely left the professor's side lest the work should be finished without his knowing it.

When the JJ-3 was nearly completed, the professor rejected it as unsatisfactory. It had been equipped with the sort of apparatus Edward Tragg had used on his flight to Sirius, yet the professor declared it unsafe.

"Tragg charged the outer hull of his ship with energy," he explained to Crosse. "It was the obvious course to take, yet the chances were one in one hundred that the hull would be destroyed before it could be annealed to the flow of basic energy. We don't dare take that chance."

"Rot!" Crosse retorted angrily. "We can't take any chances! That ship must be ready to leave within the week!"

But the professor insisted obstinately on having his own way, and, rather than risk further delay, Crosse allowed him to take over the flagship they had used in the trip from Earth and convert it with the new equipment. He was well aware of the professor's unreasonable jealousy of Edward Tragg's fame, and he suspected this of having much to do with the change in plans.

However, the professor repaid Crosse by redoubling his efforts. He did most of the work on the new coupler himself and ordered Zember to supervise the changes in the control room of the flagship. Within fifteen days of Blake's escape, the work was completed.

"My power flow from the atomic generators is adapted to flow into the air surrounding the ship and create the shield externally. Then, if that one-hundred-to-one slip-up occurs, the air will suffer and not the ship," the professor explained proudly. "This means we'll have to start within the atmosphere of Mars, but it guarantees our safety."

The rebel workmen were loading supplies into the flagship and stocking the ammunition bays when Captain Druff raced into the subterranean airport in a little fighter airship.

"Crosse!" he roared. "Blake is attacking in force! A strong squadron of heavy warships has already arrived from Earth. They must be something new to have such speed! Blake is throwing them against our fleet, and sooner or later he'll break through!"

Crosse turned to the professor.

"Hear that? How soon can we leave?"

"Now, if you say so," the little man replied.

"Now it is!" Crosse strode to a wall transmitter and ordered the radio coordinator to put him on the air to all Mars.

"Men and women of Mars!" he said "The hour has come! Tergon is throwing his full strength against us. But do not lose heart. Remember that you are a free people. Rise up, Martians! Rise up, everywhere on this beloved planet and strike at those who call themselves your masters.

"We in the Brozzian camp will fight as men never before fought, but we need your assistance. Wherever you are, Martians, strike now! One thing I promise you—victory will be ours!"

Crosse snapped off the transmitter.

"Blake will have his hands full now," he said grimly. "There'll be revolution in Xanadu itself, and he won't dare weaken his garrisons to strike too heavily against this camp. I leave you in charge, Druff. Professor Oliphant and I will go alone. You'll need every man."

He gripped the young captain fiercely by the shoulder.

"Don't surrender, Druff! Hold out until we return!"

"Don't worry." Druff's face was white but he was unafraid. "I'll hold this base until Mars itself blows apart!"

"Coming, professor?" Crosse said.

The old man was already climbing nimbly into the flagship, and Crosse followed. Almost through the port, he was hailed from the far side of the hangar. Two guards ran toward the ship, bringing with them Nancy Oliphant.

"She demands to be taken with you, sir!" one of the guards cried.

"Take her back!" Crosse ordered. "We have no place for a woman."

Nancy Oliphant slipped away from her guards and ran past Crosse before he could stop her. He started to follow her, but stopped and made a despairing gesture with his hands.

Waving a terse farewell to Druff, he swung the heavy port closed and listened for the heavy sigh of the pneumatic seals.

Hurrying to the instrument room, Crosse found the professor working busily over the coupler.

"We're going up, professor," Crosse said, taking his seat. Jamming home the lever that controlled the pre-heaters, he waited for the flaming hydrogen to rush through the

rocket tubes. Then he touched the throttle, and the liquid fuel blast surged after the hydrogen.

The crackling of improper combustion could be heard even in the control room, but as Crosse nosed the ship out of its berth and into a sharp-croched valley, the noise diminished. The flagship's nose lifted, and it shot skyward as full power leaped through its tubes.

The radio receptor signal crackled, and Crosse snapped on the cabin amplifier.

"Be careful, Crosse!" It was Druff's voice. "Blake has broken through our fleet with several heavy ships, and he's making for the camp. We'll have them blasted down before they can do any damage, but don't let them catch you."

Crosse acknowledged receipt of the message and snapped off the radio. Scanning his vision screens anxiously, he spotted three large Earth warships hurtling over the first foothills of the Brozzians with a swarm of rebel craft in pursuit.

"Nearly ready, professor?" he asked over his shoulder.

"Give me another minute, Crosse," the professor begged. "I want to make sure of the synchronization of this coupler. Our generators are already turning over and the power reserve is complete."

CHAPTER VII

Sirius Business

CROSSE returned his attention to the three Earth ships which were now almost directly below him. A savage volley of bolt discharge greeted the squadron, and one of them exploded in full flight. The other two, realizing how foolhardy their mission was, soared away from the bristling camp. Spotting the lone flagship, they made for it, evidently deciding to make one kill before they ran the gauntlet back to their own lines.

Eyes narrowed, Crosse watched them rise. Their forward turrets were out and ready for action, ugly with the snouts of bolt guns.

"Ready, professor?" he asked tensely?"

"Another second," the professor replied.

The Earth ships were evidently part of the reinforcement fleet that had just arrived from Earth, for they climbed at an unbelievable rate without seeming to burn their hulls.

Long range guns opened up and bolts began to burst close about the Martian flagship. Another moment would put them within volley range. Crosse tightened his grasp on the controls, preparing to maneuver if necessary.

A blinding white flash from behind brought a startled cry to his lips and he whirled in his seat. The professor was just rising from his work over the coupler. A single tiny light set on its top flashed on and off with rhythmic regularity. The professor glanced at Crosse and smiled wearily.

"We're on our way."

Crosse glanced at his vision screens. The Earth ships had disappeared. Mars itself was gone, for the screens were no longer functioning. Their plates were a neutral gray.

A long sigh escaped Crosse's lips as he relaxed his entire body. Locking the now-useless controls, he stepped from the pilot's seat.

"Professor Oliphant—" he began.

The little, bearded man, had slumped back to the floor, half sprawled over his beloved coupler, dead asleep. Crosse grinned. The strain and tension of the past weeks were gone suddenly, leaving him with a strange empty feeling.

He wondered if all adventurers were as casual as the professor. Had they all gone to sleep—those earliest pioneers of space flight? If they were human beings, if they had worked as the professor, they probably did!

Crosse shook his head as he sank into a chair, trying to realize that the ship was a tiny capsule, isolated from the familiar galaxies of stars and planets, rushing madly through outer space in the flow of an unknown force.

He felt his head nod and his eyelids close. It was dark and peaceful in the control room. Vaguely, he was aware that Nancy Oliphant was there, pulling her father into a more comfortable position.

A soft-toned siren moaned through the flagship when six hours of flight were over, and the automatic coupler released its grip on the flow of basic energy. Crosse blinked and sat erect in his chair. Yawning and stretching, he glanced about.

The professor was still asleep, a resistance-warmed blanket tucked in about his frail body. Nancy Oliphant stood by the instrument board, staring fascinatedly at the vision screens. Her lips were slightly parted, and the faint reflected glow from the soft lights touched her features softly.

"What is it?" Crosse asked.

She beckoned him to come and see for himself. In the bow screen, was envisioned a sight no mortal man, with the sole exception of Edward Tragg, had ever before seen. The great star system of the binary blue giant Sirius lay sprawled before them. Dominating the picture was the massive major sun, a ball of blue flame, thrusting its hungry tongues far beyond its own chromosphere. Set against the pearly jet blackness of airless space, it presented so immense an aspect that Crosse almost felt he could comprehend its size and in doing so was himself reduced to hopeless insignificance.

Beyond the blue giant, lay another sun, much smaller. But Crosse bent close to the vision screen and examined it carefully. No, the smaller sun was nearer than the large one, but optical illusion had placed it farther away at first glance. It was a small, dense white body, swinging sturdily around the common center of gravity it made with its giant blue companion.

MORE marvelous than either sun were the far-flung, interlaced planet systems of both. In sweeping circles, the satellites ringed the suns. Crosse counted seven for the small sun and fifteen for the large one, wreathed like necklaces in inky space.

In addition, two circles of geologic dust and fragmentation banded each sun, intersecting at the point nearest both, evidence in ages past of a collision between a planet of one system and a planet of the other. The debris of the titanic collision still drifted in the old orbit, giving the effect of Saturn's rings, and the circles still intersected like two vast celestial cogs.

"It's wonderful!" the girl breathed raptly. "And yet—do you think it heresy to say that it seems quite simple? Beautifully simple!"

Crosse shook his head.

"It's not heresy. Your father has said, and I agree with him, that the great fundamental truths of life are simple. It is only in the petty ramifications of those truths that our complicated problems arise."

"What's this? Quoting me?" The professor shambled up behind them and bent to peer at the vision screens.

"Sirius!" he muttered. It was his only comment. Crosse seated himself in the pilot's chair and charged the main blast tubes with hydrogen. Moments later, the great flagship had swung over on her course.

Although they had traveled the vast distance from Mars in six hours, the compara-

tively short distance yet remained would take two days under the dogged propulsion of liquid fuel rocket power. They had already learned from Tragg's diary that their destination was the fourth planet of Sirius' small binary companion.

"Conditions there are much like those on Earth in the early stages of its development," the professor said. "Tragg describes the planet fully."

"How about the treasure?" Crosse asked.

"It's on high ground. Tragg says there is only one range of mountains on the entire sphere. He marked the particular peak under which he cached his treasure with a small reflecting disc. He says that any ship cruising over this high land will catch a reflection from this disc without difficulty."

Crosse chafed at the loss of two precious days, for he could not help but think of the life-and-death battle back on Mars. But the time passed more quickly than he had expected, and it was less than forty-eight hours when he checked the last of their acceleration and penetrated the planet's atmosphere.

The planet on which Tragg left his booty was wreathed in clouds that completely blanketed its surface. They dived through to five thousand feet. Beneath this, the atmosphere was not clear.

It was muggy and steamy, and the occupants of the spaceship could barely distinguish the surface features.

"One might almost be gazing upon Earth during its Devonian or Pennsylvanian era," the professor mused. "Although, of course the atmosphere of Earth was not so misty then. Notice how the land and sea merge. It's a world of bog and water-logged, fern-like forests growing from the mud."

"Do you suppose anything lives there, daddy?" Nancy asked, peering through the large glass port that supplanted the vision screens when the ship was not in space.

"There undoubtedly is life, my dear," the professor replied, his face lit with the prospect of examining this strange new world. "Probably it takes the form of vegetation with some basic animal types just starting."

"Oh," Nancy remarked in disappointment. "I thought there might be savages down there, and we'd have to fight them for the treasure."

Crosse snorted.

"This is hardly the place or time to exercise your sense of humor," he observed dryly. "The citizens of Mars live only in the hope that we will return successful, and you prattle about 'savages.'"

"Don't be so stuffy, Mr. Crosse," Nancy replied. "I should hate to live in a world you ruled! Must you always be so dull and serious?"

"Good Lord!" the professor snapped. "Here we are hovering over a new world, and you two quarrel about non-essentials. Cruise about, Crosse, and see if you can't pick up that reflecting disc."

Hours later they were still in the air. The horrible suspicion that perhaps Tragg's diary was a hoax after all began to enter their minds, when suddenly Nancy screamed and seized her father's arm excitedly.

"Daddy! Look!" Her slim arm was extended to point out a low range of hump-backed peaks rising through the mists. The high land lay dead ahead, and Crosse was forced to throw on full braking power and swerve from his course to avoid a collision.

It was much brighter over the mountains, for the rising currents of air tended to dispel the thick blanket of clouds. In one place, pure sunlight poured through a break and touched the lush green landscape like a magic wand. The professor sighed with relief.

"I couldn't understand how a reflecting disc could attract our attention in such diffused light," he said. "Tragg picked the one place where such a device would work."

"I see it, father! I see it!" Nancy squealed, all but hopping up and down with delight. "Over there on that last mountain? Something glittered!"

Crosse brought the spaceship around and lowered it gently toward the peak Nancy indicated.

"Got it!" he agreed as a glint caught his eye.

The sides of the hill sloped shallowly, were level in many places. Crosse selected a likely spot for his landing and threw on a parking beam. Gradually advancing the beam's power until it supported the weight of the ship, he played it across the flat spot.

"Seems solid enough," he remarked.

After nosing about like a cat in an overstuffed armchair, the giant ship settled down. It sank a little as its weight packed the light foliage, then was still.

"Let's go!" Crosse said. "We have no time to waste."

"Wait!" the professor cried, as the young man hurried back through the ship toward the main port. "We don't know what the atmosphere is like."

Crosse barked an impatient word that was not meant for the ears of young ladies. He

was conscious of Nancy's amused eyes on him as he waited for the professor to make his analysis.

"All right," the little man pronounced at last. "There is sufficient oxygen."

Crosse released the pneumatic seals, and the port opened with a sigh.

"Watch your step," he warned. "The gravitational pull may be—"

NOT valuing his own advice, he leaped to the ground. The bound carried him twenty feet from the spaceship and landed him headfirst in the loose mud. When he picked himself up, the sound of Nancy's laughter filled his ears.

Something hit him on the side of the head and he was showered with mud. Angrily, he started back for the ship. Nancy was bending to pick up another handful of the snow-like earth to throw at him.

"Confound it, professor!" he growled. "Do something with that girl!"

"Boo!" she cried fearlessly and threw another dripping mudball at him.

He ducked the missile and before she could arm herself again, he had her arms in a tight grasp.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Crosse!" she laughed, brown hair tumbled over her eyes. "I just couldn't resist it. You were so vulnerable!"

The intolerant anger that was blazing in the young man's eyes died slowly. Something like a smile softened the stern set of his lips as he let the girl go.

"Your father should have spanked the living daylights out of you at least once a day while you were growing up," he told her. "You might have been a nice girl."

"MIGHT have been! I like that!" She brushed her hair back with the crook of her arm so as not to muddy it with her hands.

The professor, who had paid no attention to them, rose from his inspection of the soil.

"Most interesting!" he murmured. "It does not rain here because the heavy dews supply all the moisture needed, and there is practically no hydraulic erosion. In the lowlands, sedimentary rock is probably forming, but here—"

"Let it form," Crosse protested. "We have work to do, professor."

"Quite!" the old man agreed. "Nancy, you'd better put some boots on if you're going to play in that mud." This last observation was made so innocently that both Crosse and the girl burst into laughter.

"Father!" she cried, trying to sound annoyed. "I'm a grown woman! I don't play

in the mud."

But Crosse's impatience prevented any further discussion, and he and the professor trudged off to the top of the peak, armed with bolt guns and axes and booted to the hips.

Several hours passed before they returned. They stayed only long enough to swallow the food Nancy had ready for them before they set out again. The soft, pearly twilight of the strange planet was just beginning to mark the end of day when they returned a second time.

"We've found it!" Crosse told the girl exultantly. "Tragg's treasure! It's cached on the other side of the mountain. The markings he left have disappeared, that's why it took us so long. It's sealed against the weather with masonry, and we'll have to blast our way in tomorrow."

When day returned, Crosse and the professor set out again, carrying heavy blasting equipment. Left to herself, Nancy decided to walk down the mountain slope toward the misty flat lands that spread over the rest of the globe.

When Crosse and the professor reached the cairn, they discovered they had forgotten the cables for the bolt equipment. Crosse cursed his own stupidity, and immediately started back to the spaceship. He had just reached it and was about to climb through the port when he heard a faint scream. He paused, unwilling to interrupt his work, yet curious.

"Nancy!" he called. "Come out here."

There was no reply. A quick inspection of the ship showed Nancy was gone, and he found her deep, fresh tracks leading down the slope. Forgetting the cables he hurried after her, yanking out his bolt gun as he went.

The clarity of the air grew less and less as he pressed on, but his pace quickened as he heard another scream. The girl called to him, and the terror in her voice was unmistakable.

"Nancy!" he roared, glaring fiercely through the veil of mist. "Where are you?"

"Lance!" her voice came to him like a wail. "Hurry!"

The sound served to give him his direction, and he pushed through the tall rubbery grasses that now grew waist-high in lush profusion. Without warning, he broke suddenly upon a vast bog that stretched unbroken into the reaches of the mist. It was a sea of loose, semi-liquid mud, being neither land nor water to a decisive degree.

A hundred feet away, Nancy Oliphant floundered wildly, waving her arms in an effort to keep her balance as she struggled toward the solid bank on which Crosse stood. She turned an agonized face toward him.

"Lance!" she sobbed. "Hurry."

He stood there, perplexed, for the girl seemed to be in no danger. Then a huge lump of the muck boiled up close at her heels. A vast, shapeless creature threw itself at her, and a slit opened in its head, baring a ghastly white mouth with double rows of yellow fangs.

The powerful snap of the jaws came dangerously close to the girl's body. Then, writhing and wriggling with its loathsome coating of mud, the thing fell back again. Two more rose up, and still others behind them stirred the bog into activity.

CHAPTER VIII

Trailed

AT FIRST sight of the mud monster, Lance Crosse leaped into the bog and waded toward the terrified girl.

"Don't let them catch you, Nancy!" he called, trying to keep his voice calm. "I'll be with you in a moment!"

But the foremost of the mud beasts erupted from its slime again, and hideous jaws were bared by the peeling back of thick, mud-coated lips. Nancy half turned and saw the thing. Hypnotised with fright she stood still, trembling throughout her entire body.

The mud thing snapped at one of her outstretched arms, and it was instinct alone that brought her out of the lethargy. The yellow teeth raked her smooth flesh before she could turn. Her scream of pure terror ate at Crosse's heart like a hot iron.

The muck clung to his powerful legs as he drove through it. He panted with the exertion of pulling his feet out of the sucking holes at each step.

The girl stumbled suddenly and fell forward into the ooze. Her arms drove into it up to the armpits.

"Lance!" she moaned faintly. Her eyes were turned up to him, fastened upon him as her last hope.

The mud beast lifted its shapeless bulk once more. White eyes flicked open in a baleful direct gaze. Struggling through the mud, it neared the girl, its hide crawling in

a loose mobile way, its mouth wide open to reveal the dead white tissue within.

Even as he yanked his bolt gun out of its holster, Crosse heard the cry. So high-pitched was the tone that it seemed almost as if he were remembering it or conceiving it in his own brain. It was intermittent in a curious way, as if he were hearing only scattered parts of the noise. Evidently the vocal range of the mud beasts started in at the highest pitched tone human ears could hear and continued on up in an inaudible scale.

Crosse fired over Nancy's head and caught the creature squarely in the mouth with a heavy bolt. The explosion blew a large part of the thing's head off, and a rich yellow blood poured out. Silently the bulk of the maimed body slid beneath the turgid mud and disappeared.

"Lance!" Nancy sobbed, "Lance!" and grasped his knees.

He lifted her in a swift powerful motion of his left arm and held her close against him. Two more beasts lumped from the mud, gnashing their fangs and uttering their faint whistling cries. Crosse fired rapidly, and the mud fairly boiled with the death struggle of the creatures.

There were more beyond. Hundreds of them bobbed in the mud, gathering from the outer parts of the bog where the fog was thickest. It was hopeless to think of killing all of them. Crosse glanced over his shoulder and saw that none of them had as yet lumbered between him and the solid ground.

Picking up the girl and slinging her over his left shoulder, he wrenched his feet loose from the grasp of the mud and struggled back the way he had come. Behind him he could hear the barely audible cries of the beasts. They could wallow through the bog as fast as he could.

Sweat stood out on his forehead in glistening beads by the time he reached the bank and struggled up into the tall rubbery grasses. Placing the girl carefully down, he turned and directed his bolt gun at the creatures.

The more agile of them were already at the edge of the bog, leaping at the bank and snarling. Their bodies were vast sacks of muscles. In general shape, they resembled the walrus of Earth, although their blunt heads were much larger and their mouths vast caverns of destruction.

Crosse fired slowly and deliberately, picking off as many of the nearest beasts as he was able. But the multitude that remained continued doggedly to creep over the sub-

merged hulks of those who had gone before and died and sought to reach the bank.

One managed to cast itself up out of the bog. Crosse saw that it had four pairs of fleshy flippers on the underpart of its body and a powerful tail. Awkwardly, it lumbered toward him, mouth agape, but its progress on hard land was slow. Crosse shot it quickly.

But four others had managed to climb the bank. Seeing that it was hopeless to think of discouraging them, Crosse knelt and picked up the unconscious girl. Holstering his gun, he trotted through the rubbery grasses, following the trail he had made from the spaceship.

A hundred yards beyond, the mist began to thin, and he could see the outline of the peak clearly. He paused then and laid the girl down once more. She stirred while he was massaging her wrists and opened her eyes. For a while she lay quiet, staring at him, then a shudder passed through her lithe young body.

"Oh, Lance!" she moaned. "T-They were horrible!"

SHE GRASPED one of his hands and pressed it to her lips in a sudden grateful gesture. A slow warmth stole through his body with an intangible thrill to it. Lance Crosse, who had never known anything but bitterness and war and his own fiery beliefs, felt a quick surge of some new emotion.

He wanted to lift the girl in his arms and hold her cool youthfulness close to him in a crushing embrace. But all he did was pat her cheek in an awkward embarrassed way. She glanced up quickly, smiling through her tears. Witnessing that smile, he forgot the mud beasts lumbering through the grasses in pursuit.

"I'm—I'm such a nuisance, aren't I?" she whispered.

"No!" Crosse declared, and the explosive-ness with which he said it surprised even himself. He flushed a deep red, thinking that she would make fun of him. Painfully, he said, "Lila," I—

"Don't call me Lila," she interrupted instantly. "Nancy is the name my mother gave me, and I like it better than my government tag."

Crosse looked confused.

"You told me once that if I ever had occasion to address you, I should call you Lila—your symbol."

She made a wry face.

"Don't remind me of the things I once

said, Lance. I've behaved abominably! But do you know you saved my life? Those ugly mud beasts meant to harm me!"

"Well," Crosse said hesitantly, releasing her and moving away slightly. "You saved my life once, so now we're even."

The girl's eyes flew wide with astonishment.

"I saved your life? When?"

"When Blake escaped from the Brozzian camp and knocked me out. I don't believe anything in the world would have kept Blake from killing me after he knocked me unconscious if someone hadn't stopped him—and you were the only one there."

"You knew then!" she breathed. "You knew I didn't help Blake escape."

"Yes. Zember freed Blake. But I had to keep that a secret from Druff and the others or they would have torn Zember apart. Now that it's over, I can't think of any way to make amends to you. But I do want to thank you for what you did—and apologize for what I did."

She smiled shyly.

"That's all right, Lance. I don't mind now that I know you didn't really think it was I. Blake was so ugly! I went to his room because he sent for me. He wanted me to help him get away, but Zember came along just then and freed him.

"After Blake knocked you down, he wanted to kick you to death, but I stopped him. He called me horrible names and struck me on the face. That was when I became a rebel!" Her brow wrinkled in puzzlement. "Why should you want to protect Zember if he betrayed you?"

Crosse's face went blank.

"Let's go back to the spaceship," he said roughly, and she knew the subject was dropped.

They climbed out of the mist until they could make out their path. Crosse spotted the ship and took Nancy by the arm to lead her toward it, but she stopped and pointed.

"Lance!" she screamed. "Look!"

Almost at the same moment, he saw it for himself—another spaceship hovering over the mountains in the clear bright air. A lonely shaft of sunlight caught its metal hull and flashed a reflection into their eyes as they stared at it.

"Impossible!" Crosse breathed. "That's JJ-3!"

A horrible fear assailed him.

"Perhaps Blake defeated my people! Perhaps that's Druff come to tell us about it."

Before either of them could take a step, the hovering spaceship darted down to the grounded ship. Destructive rays flashed from its belly, and the air rocked with the detonation of bolt discharges. A full broadside ripped into the undefended flagship, encasing it in a livid glare of destruction. In a moment it was over. The attacker withdrew and circled for a landing.

Crosse stared at the smoking ruin of his ship. The whole forward section had fused into a molten mass. His shoulders sagged.

Nancy's eyes were clouded with fear, but she knelt beside the rebel and put her arms about him.

"Don't, Lance!" she whispered. She was frightened by the slackness of his young powerful body.

"Marooned!" he said tonelessly. "Marooned on this cursed place. Druff and the others will perish."

The JJ-3 had thrown on its parking beam and come to rest beside its victim. A port opened in its side and men leaped out.

"Lance!" Nancy cried. "It's Blake and Zember!"

CROSSE came to his feet with a bound. His eyes were blazing with uncontrollable wrath. Uttering a low growl that might have come from the throat of a hunting hound, he began to run up the slope toward the two ships, unlimbering his bolt gun as he went. Nancy called after him frantically, but he paid no attention to her.

The earthmen saw him coming, and Blake barked swift orders. They ran to intercept him, fumbling with their guns, and Crosse's bolt gun cracked in swift, successive shots. Three of the men tumbled to the ground.

Before they could open fire, Crosse was among them. His magnificent strength was unleashed by his rage, and he tore through them and raced for Blake. The Stapo chief reached for his gun, but Zember, who stood beside him, prevented him from firing.

Nancy screamed and buried her face in her hands. A Stapo man fired a bolt at Crosse. It did not hit him, but the concussion of its explosion knocked him flat. Immediately, the Stapo men dived on him.

When they stepped back, Crosse was staggering to his feet, his head bloody and his hands bound behind his back. Nancy felt a leaden weight descend over her heart. Reluctantly, she approached the men.

"Well, Crosse," Blake observed loftily, when the rebel was dragged before him. "I hoped you were in that ship when we blasted

it, but your impetuosity has brought you into my hands just as nicely."

Crosse was silent.

Heedless of the blood that flowed down his cheek from a deep scalp wound, he glared at the Stapo chief and kept his jaw tightly clamped.

"Nothing to say?" Blake sneered. "Good. I like rebels best when they keep their mouths shut. Unfortunately the rebels on Mars can no longer do that. They're all crying for mercy, and you can guess," he added insinuatingly, "that little mercy will be found for them."

"Blake," Crosse grated. "You're a liar! You want me to believe you captured the Brozzian camp, don't you? You want me to believe you got the JJ-3 there, but I know how you got that ship. Zember brought it to you in Xanadu!"

The lanky Martian standing behind Blake turned white. His face was a confusion of mixed emotions. He looked half sly and half apologetic. He did not speak, but his manner indicated that Crosse had hit upon the truth.

"Yes," Blake admitted calmly, "your rebels are still fighting. But when they find you don't return, they'll lay down their arms. And you won't return. You and Professor Oliphant will be abandoned on this planet, and the girl will be taken back to Earth for punishment."

Crosse was not listening. His eyes were on Blake, piercing him with a steady, contemptuous gaze.

"So long as I am alive, Blake, I will live in the hope that I will kill you."

Blake barked a swift command.

"Take these prisoners away."

It was a tribute to Crosse, in a way, that Blake did not question him concerning Tragg's treasure nor the whereabouts of Professor Oliphant. He knew that Crosse would die a thousand deaths before he would tell anything, no matter how unimportant.

Instead, Blake gathered his Stapo police and sent them out in searching parties. But they knew nothing of the reflecting disc and scattered themselves too widely over the country to search effectively. Night began to soften the misty skies, and Blake called his men in.

"We are in no hurry to find the treasure," he told them. "The government of Earth is already rich and powerful. For the Martians, it was a different thing."

A camp was set on the mountain slope, for the men were too cramped in the space-

ship. Shacks of flexible metal were erected over light frameworks and Crosse and Nancy were put in one of these with Stapo guards.

"What can we do, Lance?" Nancy whispered once they were alone. She was trembling and huddled close to him. "They'll find the treasure tomorrow, and they find my father with it."

"I'll find a way," he replied grimly. "Try to get some sleep. We must wait a little longer."

How much of the night passed before Crosse woke with a start he did not know. He lay quiet a moment, eyes wide and alert, trying to sense out the subtle cause of his awakening. Outside the tent the camp seemed to be absolutely silent. The guard was snoring heavily. Yet—there was something . . .

He rolled over on his side and nudged Nancy gently. She woke with a little cry, but his steady, hushed voice reassured her.

"Do you hear anything, Nancy?" he asked tensely.

She strained her ears, trying to analyze the elusive sounds of the night.

"You mean the sleeping guard?" she whispered.

"No! There's something else!" he hissed.

Once more they listened. The sound, whatever it was, was faint. Faint and unbelievably high-pitched. It was a sound that might have been dreamed, a sound that one ought to be hearing but could not.

"Lance!" Nancy cried suddenly in a terrified, hushed voice. "The mud beasts!"

CHAPTER IX

The Mud Beasts

HIS blood went cold within him. So much had happened since the adventure in the bog that he had forgotten the loathsome creatures. What strange unfaltering persistence drove them to pursue their quarry up the grassy slope from the bog?

Were they so starved that they willingly climbed the slope and left their native mists merely for the hope of a meal? A sudden memory picture of the bared white gums and staring black eyes assailed his brain, and he shuddered in spite of himself.

"Lance, my darling!" Nancy was sobbing. "What can we do?"

"Whatever we do," he whispered in reply, "we must be clever. These mud beasts may give us our chance to get away."

"But all those Stapo men out there!"

"The Stapo wasn't too solicitous of us! We can't afford to risk our own safety merely to warn them."

There was a gasping sound outside their tent that froze their blood. It sounded like the noise a man might make if he woke from his sleep into a living nightmare. It ended with a gargled, inhuman sob. Then they heard another sound—one that brought cold perspiration to their bodies. An animal crunching noise, it was like a soundless thing crunching the bones of its fallen adversary.

"The mud beasts got one of the guards!" Lance whispered.

IN a sudden titanic effort, Crosse brought the strength of his great biceps to bear against his bonds. Gritting his teeth against the pain, he strove to break the slim, steel wire, but he was forced to give it up. Warm blood poured over his wrists.

They heard a dragging, muffled noise outside their tent, and they knew one of the mud beasts was coming. It lumbered against the canvas and paused a moment, close beside the sleeping guard. They could almost see it rising on its flippers and launch its deadening weight upon the Stapo man.

They heard the dull thud of the two bodies meeting. The guard uttered a startled squawk, but great savage jaws closed upon his face and bit deep, wrenching the whole front of his skull off.

Other mud beasts crawled up and joined the first. The sickening sounds of the feasting made Nancy faint. She rolled close to Lance and pressed against him to seek protection. Neither said a word, for the fear was in both their hearts that the mud beasts would enter the tent when they had finished devouring the guard.

They waited until their muscles ached with the tension of waiting, praying that one of the guards might wake up and see what was happening. But the beasts were too silent.

The fly of the tent stirred. It was pitch dark inside, but the slight motion revealed the pearly grey of the night outside. Nancy drew her breath in a quick little cry.

"Steady!" Crosse breathed, wishing only that his hands were freed.

The fly was brushed aside. The bulk of a mud beast bunched against the gray sky. It waddled toward them.

Then Nancy screamed. The terror made her voice loud and piercing. She screamed again and again, madly seeking relief for her taut, singing nerves.

"Lance! Lance!" she shrieked. "Don't let them hurt me!"

The mud beast snorted, and they could hear its breathing and its thin wail of a cry. Part of it brushed against his foot. Something snapped inside his brain. Nancy's genuine terror and her plea to him was more than he could bear. Raging like an animal run amuck, he wrenched at his bonds.

He could no longer feel the pain of the torn flesh. Using the leverage of his entire arm, he pried at his wrists. The steel snapped with a clear twang. He bent double and tore at the bindings on his ankles. The slip catch gave instantly, and he was free.

Nancy was still screaming, wriggling to get away from the hideous creature that occupied the darkness with them. Outside, lights were snapping on, and men were shouting. But Crosse did not hear them. Unarmed as he was, he threw himself on the mud beast.

For a brief moment he was sick at what his fingers touched. The hide of the beast was like the bog itself, loose and slimy. It crawled on the beast in a repulsive fashion, wrinkling into deep furrows and then smoothing out. His hands were caught in one of these wrinkles, but he yanked them free and sought the thing's head.

It turned on him ponderously and he felt its warm breath as it snapped at him. It had no brain, merely an instinct to kill and devour. He could not grasp it because the skin crawled beneath his touch. There was no neck. As he pounded it madly, it rose beneath him in an upheaval like a bucking Earth horse, and he fell off its back.

"It's touching me!" Nancy cried.

Desperately, Crosse pulled the girl from under the beast and pushed her out of harm's way. Then he grasped the thing's broad tail and heaved it up over his head. For a moment the beast struggled aimlessly. Then the tail lashed a single powerful blow and threw Crosse sprawling to one side.

"Don't fight it, Lance!" the girl sobbed. "It will kill you!"

But Crosse had no ear for her words. He dived at the mud beast and sank his powerful fingers deep into its folded skin, searching for some vulnerable point. The hide was like three-inch leather and everywhere of the same thickness. Groping about the base of its hemispherical head, his fingers suddenly

sank into a crevice. The mud beast quivered and lay still.

Triumphantly, Crosse thrust his whole arm into what seemed a gill slit. He grasped with his strong fingers what he found there and pulled mightily. It ripped loose and he dragged it through the gill slit. A foul stench broke through the tent, and the mud beast gave a powerful twist that threw Crosse flat on his back, still grasping the vital organ he had wrenched out.

In the throes of an agonized death, the thing flapped and grovelled about the tent. Crosse paid no more attention to it. Wiping his hands, he crept over to where Nancy lay.

"Are you all right, Lance?" she whimpered.

He took her in his arms, bound as she was, and pressed her close to him as he had wanted to do in the bog. Then he released her and unsnapped the steel lashings from her wrists and ankles.

"Come!" he said.

THEY stepped outside the tent, but a glare of floodlights struck them. Crosse leaped back behind the tent fly, pulling the girl with him. As soon as his eyes could accommodate themselves to the light, he inspected the scene carefully.

The mud beasts were everywhere. Countless numbers of them writhed along the ground, concentrating wherever a human body lay. Blake and his men, those that remained alive, had withdrawn to the side of the camp nearest the spaceship. The powerful cadmium lights of the ship bathed the bobbing sea of beasts with light, and the Stapo men poured a steady fusillade of bolts from their guns.

With their slow, almost patient single-mindedness, the beasts fought to approach Blake and his men. They did not seem to fear the blazing bolt guns, nor to associate their dying companions with the explosions. They pushed insistently on and would have been completely annihilated if there had not been so many of them.

The tent in which Crosse and Nancy stood was on the opposite side of the camp from the spaceship, and the mud beasts intervened between them and Blake.

"If we can get past them and out of range of Blake's guns we might get free, Nancy!" Crosse hissed.

The girl's lips were trembling, and her eyes were still wide with hysteria. He looked at her keenly.

"Do you think you're in any condition to

run?" he asked.

Some of the fear left her face. She straightened a little and squared her shoulders.

"You lead the way, Lance," she said simply. "I'll follow."

His powerful hands touched her shoulders in a momentary gesture of affection.

"Remind me to like you," he said gruffly.

They stepped out of the tent. The nearest mud beasts were facing the other way, but with fatal instinct, they turned. Instantly the wide, white jaws opened, and they crawled toward the pair.

Crosse shot a quick glance across the camp. Blake was roaring an order for those in the JJ-3 to put the ship's bolt batteries into action. His face was pale with rage and fear, and his attention seemed wholly occupied with repelling the beasts.

"Come! Quickly!" Crosse whispered.

Taking Nancy by the hand, he ran off around the tent, kicking at the nearest of the massive beasts. Behind the tent, there were no beasts. Nancy stumbled, but Crosse swept her up into his arms and ran swiftly along the smooth slope of the mountain. The cool grayness of the night enveloped them and, as the cries of the Stapo men and the explosions of the bolt guns died away, a sensation of peace and security came to them.

When the curve of the mountain intervened between them and the camp, Crosse stopped and set Nancy on her feet. They stood still a moment, leaning against one another lightly.

"That's the second life I owe you today," Nancy said.

Although he was panting from the run, he managed to adopt her attitude of pretended casualness.

"Getting to be a habit, isn't it?" he asked gruffly.

"Thank you, Lance," the girl whispered.

THE dim dawn was beginning to gloss the sky, appearing at no particular horizon, so diffused was its light. Crosse picked his way around the slope of the mountain and found his way without trouble to the treasure cache. But the masonry walls that guarded the treasure were lying in shambles. Soft lights glowed from a cavern within. Crosse stooped and picked up a jagged fragment of rock before he entered.

"Professor Oliphant!" he called.

"Eh?" The little grey-haired man thrust his head above a pile of huge cases. "Who's

that? Crosse! Where have you been? I couldn't wait for you to come back with those cables so I had to rig up the bolt blaster to work without them."

"Father!" Nancy cried, rushing to him and flinging herself into his arms.

"What is the matter?" he demanded.

Crosse told him hastily, describing the destruction of their spaceship and the attack of the mud creatures.

"Interesting!" the professor observed sleepily. "If they attacked you, they must be carnivorous, and if they're carnivorous there must be other animals on this planet for them to eat. You see, in biology—"

"Daddy!" Nancy wailed. "Forget those awful creatures! How are we going to get off this planet?"

The professor stared at them vacantly a moment, then suddenly seemed to come awake.

"Of course!" he crowed. "You haven't seen the treasure!"

Motioning them to follow, he led the way out of the cavern to a roughly hewn corridor that penetrated straight into the side of the mountain and terminated in a vastly larger cavern. In the middle of this cave, lighted by the soft glow of cadmium lamps, was a long, sleek spaceship, much smaller than the flagship that had been destroyed, but gracefully designed and beautifully constructed.

"When Tragg came here with his treasure, he brought a spare for every part in his spaceship. Like the wise man he was, he assembled these parts into another spaceship and left it here. It's equipped with working models of all his inventions, several of which I found entirely new in principle. I've had a fascinating time inspecting them."

A sob escaped Nancy's lips as she realized what the spaceship meant. Crosse gazed at her fondly and repeated the words he had said to Blake—

"So long as there's life, there's hope!"

"One of the most interesting of Tragg's inventions," the professor continued, as if he were lecturing, "is what he calls his 'peace weapon'—a misnomer if ever there were one, for no weapon can truly be called a peace weapon. Yet Tragg asserts that this particular weapon is so powerful that it insures peace for whoever possesses it."

"What's that?" Crosse cried, his eyes lighting.

The professor started back through the corridor that led to the ante-chamber. Crosse and Nancy followed, but when they stepped out into the outer cave, they found

the professor standing stock still with his hands raised, staring at the dangerous end of a bolt gun. The gun was in Blake's hands, and behind him stood Zember and two Stapo men.

"Did you think you left unnoticed, Crosse?" Blake asked unpleasantly. "Those searchlights picked you out just as you were stealing around the shack. I left the largest part of my men to clean up those ugly animals and followed you here. You led me right to the treasure!"

CHAPTER X

Return to Mars

HIS eyes glittered suddenly, and he lifted his bolt gun and trained it on Crosse.

"You have broken the laws of the Diktor and you have fled the just punishment that awaited you at the hands of the Stapo. I can be lenient no longer. You must die!"

His finger tightened about the release button of the bolt gun, and at the same moment Peter Zember lurched forward, his face drawn and pallid.

"Not that, Blake!" he screamed. "You promised you wouldn't kill him!"

He wrapped his long arms around Blake and tried to pull him back, but the powerful Stapo chief threw him off with a curse and turned on him. The bolt gun spat blue flame, and Zember crumpled as the bolt exploded inside his body.

Zember's interference had given Crosse his chance. Launching himself through the air, he collided with Blake and knocked the gun from his hands. They went down together.

Nancy leaped forward nimbly and caught up the gun, training it on the two Stapo men who had also had designs on the weapon.

"Stand back!" she warned them. "If you try to help Blake, I'll kill you!"

They took one look at the weapon and at the trembling, nervous fingers that clasped it and decided to obey.

Blake was a powerful man. His body was padded with muscle, and he could absorb a great deal of punishment. The fighting was in his favor, for he could wrap his arms around Crosse and exert the powerful, slow pressure of which he was capable.

But Crosse had no intention of being beaten. With the instinct of a fighting man,

he knew it was the most important battle of his life. Throwing all his weight into it, he pounded Blake on face and body with sledgehammer blows, struggling all the while to free himself of the other's bearhug. Finally he managed to bring an uppercut through Blake's arms, and the Stapo chief grunted in pain, relaxing his hold for a moment.

Crosse was on his feet like a cat, dragging Blake after him. Pausing for the slimmest part of a second, he struck Blake on the point of the chin with all his strength. The sound of breaking bones was almost like that of a small-calibre bolt discharge. Blake collapsed backward with his head bent at a curious angle.

Crosse stepped back from his fallen enemy, his arms still tense and poised. His breath came in long sobs, for Blake had come close to strangling him. Nancy touched him gently and pressed him back upon the pile of boxes. Skillfully she massaged his aching throat and tired arms.

"Lance!" she whispered. "You were magnificent! If only your Martian people could have seen how well you fought for them!"

Their eyes met, and he took her hands in his.

"Oh!" she cried suddenly and leaped to her feet. The two Stapo guards were gone. "I forgot to watch them!"

"Let them go," Crosse said. "They'll probably go back to their spaceship."

She knelt beside him again. Unexpectedly, she began to cry. Crosse pulled her head against his chest tenderly. Then he became aware of the professor's amused and interested gaze, and his face went red.

"It's all right now, Nancy, dear," he told the girl, patting her on the head.

"Of course it is, my darling!" she sobbed. "But suppose it wasn't! Suppose they killed you!"

The professor's grunt of disgust was clearly audible.

"Crosse," he said irritably, "we have to pack as much of this stuff on Tragg's ship as it will carry. No time to lose."

Crosse sighed and got to his feet. With the help of the professor and Nancy, he began to carry the boxes and bales through the corridor into the inner cavern where the spaceship lay. They worked for an hour, picking the most valuable and usable treasures.

"That's enough," Crosse said finally, wiping his brow. "We can come back for the rest."

THEY entered the spaceship and sealed the ports.

Crosse inspected the controls to familiarize himself with them before he settled himself in the pilot's seat.

"Here we go," he muttered and ran out the forward battery of bolt guns. The roar of their discharge was deafening, but when the smoke and fumes cleared, a hole had been blasted through the mountainside. Crosse sent the ship through the aperture and into the steamy air. He circled the mountains once.

"The JJ-Three is still here!" he cried.

They all glanced down through the glass port in the floor. The Stapo men were running about the ship, loading the camp equipment aboard. One of them spotted the spaceship in the air, however, and they dropped their work. The JJ-3 lifted from the sloping mountainside and blasted into the air.

"They thought we were going to attack," Crosse said. He watched the JJ-3 diminish in size as it roared toward space. "I wonder if they know how to use the coupler," he murmured.

Following upon his words like a punctuation mark was an explosion of unimaginable force. The JJ-3 disappeared in a white blankness, and lines of force washed out from it as do ripples in a pool. Their own spaceship bucked and was thrown over on its side. Crosse shot full throttle to the tubes and saved them from a collision with the ground.

"What was that!" he cried, when the ship was level again.

The professor's face was strained.

"You remember that the JJ-Three was the ship I discarded when it was almost finished! I said it was too dangerous. There was a one-to-one-hundred chance that it would destroy itself. The mathematics of probabilities have just demonstrated this. The JJ-Three blew up because its hull screen of power could not close fast enough for the flow of basic energy."

Crosse and Nancy were silent. The realization was dawning in the minds of both that the JJ-3 was equipped with a replica of Tragg's coupler, and the ship they were in had identical equipment. Would that one-in-one-hundred chance wreck their chance of reaching Mars?

Nancy's knuckles were white as she grasped the arms of the chair in which she sat. Both Crosse and her father were watching her, and she managed to smile.

"Shouldn't we be on our way?" she asked shakily.

Crosse smiled at her.

"Good girl!" he said quietly. Then, to the professor, "Whenever you're ready, sir."

The old man kneeled beside the coupler. A slight frown was on his face, as he inspected the instruments and gauges on its case.

"At any other time, under any other conditions, I would be glad of such dramatic proof of the superiority of my coupler to Tragg's," he said. "But under the circumstances I—"

His words trailed off into a meaningless mumble, and he grasped the main switch that would throw a reservoir of power into the metal of the outer hull. A blinding flash filled the control room, and Nancy screamed. A moment later the vision screens were a neutral gray, and a small indicator bulb was blinking monotonously atop the coupler. They stared at each other foolishly.

NANCY collapsed into her chair and shivered.

"I don't know which one of the ninety-nine chances we hit, but I'm glad it wasn't the hundredth."

Crosse locked the controls and swung out of his chair.

"Now for Zember," he said tersely. Nancy and her father glanced at him with interest. "Zember was my half brother, the son of my mother and her first husband—a true Martian. As you know, the true Martians were a weak-willed race.

"Their courage was broken and their morals were sapped. They were almost extinct when the first Earthmen arrived on Mars, and intermarriage was rare. Zember, I believe, was the last man to have true Martian blood in his veins.

"We grew up together after my mother and father died, and Zember was all I could ask for in a brother. I owed my very life to him. And so, when he began to get his spells at the age of fifteen, I loved him just as much as always and tried to help him.

"True Martian blood does not mix with Earth blood. Zember was either all Earth or all Mars. When his Earth character was dominant, he was a fine, industrious, able man—a keen scientist. But he had spells, one of which you witnessed, Professor Oliphant, when his Martian character came to the fore, and he turned into a wheedling, avaricious, shiftless creature.

"For many years he was Martian and he

hung around Xanadu, scraping the crumbs from the governor's table, and that was why my rebels hated him. But I couldn't desert Peter Zember, because I loved him and knew that he could not help his biological fault.

"That was why I took him in with us, hoping it would give him some self-respect and keep his Earth character forever dominant.

"But you saw the result. He reverted, helped Blake to escape, stole the JJ-Three and finished the coupler on it and brought Blake after us. And yet—I do not regret having helped him."

"Nor should you, Lance," Nancy said softly. "He died bravely, and in dying did more for the rebel cause than anyone on Mars."

Crosse made a wry face. "The rebel cause! I hope there still is one. If the governor has had reinforcements he might have been able to smash our fleet and take the Brozzian camp. If that's the case, Tragg's treasure will do us no good."

"Nor his peace weapon either," the professor said.

"How does that work?" Crosse asked. "You were about to tell us when Blake interrupted."

"You should have listened the first time," the professor said grumpily. "In those boxes we carried aboard is a good supply of ion-element. It is used in a handy little gadget Tragg invented, which I have labeled 'peace weapon.'

"Tragg flattered himself when he thought it was too terrible a weapon for the diktors to have. It is limited to purely defensive use, simply because the power required to make it effective couldn't be contained in any known spaceship. It would have to be set up on the ground."

"But how does it work?" Crosse insisted.

"This ion-element can be put in shell cases that are made of anything except carbon or its compounds. When it is fired into the air, and exploded by conventional bolt methods, the free ion-metal breaks down the carbon dioxide in the atmosphere and dismantles its atomic structure.

"This causes a partial vacuum, and the surrounding air rushes in with terrific impact—sort of an inverted explosion. But the charm of the thing is, that if enough power stations were built on Mars and enough projectors, the entire atmosphere could be kept free of spaceships.

"Just one of these devices can cover about eighty square miles in area to a height of five

miles, and it could destroy any ship venturing within its scope. See what I mean?"

"Of course!" Crosse cried. "We can rig up enough of these weapons to cover the whole of Mars, and no Earth ship would dare to attack us! Professor, it means the revolution will be a success!"

"Provided, of course," the professor replied somberly, "your rebels have managed to resist the Earth forces until we get back."

They could not know the outcome of Druff's defensive battle for six hours. Radio could not reach across the gap that separated them from Mars, and even if they were able to build up a strong enough signal, it would be years before the wave could get through.

SIX hours later, Crosse was waiting at the control transmitter, and when the coupler threw out its hold on the basic energy flow, he snapped on the phone and called the Brozzian camp.

"Lance Crosse calling!" he said. "Give me Druff!"

Nancy moved close to his side, eager to hear if there would be response. Crosse held his breath, fumbling impatiently with the amplifier controls.

"No answer!" he groaned.

"Calling Crosse!" the amplifier suddenly blared. "Druff is at the front. Can we give him a message?"

"Hurrah!" Nancy shouted and threw her arms around Crosse's neck. Grinning hugely, he swept her off her feet and swung her high in the air.

"Stop!" she squealed. "Ask them if the camp is still safe."

Crosse set her back on her feet, and picked up the transmitter.

"Have you been able to hold the Earth fleet?" he barked. "Have those reinforcements gone into action against you?"

The amplifier gargled, then the voice of the coordinator at the Brozzian camp came through.

"Of course we've held out! The governor hasn't gained an inch from Druff. When Blake left, the Earth fleet went back to their old method of fighting. Druff said he wanted to capture Xanadu before you got back, but he hasn't quite managed it yet.

"The Earth reinforcements were called back to First City to suppress the revolution that is rising on Earth. Would you like me to give Druff a message?"

"Certainly!" Crosse replied promptly. "Tell him we will reach the camp in three

days with most of Tragg's treasure. Tell him to leave some of the governor's fleet intact, because we have a new weapon to try out. Tell him the revolution is won, and Mars is free—"

He glanced at the girl who stood beside

him, her lips slightly parted and her eyes glowing with the strange, lovely light of a woman in love.

"Tell him that light brown hair, especially when wavy, can do strange things to a man's heart!"



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THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

EVERY reader doubtless has his own method of tackling the contents of a magazine. Perhaps he reads certain features, departments or stories first. Perhaps he just plows right on through. Which-ever system you follow—whether you've already read the stories before you come to



this page, or whether you are saving the stories until last—here we present you this issue's story behind the story.

First we hear from Charles W. Harbaugh, author of **STAR OF TREASURE**. Read what Author Harbaugh has to say about the genesis of this month's novel.

A writer has more room to stretch his mental elbows when he's handling a long story, and in *Star of Treasure* I've tried to tackle two ideas, one scientific and one social.

A study of the ancient scientists, and of modern ones as well, can be interesting if it's done in the light of what they were trying to discover as well as what they actually accomplished. Scientists are constantly seeking after the one secret of life—the Big Secret. They're uncovering it inch by inch, and have been doing so for thousands of years. Some day they may finish the job and add up all their findings into an answer so wondrously simple and complete that it is likely to be breath-taking.

That's where Professor Oliphant's *basic energy* comes in. It's the cure-all witch doctor medicine that completes all scientific inquiry by answering the last question. It is, I hope, a sensible if imaginative reason for energy. *Basic energy* is not really an idea for a story. As a matter of fact, it's not an idea at all. It's more a desire, or a need. It's one answer to the longing for a simple satisfactory answer to the many billions of questions life constantly poses. And it was with this thought in mind that I had Professor Oliphant discover it.

But there's the social side of the question, too. Have you ever thought what it would mean if we lost the war we're at present fighting? You and I both know we're going to win, but suppose we didn't? Would Hitler establish such a slavery over our world that the word freedom would never again be heard? I don't think so. At the very moment Hitler was celebrating this hypothetical success, the "moving finger" that writes in the book of Destiny would take its pen in hand to place an order for another George Washington, to be born, perhaps in the year 3000.

The men of the future will never lose sight of their ancestors' freedom.

The dictators might possibly extend their sway through the thousand years of the future that they boast belongs to them, but the deathlessness of freedom would eventually outlive them. The children of our great-grandchildren's children would win another Yorktown, fighting with rocket inter-

ceptors, possibly, instead of the muskets and cannon that defeated Cornwallis.

If you look at it this way, the things we are fighting for can never be lost. Our war to preserve freedom is simply a stage in Earth's constant evolution toward the perfect. And if we secure a victory for ourselves, that makes the part we play in this gigantic scheme all the more important.

These are the thoughts I had in mind when I wrote *Star of Treasure*, and I hope you'll like the way I handled them in the yarn.—Charles W. Harbaugh.

It seems that Mr. Harbaugh has thought rather deeply on the ideas he hands us in this yarn, and his letter smacks of good old downright patriotism as well as hope for the future of mankind as a whole.

Let's read now what Miss Leigh Brackett has to say about VEIL OF ASTELLAR.

You want to know how I came to write THE VEIL OF ASTELLAR? Well, one day I happened to read Dunsany's tale, THE MAN WITH THE GOLDEN EAR-RINGS. It's a fascinating little thing, and the end stuck in my mind: "And he said, 'I work in the Sargasso Sea, and I am the last of the pirates, the last left alive.' And I shook him by the hand I do not know how many times. I said: 'We feared you were dead.' And he answered sadly: 'No. No. I have sinned too deeply on the Spanish seas: I am not allowed to die.'"

I have sinned too deeply. I am not allowed to die.

What more do you need for a story germ? It worked in me like yeast in dough. The Sargasso Sea is old and cramped, but in the gulfs of space there must be worlds and ways of sinning on them that man on this mundane pebble has never thought of. I got to thinking about that, and gradually the jewel-crystal world of Astellar and its black gateway beyond space and time took shape, and with it Shirina and the Veil and the golden Cloud, and the men who were afraid to die. One man in particular—Stephen Vance, the Judas goat who led the sheep to slaughter. The story grew easily, and the deeper I got into it . . .

Presently you're in another space, another time. You can take over any body that pleases you, for as long as you want. You can go between planets, between suns, between galaxies, just by thinking about it. You can see things, do things, taste experiences that all the languages of our space-time continuum put together have no words for. Memories—shade under suns that never burned for you. And the interlocking universes are infinite. . . .

Stephen Vance was afraid to die. But immortality is a long time. . . .

I wish I knew the way to Astellar.—Leigh Brackett.

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