

The Finding of Haldgren



Charles Willard Diffin

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[Illustration]

[Chet Ballard answers the pinpoint of light that from the craggy
desolation of the moon stabs out man's old call for help.]

The Finding of Haldgren

A Complete Novelette

By Charles Willard Diffin



CHAPTER I

SOS

The venerable President of the Federation Aeronautique Internationale had been speaking. He paused now to look out over the sea of faces that filled the great hall in serried waves. He half turned that he might let his eyes pass over the massed company on the platform with him. The Stratosphere Control Board--and they had called in their representatives from the far corners of Earth to hear the memorable words of this aged man.

[Illustration: *The beasts fell into the pit beyond; their screams rang horribly as they fell.*]

From the waiting audience came no slightest sound; the men and women were as silent as that other audience listening and watching in every hamlet of the world, wherever radio and television reached. Again the figure of the President was drawn erect; the scanty, white hair was thrown back from his forehead; he was speaking:

" ... And this vast development has come within the memory of one man. I, speaking to you here in this year of 1974, have seen it all come to pass. And now I am overwhelmed with the wonder of it, even as I was when those two Americans first flew at Kittyhawk.

"I, myself, saw that. I saw with these eyes the first crude engine-bearing kites; I saw them from 1914 to 1918 tempered and perfected in the furnace of war; I saw the coming of detonite and the beginning of our air-transport of to-day. And always I have seen brave men--men who smiled grimly as they took those first crude controls in their hands; who laughed and waved to us as they took off in the 'flying

coffins' of the great war; who had the courage to dare the unknown dangers of the high levels and who first threw their ships through the Repelling Area and blazed the air-trails of a new world.

"And to-day I, who have seen all this, stand before you and say: 'Thank God that the spirit of brave men goes on!'

* * * * *

"It has never ended--that adventurer strain--that race of Viking men. We have two of them here to-night. The whole world is pausing this instant wherever men are on land or water or air to do honor to these two.

"They do not know why they are here. They have been summoned by the Stratosphere Control Board which has delegated to me the honor of making the announcement."

The tall figure was commandingly erect; for an instant the fire of youth had returned to him.

"Walter Harkness!" he called. "Chester Bullard! Stand forth that the eyes of the world may see!"

Two men arose from among the members of the Board and came hesitantly forward. Strongly contrasting was the darkly handsome face of Harkness, man of wealth and Pilot of the Second Class, and the no less pleasing features of Chet Bullard, Master Pilot of the World. For Bullard's curling hair was as golden as the triple star upon his chest that proclaimed his standing to the world and all the air above.

The speaker was facing them; he turned away for a moment that he might bow to a girl who was still seated next to the chair where Walt

Harkness had been.

"To Mrs. Harkness," he said, "who, until one month ago, was Mademoiselle Delacouer of our own beloved France, I shall have something further to say. She, too, has been summoned by the Board, but, for now, I address these two."

* * * * *

Again he was facing the two men; and now he was speaking directly to them:

"Pilot Harkness and Master Pilot Bullard, for you the world has been forced to create a new honor, a new mark of the world's esteem. For you two have done what never men have done before. We who have preceded you have subdued the air; but you, gentlemen, you--the first of all created beings to do so--have conquered space.

"And to you, because of your courage; because of your dauntless pioneer spirit; because of the unconquerable will that drove you and the inventive genius that made it possible--because all these have set you above us more ordinary men, since they have made you the first men to fly through space--it is my privilege now to show you the honor in which you are held by the whole world."

The firm voice quavered; for a moment the old hands trembled as they lifted a blazing gem from its velvet case.

"Chester Bullard, Master Pilot, on behalf of the Stratosphere Control Board I bestow upon you--"

"Stop!"

* * * * *

Every radiophone in the world must have echoed that sharp command; every television screen must have shown to a breathless audience the figure whose blond hair was awry, whose lean face was aflame with protest, as Chet Bullard sprang forward with upraised hand.

"You're wrong--dead wrong! You're making a mistake. I can't accept that!"

The master pilot's voice was raised in earnest protest. He seemed, for the moment, unaware of the thousands of eyes that were upon him; heedless of the gasp of amazement that swept sibilantly over the vast audience like a hissing wave breaking upon the beach. And then his face flushed scarlet, though his eyes still held steadily upon the startled countenance of the man who stood transfixed, while the jewel in his hand took the light of the nitron illuminators above and shot it back in a glory of rainbow hues.

From the seated group on the platform a man came forward. Commander of the Air, this iron-gray man; he was head of the Stratosphere Control Board, supreme authority on all matters that concerned the air levels of the whole world; Commander-in-Chief of all men who laid hands on the controls of a ship. He spoke quietly now, and Chet Bullard, at his first word, snapped instantly to salute, then stood silently waiting.

"What is the meaning of this?" demanded the voice of authority. The voice seemed soft, almost gentle, yet each syllable carried throughout the hall with an unmistakable hint of the hardness of a steelite shell beneath the words.

"The eyes of the world are upon us here; the whole world is gathered to do you honor. Is it possible that you are refusing that which we offer? Why? You will speak, please!"

And Chet Bullard, standing stiffly at attention before his commander, spoke in a tone rendered almost boyish by embarrassment.

* * * * *

"I can't accept, sir. Pilot Harkness will bear me out in this. You would decorate us for being the first to navigate space; but we are not the first."

"Continue!" ordered the quiet voice as Chet paused. "You refer to Haldgren, probably."

"To Pilot Haldgren, sir."

"This is absurd! Haldgren was lost. It is supposed that he fell back into the sea, or struck some untraveled part of Earth."

"I have checked over his data, sir. It is my opinion that he did not fall; his figures indicate that he must have thrown his ship beyond the gravitational influence of Earth."

The Commander eyed the master pilot coldly. "And because you *think* that your conclusions are more accurate than those of my own investigating committee, you refuse this honor!

"Attention!" he snapped sharply. "The entire Service of Air is being rendered ridiculous by your conduct! I command you to accept this decoration."

"You are exceeding your authority, sir. I refuse!"

Suddenly the frozen quiet of the Commander's face was flushed red with rage. "Give me that insignia!" he demanded, and pointed to the triple star on Chet Bullard's breast. "Your commission is revoked!"

To the last breathless spectator in the farthest end of the great hall the white pallor of Chet Bullard's face must have been apparent. One hand moved toward the emblem on his blouse, the cherished triple star of a master pilot of the World; then the hand paused.

"I have still another reason for believing Haldgren is alive," he said in a cold and carefully emotionless voice. "Are you interested in hearing it?"

"Speak!" ordered the Commander.

Chet Bullard, still wearing the triple star, crossed quickly to a phone panel in the speaker's stand at one side of the stage. He jerked out an instrument. The buzz of excited whispering that had swept the audience gave place to utter silence. Each quiet, incisive word that Chet spoke was clearly heard. He gave his call number.

"Bullard; Master Pilot, First Class; Number U.S. 1; calling Doctor Roche at Allied Observatory, Mount Everest. Micro-wave, please, and connect through for telefoto-projection."

A few breathless seconds passed, while Chet aimed an instrument of gleaming chromium and glass, whose cable connections vanished in the phone panel recess. He focused it upon an artificially darkened screen above and behind the grouped figures on the stage. Then:

"Doctor Roche?" Chet queried.

And, before the whole audience, the dark screen came to life to show a clear-cut picture of a man who sat at a telescope; whose hand held a radiophone; and who glanced up frowningly and said: "Yes, this is Doctor Roche."

Chet's response was immediate.

"Bullard speaking; Chet Bullard, at New York. When I was in your observatory yesterday, Doctor, you said that you had seen flashes of light on the Moon. You remember that, don't you? You saw them some months ago while I was on the Dark Moon."

* * * * *

The man in that distant observatory was no longer scowling at this interruption of his work. His smile was echoed by the cordial tone of his voice that rang clearly through the great hall.

"Correct, Mr. Bullard. An observer at our two hundred-inch reflector reported them on two successive nights. They were inside the crater of Hercules."

From his place at the center of the stage the waiting Commander of Air protested:

"Come--come! We know all about that, Bullard. Are you trying to say--"

The voice of the astronomer was speaking again:

"You will no doubt be interested to know that the lights occurred again yesterday at about this time.... Let me see if they are on now. I will have the two hundred-inch instrument used as before, and will show you what we see.

"Watch your screen, but don't expect to find any substantiation of your wild theory that these lights have a human origin." He laughed softly. "No atmosphere to speak of there, you know; we have determined that very definitely."

On the screen the picture of the smiling man flashed off; it was replaced by an unflickering darkness that came abruptly into softly shaded light. There was an expanse of volcanic terrain and a round orifice of tremendous size, where the sunlight cast black shadows. Other shaded portions about were like rocky, broken ground.

* * * * *

To Chet, staring at the strange conformation, came the quick sense of hanging above that ground and looking down upon it. And he knew that in New York he was looking through a great telescope down under the world and was staring straight down into the throat of an extinct volcano on the Moon.

There were few wonders of the modern world that could thrill the master pilot with any feeling of amazement, but here was a new experience. He would have spoken, would have ejaculated some word of wonder, but for the new light that claimed his eyes and brain.

The volcano, even in death, was ages old; its cold desolation showing plainly on the screen. No fires poured now from a hot throat; the molten sea that once had raged within had hardened and choked that vast throat with rock that had frozen to make one enormous plain. Ringed about by the jagged sides of the tremendous volcano, the floor within seemed smooth by comparison, except for another depression at its upper edge.

Here was another and smaller crater inside the great ringed wall of Hercules. The light of the sun struck slantingly across to throw one side of the gigantic cup into shadow, while the opposite rim blared brightly in the lunar dawn. And within the smaller crater, too, one side was dead black with shadow.

Dead!--No moving thing--no sign of life or indication that life might ever have been! A dead world, this!--its utter desolation struck Chet's half-uttered exclamation to a hoarse whisper of dismay. In all the universe what less likely place might one discover wherein to look for man?

* * * * *

His gaze was held in fascinated hopelessness on the barren, mountainous ring, on the inner inverted cone, on the shadow within that smaller crater--*on a tiny pinpoint of light that was flashing there!*... He hardly knew when he raised one trembling hand and pointed, while a voice quite unlike his own said huskily:

"Look! Look! I told you it was so!... There! In that little crater!--it's signaling! Three dots--now three dashes--three dots again! The old S O S!--the old call for help! It's Haldgren!"

Again the screen showed the smiling scientist.

"Caught them just right," he said, "and glad to be of service. Now, if there's anything else I can do--"

"Thanks!" said Chet in that same strained voice. "Thanks! There's nothing else." A switch clicked beneath his hand, and once more the screen was dark.

"Those dots and dashes! The old S O S! Who could doubt now?" Chet was telling himself this when the Commander's voice broke in harshly.

"Even you must see the absurdity of this, Bullard. You have heard this astronomer tell you what the rest of us knew for ourselves--that there is no air on the Moon; that it is impossible for a human being to live

there. And you would have us believe that a man has lived there for five years!

"But I am taking your distinguished record into account; I am overlooking your insubordination and the folly of your reasoning. Perhaps your feeling about Haldgren does you credit; but Haldgren is dead. Now I am giving you another chance: I order you to come forward and receive this honor, which is an honor to the entire Service of Air."

* * * * *

Chet was staring in open amazement. "No air on the Moon," this man had said. And what of that? Neither was there air in interplanetary space, yet he had traveled there. It was inconceivable that this imperious and dictatorial man could be so blind.

"I can't do it, sir," he tried to explain. "You surely can't disregard that message, the old call for help. We were using that, you know, when Haldgren took off five years ago."

No longer did a masking softness overlay the hard brittleness of the Commander's voice.

"Your star!" he snapped. "You are no longer in the Service, Bullard!"

But Chet Bullard, as he stepped forward that the Commander might rip the triple star from his chest, was not alone. Walt Harkness was only a Pilot of the Second Class, but he stripped the emblem from his own silken blouse and placed it in the Commander's outstretched hand beside Chet's star.

"Permit me, sir, to share Mr. Bullard's enviable humiliation," he observed with venomous courtesy; and added:

"Whatever similar honors were in store for Mrs. Harkness and myself are respectfully declined. We, too, are of the opinion that Pilot Haldgren deserves them instead of us."

For an instant Chet's flashing smile drew his face into friendly lines. "Thanks!" he said.

But all friendliness was erased as he swung back upon the Commander.

* * * * *

No thought now of the thousands of staring faces or of the millions throughout the world who were watching him and were hearing his words. Chet Bullard clipped those words into curt phrases, and he shot them at his superior officer as if from a detonite gun:

"You think your judgment better than mine--you've dropped me from the Service--and you've got the power to make that stick! But you're wrong, sir, dead wrong! And I'll make you admit it, too.

"No--don't interrupt! I'm going to say what I please, and this is it, Commander:

"Hang onto that jewel you were giving me. Keep it ready. For I'm going to the Moon. I'm going to find Haldgren, if he's still living when I get there. And, at the least, I will bring back some record to show he is the man we should honor.

"Haldgren, alive or dead, was the first man to conquer space. Neither Harkness nor I would steal an atom of his glory. I'll have the proof when I come back. And when I come--"

* * * * *

For an instant the ready grin that marked Chet's irresistible good nature lighted up his face with a silent echo of some laugh-provoking thought occurring in his mind.

"--when I do come, Commander, I will make you eat your words. It's you who will be out of the Service then, laughed out!"

The Commander smiled, too; smiled coldly, complacently, while his head shook.

"Again you are mistaken," he told Chet; "never again will you fly as much as one foot above Earth."

And still Chet's grin persisted. "Commander," he said, "a man in your position should not make so many mistakes. I am going--I give you warning now--going to the Moon. And you haven't enough Patrol Ships in all the air levels of Earth to hold me back, once I'm on my way!"

And every television screen of Earth showed a remarkable scene: a red-faced, choleric Commander of the Air, who shouted that a group of officers might leap forward to do his bidding; a dark-haired man and a girl who sprang beside him. The bodies of the two were interposed for an instant between the officers' weapons and a fair-haired man.... And the lean young man, with his shock of golden hair thrown back from his face, leaped like a panther in that same instant; drew himself to an open window; threw himself through, and vanished among the brilliant lights and black shadows of a New York night.

But, as he fought his way free of the throng outside, there came above the clamor of an excited crowd the voice of Walt Harkness in cryptic words:

"The ship is yours, Chet," the fugitive heard Harkness call; "it's in cold

storage for you!"

CHAPTER II

A Dirty Red Freighter....

Chet Bullard was more at home among the air-lanes of Earth than he was on solid ground. But he oriented himself in an instant; knew he was on a cross street in the three hundred zone; and saw ahead of him, not a hundred feet away, the green, glowing ring that marked a subway escalator.

In the passing throng there were those who looked curiously at him. Chet checked his first headlong flight and dropped to an unhurried walk.

About him, as he well knew, the air was filled with silent radio waves that were sounding the alarm in every sentry box of the great city. They would reach the aircraft terminals and the control room of every ship within a fixed radius. He had dared the wrath of one of the most powerful officials of Earth; no effort would be spared to run him down; his picture would be flashing within ten minutes on every television screen of the Air Patrol. And Chet Bullard knew only one way to go.

Of course they would be watching for him at the airports, yet he knew he must get away somehow; escape quickly--and find some corner of the world where he could hide.

He was in the escalator, and wild plans were flashing through his mind as he watched the levels go past. "First Level; Trains North and South; Local Service. Second Level; Express Stop for North-shore Lines. Third Level; Airport Loop Lines; Transatlantic Terminals--"

Chet Bullard, his hair still tangled on his hatless head, his blouse torn where a hand had ripped off the Master Pilot's emblem, stepped from the escalator to a platform, then to a cylindrical car that slid silently in before him and whose flashing announcement-board proclaimed: "*Hoover Airport Express. No Intermediate Stops.*"

* * * * *

Would they be watching for him at the great Hoover Terminal on the tip of Long Island? Chet assured himself silently that he would tell the world they would be. But even a fugitive may have friends—if he has been a master pilot and has a lean, likable face with a most disarming grin.

Where would he go? He did not know; he had been bluffing a bit and the Commander had called him when his hand was weak; he had no least idea where he could find their ship. If only he had had a chance for a word with Walt Harkness: Walt had been flying it; he had left it apparently in a storage hangar.

But where? And what was it that Walt had called out? Chet was racking his brains to remember.

"The ship is yours," Walt had shouted ... and something about "storage." But why should he have laid up the ship; why should he have stored it?

Chet saw the lights of subterranean stations flashing past as the car that held him rode silently through a tube that it touched not at all. He knew that magnetic rails made a grillwork that surrounded the car and that drew it on at terrific speed while suspending it in air. But he would infinitely have preferred the freedom of the high levels, and his own hand on a ship's controls.

A ship!--any ship!--but preferably his ship and Walt's. And Walt had said something of "*storage--cold storage.*" The words seemed written before him in fiery lines. It was a moment before he knew what he had recalled. Then a slow smile tugged at the corners of his mouth, and he turned and stared through a window that showed only blackness.

"*Cold storage!*" That was good work on Walt's part. He had been forced to shout the directions before them all, yet tell none of those others about him where the ship was hidden. Chet was picturing that place of "cold storage" as he smiled. The fact that it was some thousands of miles away troubled him not at all.

* * * * *

The great Hoover Terminal was a place where night never came. Its daylight tubes wove a network of light about the stupendous enclosure, their almost silent hissing merged to an unceasing rush of sound, so soft as to be unheard through the scuffling feet and chattering voices of the ever-hurrying crowds.

From subways the impatient people came and went, and from highway stations where busses and private cars drove in and away. The clock in the squat tower swung its electrically driven hands toward the figure 22; there lacked but two hours of midnight, and a steady stream of aircraft came dropping down the shaft of green light that reached to and through the clouds. There would be many liners leaving on the hour; these that were coming in were private craft that spun their flashing helicopters like giant emeralds in the green descending light, while the noise of their beating blades filled the air with a rush of sound.

Outside the entrance to the Passenger Station, Chet Bullard withdrew himself from the surging press of hurrying men and women

and slipped into a shadowed alcove. Two passing figures in the gray and gold of the Air Patrol scanned the crowd closely; Chet drew himself into the deeper shadows and waited until they were by before he emerged and followed the shelter of a coffee-house that extended toward another entrance to the field, where pilots and mechanics passed in and out.

* * * * *

A bulletin board showed in changing letters of light the official assignment of landing space. And, though every passing eye was turned toward it, Chet knew that each man was intent upon the board and not on the shadowed niche in the building behind it. He watched his chance and slipped into that shadow.

Unseen, he could see them as they approached: men in the multicolored uniforms of many lines, who paused to read, to exchange bantering shop-talk--and to pass on.

Many voices: "Storm area, over the South-shore up to Level Six. You birds on the local runs had better watch your step" ... "--coming down at Calcutta. Yeah, a dirty, red-bottomed freighter that rammed him. I saw it take off two of his fans, but Shorty set the old girl down like a feather on the lift of the four fans he had left. You said it--Shorty's a real pilot...."

Another pause; then a growling voice that proclaimed complainingly: "Lord, but I'm tired! All right, Spud; grin, you damned Irishman! But if you had been hauling the Commander all over Alaska to-day and then got ordered out again just as you were set for a good sleep, you'd be sore. What in thunder does he want his ship for to-night, I ask you?"

* * * * *

Chet, crouching still lower in the little retreat, stiffened to attention at the reference to the Commander. So the "big boss" had ordered out his own cruiser again! He listened still more intently to the voice that replied.

"Sure, and it's thankful you sh'u'd be to be holdin' the controls on a fine, big cruiser like that; though, betwixt you and me, 'tis myself that don't envy you your job. Me and my old freighter, we go wallowin' along. And to-night I'm takin' her home for repairs--back to the fact'ry in Rooshia where they made her; and the devil of a job it will be, for she handles with all the grace of a pig in a puddle."

Chet risked a glance when the sound of heavy footsteps indicated that one of the two speakers had gone on alone to the pilots' gate. Before the huge bulletin board, in pilot's uniform and with the markings of a low-level man on his sleeve, stood the sturdy figure of the man called Spud. He started back at sight of the face peering out at him, but Chet whispered a command, and the man moved closer to the hiding place behind the board.

There were others coming in a laughing group up the walk; daylight tubes illuminated the approach. Chet spoke hurriedly.

"I'm in a devil of a mess, Spud. Will you lend a hand? Will you stand by for rescue work?"

And Spud studied the bulletin board as he growled:

"Lend a hand?--yes, and the arm with it, Mr. Bullard. You stud by me once whin I needed help; and now you ask will I stand by for rescue work. Till we crash--that's all, me bhoy!"

* * * * *

Spud's speech was tinged with the brogue of Erin; it grew perceptibly more pronounced as his quick emotions took hold of him.

"Quiet!" said Chet. "Wait till they pass!"

The newcomers stopped for no more than a glance. Then:

"I'm demoted," Chet told the round-eyed man who stared unbelievably at the vacant place on Chet's blouse. "The air's hot with orders for my arrest. I've got to get out, and I've got to do it quick."

And now there was only a trace of the brogue in Spud's voice. Chet knew the trick of the man's speech; touch his heart and his tongue would grow thick; place him face to face with an emergency and he would go cold and hard, while the good-natured phrasing of his native sod went from him and he talked fast and straight.

"The devil you say!" exclaimed Spud. "What you've done I don't know, nor yet why you did it. But, whatever it was, I don't believe you let that triple star go for less than a damned good reason. Now, let me think; let--me--think--"

A figure in gray and gold was approaching, a member of the Air Patrol. Spud's tongue was lively with good-natured raillery as he fell into step and drew the officer with him through the pilots' gate, while Chet, from his shadow, saw with satisfaction the apparent desertion. He had known Spud O'Malley of old. Spud was square--and Spud had wanted time for thinking.

There were many who passed Chet's hiding place before a cautious whisper came to him and he saw a hand that thrust a roll of clothing around the edge of the bulletin board.

"Put 'em on!" was the order of Spud. "And smear your yella hair with

the grease! Work fast, me bhoy!"

* * * * *

The command was no less imperative for being spoken beneath Spud's breath, and for the first time Chet's hopes soared high within him. It had all been so hopeless, the prospect of actual escape from the net that was closing about him. And now--!

He unrolled the tight package of cloth to find a small can of black graphite lubricant done up in a jacket and blouse. Both were stained and smeared with grease; they were amply large. Chet did not bother to strip off his own blouse; he pulled on the other clothes over his own, and his face was alight with a grin of appreciation of Spud's attention to details as he took a daub of the grease, rubbed it on his hands, then passed them through his hair.

"Yellah," Spud had said, but the description was no longer apt. And the man who stepped forth beside Spud O'Malley in the uniform of an engineer of a tramp freighter looked like nothing else in the world but just that.

"Come on, now!" ordered Spud harshly, as a figure in gray and gold appeared around the corner of the coffee shop. "You're plinty late, me fine lad! Now get in there and clean up that dirty motor and get her runnin'! Try out every fan on the old boat; then we'll be off.

"You're number CG41!" he whispered. And Chet repeated the number as he followed the pilot through the gate.

"O.K.," said the guard at the gate, "and I'll bet he gives you hell and to spare!"

Chet slouched his shoulders to disguise his real height and followed

where Spud O'Malley, with every indication of righteous anger, strode indignantly down the pavement, at the far end of which was a battered and service-stained ship.

* * * * *

Her hull of dirty red showed mottlings of brown; she was sadly in need of a painter's gun. She would groan and squeal, Chet knew, when the fans lifted her from the hold-down clutch; and she couldn't fly at over twenty thousand without leaking her internal pressure through a thousand cracks that made her porous as an old balloon--but to Chet's eyes the old relic of the years was a thing of sheer beauty and grace.

O'Malley was leading through an open freight hatch; Chet followed, and, at his beckoning hand, slipped into a dingy cabin.

"Lay low there," the pilot ordered, and still, as Chet observed, his speech showed how clearly the man was thinking, since the emergency still existed "I've cleared some time ago, Mr. Bullard; we're ready to leave as soon as we get the dispatcher's O.K."

The minutes were long where Chet waited in the pilot's cabin. Each sound might mean a last-minute search of departing ships, but he tried to tell himself that the attention of the officers would be centered upon the passenger liners.

Beyond, where he could see out into the control room, a white light flashed. He heard the bellowing orders of the Irishman at the controls. And, as other sounds reached his ears, he had to grip his hands hard while he fought for control of the laughter that was almost hysterical. For, beneath him, he felt the sluggish lift of the ship, and, from every joint and plate of this old-timer of the air, came squawking protests against the cruel fates that drove her forth again to face the buffeting,

racking gales.

But the blue light of an ascending area was about them, and Spud O'Malley was shouting from the control room:

"Sure, and we're off, Mr. Bullard. Now do ye come up here and tell me all about it—but I warn you, I'll not be believin' a word--"

CHAPTER III

Up From Earth

Chet had plenty of time in which to acquaint Pilot O'Malley with the facts. And, when he had told his story, it did his sick and worried mind good to hear the explosive stream of expletives that came from the other's lips. Yet, despite the Irishman's anger, it was noticeable that he closed the tight door of the control room before he said a word.

"Only a skeleton crew," he explained. "Just the relief pilot and the engineers and a man or two in the galley, and I trust 'em all. But you can't be too careful.

"The Commander," he concluded, "is gettin' to be more an emperor than a Commander, and somethin's got to be done. Discipline we must have, 'tis true; but this kotowin' to His Royal Highness and all o' that--devil a bit do I like it! If only you could show him up, Mr. Bullard--but of course you can't."

"I'm not so sure," Chet responded. "What I told the big boss wasn't all bluff. Haldgren *did* go out, five years ago this month. We have the record of a Crescent liner's captain who saw Haldgren's little ship shoot through the R.A. and go on out as if it were going somewhere.

And now we have these flashes!

"Do you see what that means, Spud? An SOS! Nobody but an Earthman would send that, and we wouldn't do it now. We would just press the lever of our emergency-call, and every receiver within a thousand miles would pick up the scream of it.

"But we've had this Dunston Emergency Transmitter less than four years. Haldgren knew only the old S O S. And remember this: three dots, three dashes and three dots don't just happen. They showed up on the Moon. They were repeated the next night. *Somebody sent them!* Who was it?"

* * * * *

And Pilot O'Malley gave the only obvious answer:

"There's only yourself and Mr. Harkness and Pilot Haldgren that could have got there. 'Twas Haldgren, of course! What a pity that you can't go; 'tis likely the poor bhoy needs help."

"Five years!" mused Chet. "Five long years since he left! He must have landed safely--and then what? After five years comes a signal and that signal a call for help that no pilot worthy the name would disregard....

"Where are we bound?" he demanded abruptly.

"Rooshia," said O'Malley. "I disremember the name--'tis on my orders--but I know it's a long way up north."

"Spud," said Chet, "you're a rotten pilot; you're one of the worst I ever knew. Careless--that's your worst fault--and if anybody doubts that they'll believe it after this trip. For, Spud, if you're any friend of mine,

and I know you are, you're going to lose your bearings, and kick this old sky-hog a long way beyond that factory she is bound for. And you're going to set me down in a God-forsaken spot in the arctic where I'm pretty sure I'll find a ship waiting for me.

"And, if you just stick around for a while after that, you will see me take off for the Moon. Then, if Haldgren is there--"

Chet failed to finish the sentence; he was staring through a rear lookout, where, over the arc of the Earth's horizon, could be seen a thin crescent Moon; about it drifting clouds made a halo.

The eyes of Spud O'Malley followed Chet's, and his imaginative faculties must have been stimulated by Chet's words, for he gazed open-mouthed, as if for the first time he visioned that golden scimitar as something more substantial than a high-hung light. He drew one long incredulous breath before he answered.

"What position, sir? Say the word and I'll lose myself so bad we'll be over the Pole and half-way to the equator again!"

"Not that bad," was Chet's assurance. "Just spot this ship over 82:14 north, 93:20 east, and I'll give you local bearings from there."

Then to himself: "'Cold storage,' Walt said; he meant our old shop, of course. Probably had a hunch we would need it."

But to the pilot he said only the one word: "Thanks!"--though the grip of his hand must have spoken more eloquently.

* * * * *

The eastbound lanes of the five thousand level saw them plod slowly along, while faster and better-groomed ships slipped smoothly past;

then the red hull rose to Level Twelve and swung out upon the great circle course that would bear them more nearly in the direction of the destination Chet had given. There were free levels higher up in which they could have laid a direct course, but the Irish pilot did not need Chet to tell him that the old hull would never stand it. Her internal pressure could never have been maintained at any density such as human lungs demanded.

But they were on their way, and Chet's customary genial expression gave place to one of more grim determination as he watched the white-flecked ocean drift slowly past below.

Once a patrol ship spoke to them. Daylight had come to show plainly the silver hull with the distinctive red markings of the Service that slipped smoothly down from above to hang poised under flashing fans like a giant humming-bird. Her directed radio beam flashed the yellow call signal in O'Malley's control room.

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Chet was beside him, and the two exchanged silent glances before O'Malley cut in his transmitter. He must give name and number--this signal was a demand that could not be disregarded--but on the old freighter was no automatic sender that would flash the information across to the other ship; the pilot's voice must serve instead.

"Number three--seven--G--four--two!" he thundered into the radiophone. "Freighter of the Intercolonial Line, without cargo--"

"For the love of Pete," shouted the loudspeaker beside him in volume to drown out the pilot's words, "are you sending this by short wave, or are you just yelling across to me? Calm down, you Irish terrier!"

Then, before the pilot could reply, the voice from the silver and red

patrol ship dropped into an exaggerated mimicry of the O'Malley brogue--

"And did yez say 'twas a freighter you had there? Sure, I thot at th' very last 'twas a foine big liner from the Orient and Transpolar run, dropped down here from the hoigh livils! All right, Spud; on your way! But don't crowd the bottom of the Twelve Level so close. This is O--sixteen--L; Jimmy Maddux. By--by! I'll report you O.K."

* * * * *

Again Chet looked at the pilot silently before he glanced back at the vanishing ship, already small in the distance. He repeated the Patrol Captain's words:

"You will 'report us O.K.'--yes, Jimmy, you'll do that, and if they want to find us again you can tell them right where to look."

"I'm pushin' her all I can, Mr. Bullard," said Spud. "'Tis all she can do.... And now do ye go into my cabin--there's two berths there--and we'll just turn in and sleep while my relief man takes his turn. But go in before I call him; there's not a soul on the ship besides ourselves knows that you're here."

And, in the cabin a short time later, Pilot O'Malley chuckled as he whispered: "I gave the lad his course. And Mac will follow it, but it'll niver take him near to the part of Rooshia he expects it to. Still, the record's clear as far as he's concerned; I've got it in the log. Mac's a good lad, and I wouldn't have him get into trouble over this."

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In the freighter's cabin the chronometer was again approaching the hour of twenty-two; for nearly twenty-four hours the ship had been on

her plodding way. And, lacking the A.D.D.--the Automatic Destination Detector--and other refinements of instrumental installations of the passenger ships, Pilot O'Malley had to work out his position for himself.

And where a faster craft would have driven through with scarcely a quiver, the big ship trembled with the buffets and suction of a wintry blast that drove dry snow like sand across the lookout glasses. The twelve thousand level was an unbroken cloud of snow--a gray smother where the red ship's blunt and rusty bow nosed through.

O'Malley clung to the chart table as the air gave way beneath them and the ship fell a hundred feet or more before her racing fans took hold and jerked her back to an even keel. He managed to check his figures, then moved to the door of his cabin, opened it and called softly.

Chet was beside him in an instant. It had seemed best that he remain in hiding, and he knew what the pilot's call meant. "Made it, did you!" he exclaimed. "Now I'll take a look about and pick up my bearing points."

But one look at the ports and he shook his head.

"That's dirty," he told O'Malley, and his eyes twinkled as he felt the old ship rear and plunge with the lift of a driving gale; "and how the old girl does feel it! She can't rip through, and she can't go above. You've had some trip, Spud; it's been mighty decent of you to go to all this--"

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A flashing of yellow light on the instrument panel brought his thanks to a sudden halt. A voice, startling in its sudden loudness, filled the little room.

"Calling three--seven--G--four--two! Stand by for orders! Patrol O--sixteen--L sending; acknowledge, please!"

Chet's eyes were staring into those of O'Malley. "That's Jimmy Maddux back on our trail," he said. "Now, what has got them suspicious?"

He glanced once at the collision instrument. "He's right overhead at thirty thousand," he added; "and there are more of them coming in from all sides. Now what the devil--"

Spud O'Malley had his hand on the voice switch. "Be quiet!" he commanded; then spoke into the transmitter--

"Three--seven--G--four--two acknowledging!" he said, and again Chet observed how all trace of accent had departed from his voice; it was an indication of the moment's tenseness and of the pilot's full understanding of their position.

The answering order was crisply spoken; this was a different Jimmy Maddux from the one who had chaffed the Irish pilot some hours before.

"Stand by! We're coming down! Records at Hoover Terminal show two men reporting at pilots' gate under the number of your engineer, CG41. Hold your ship exactly where you are; we're sending a man aboard!"

* * * * *

Chet had moved silently to the controls. The old multiple-lever instrument--he knew it well! But he looked at Spud O'Malley and waited for his nod of assent before he presumed to trespass on another pilot's domain. Then he shifted two little levers, and the ship

fell away beneath them as it plunged toward the Earth.

And Pilot O'Malley was explaining to the Patrol Ship Captain as best he could for the rolling plunge of the careening ship:

"I can't hold her, sir. And you'd best be keepin' away. It's stormin' fearful down here, and I can't rise above it! Keep clear!--I'm warnin' you!" The hum of their helicopters rose to a shrill whine as Chet drove the ship out and down through the smothering clouds. "You must hear her fans on your instruments; you can see how we're pitchin'!"

He switched off the transmitter for a moment and faced Chet. "They've been checkin' close," he stated. "That was my engineer's number I gave you as we came through the gate. And, of course, he had given it before when he reported in. Now we're up against it."

The collision instrument was humming with the sound of many motors, and warning lights were giving their silent alarm of the oncoming ships.

"They're comin' in," Spud went on hopelessly, "like a flock of kites in the tropics when one of them's found somethin' dead--and it's us that's the carcass!"

* * * * *

But Chet was not listening. The snowy clouds had broken for an instant; their ship had driven through and beneath them. Through the wild, whirling chaos of white there came for an instant a rift--and far across an icy expanse Chet glimpsed a range of black hills!

He spoke sharply to the pilot. "That's Jimmy Maddux above us--kid him along, Spud! Tell him we're coming up, don't let him grab us with his magnets! This is putting you in a devil of a hole, old man. I'm

sorry!--but we've got to see it through now.

"You can never set this ship down, Spud; that patrol would be on our backs in half a second. And they'd knock me out with one shot the minute I stepped outside."

The clear space in the storm had filled again with the dirty gray of wind-whipped snow; off at the right a dim glow of distant fires was the midnight sun as it shone for a brief moment. One blast, more malignant in its fury than those that had come before, tore first at the blunt bow, then caught them amidships to roll the big, sluggish freighter till her racked framework shrieked and chattered.

Spud pointed through a rear lookout where a silvery Patrol Ship flashed down through the clouds. "There's Jimmy!" he shouted. "He's takin' no chances of our landing--he's right on our tail!"

* * * * *

But Chet Bullard, his hands working at the control levers, was staring straight ahead into that gray blast; and his eyes were shining as he pulled back on a lever that threw them once more into the concealment of the whirling clouds above.

"Spud," he was shouting, "have you got a 'chute? You freighters have 'em sometimes. Get me a 'chute and I'll fool them yet! I saw the shed--our hangars--our work shop! There's where our ship is!"

They were lost once more in the snow that seemed to be driving past in solid drifts. Chet heard Spud shouting down a voice tube. And, curiously, it was plain that the Irish pilot had lost all tenseness from his voice; he was happy and as carefree as if he had found the answer to all his perplexing questions. He was calling an order to his relief pilot.

"Mac--do ye break out two parachutes, me lad! Bring 'em up here, and shake a leg! No, there's nothin' to worry about--devil a thing!"

Then, into the transmitter, he shouted thickly as he switched the instrument on:

"Jimmy, me bhoy, kape away! Kape away, I'm tellin' you, or ye'll have me Irish temper disturbed, and I'm a devil whin I'm roused! What do I know about your twin engineers? Wan of thim makes trouble enough for me! Now take yourself away, and don't step on the tail of this ship or we'll go down to glory together!--unless we go to another terminal and find ourselves in hell, and us all covered wid snow. Think how devilish conspicuous you'd be feelin'--"

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A discord of voices silenced his laughing banter; on the instrument board the warning light was flashing imperatively. Above the bedlam of voices one stood out, and all other commands went silent before the voice of authority.

"Silence! This is the Commander of Air! Orders for O--sixteen--L: seize that ship! Your magnets!--disregard damage!--get your magnets on that ship and hold her. We are coming down--"

Chet reached for the transmitter switch and opened it that their voices might not go beyond the control room.

"Lots of company; they seem pretty certain that they're on the right track. And the big boss himself is coming down to call. Can't you hurry those 'chutes?"

The control room door was flung open as the figure of a young man stumbled through and dropped two bundles of cloth and webbing

upon the floor. He clung to the door-frame as Chet threw the big freighter into a totally unexpected maneuver that rolled them down and away from a silver-bellied ship above. Then the levers moved again, and the ship went hard-a-port as Chet caught again one fleeting glimpse of shadow below that could only be the markings of a building he had known well.

"Hold her there, Spud!" he shouted. "He'll be back in a minute or two! He'll get us next time!"

Chet was reaching for the straps of a 'chute. He had the webbing about him when he stopped to waste precious seconds in wide-eyed staring at the figure of Spud O'Malley.

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Spud was pulling at a recalcitrant buckle. He had motioned the relief pilot to take the controls, and now the bulk of a parachute pack hung awkwardly behind him.

"Spud!" Chet shouted. "You're not stepping out too! It's no sure thing with these old 'chutes; they're probably rotten! Stay here! Tell 'em I stuck you up with a gun!--tell 'em I made you bring me--"

"If you must talk," said Spud O'Malley calmly, and pulled a strap tight across his chest, "do ye be tryin to work while you talk. Get that harness on! If I let you stow away on my ship you can do no less than take me along on yours!"

A crashing impact drove the men to the floor in a sprawling heap; Chet pulled the last strap tight as he lay there. The lookouts were black above where the belly of a Patrol Ship clung close.

"Jimmy knows how to obey orders," said Chet as he came to his

feet. "No cable magnets for Jimmy! He just smashed down on top of us, ripped off our fans and grabbed hold." He was helping Spud to his feet as he spoke.

"Mac, me bhoy," the pilot told his assistant, "the log has it all, the whole story. There'll be no trouble for you at all."

He yanked quickly at the port-opening switch, and the big steel disk backed slowly out of its threaded seat and swung wide.

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Chet drew back one involuntary step as a blast of icy wind drove stinging snow into his face. Then, without a word, he gave Spud O'Malley a joyous grin and threw himself out into the void....

And, later, as he released the 'chute where a wind was dragging him violently across an icy expanse, he was laughing exultantly to see another 'chute whirled into the enshrouding drifts, while the chunky figure of a man came scrambling to his feet that he might shake a fist into the air toward some hidden enemy and shout into the storm epithets only half-heard.

"--and be damned to ye!" Chet heard him conclude; then was close enough to throw one arm about the figure and draw him after where he made his way toward a building that was like a mountain of snow.

Spud must have marveled at the craft within; at her sleek, shining sides; the flat nose that ended in a black exhaust port. He was examining the other exhausts that ringed her round when Chet pulled out a lever from the streamlined surface and swung open an entrance port.

He motioned Spud into the brilliantly lighted interior, where nitron

illuminators were almost blinding as they shone of gleaming levers and dials of a control room like none that Spud O'Malley had ever seen.

Chet had thrown the building's doors open wide; a whirling motor had drawn them back on hidden tracks. Now he closed the entrance port with care, then glanced at his instruments before he placed his hand on a metal ball.

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It hung suspended in air within a cage of curved bars. It was a modification of the high-liner ball-control, and it was new. Walt Harkness had had it installed to replace a more crudely fashioned substitute that had brought them safely back from the Dark Moon. The name of that new satellite was on Chet's lips as his thin hand rested delicately upon the ball.

"It's not the Dark Moon this time, old girl," he told the ship, "though you've taken me there twice. But we're going up just the same, and I told the Commander he hasn't Patrol Ships enough to hold us back." His fingers were gripping the little ball--lifting it--moving it forward....

And, as if he lifted the ship itself, the silent cylinder came roaring into life. Within the great building was a thundering blast that made the voice of the storm less than a whispering breath. It came but faintly through the heavily insulated walls, but Chet felt the lift of the ship, and that joyous smile was crinkling about his eyes as the silvery cylinder floated smoothly out of her shelter into the grip of the wind.

His eyes were on an upper lookout, where clouds were driving away like a curtain unrolled. More cloud banks were coming, but, for a time, the heavens were clear where the great red hull of a rusty freighter hung helpless beneath a red and silver Patrol Ship whose magnets

held fast to its prey.

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There were other shapes in the markings of the Service that shot slantingly down. Chet thought again of the carrion birds; then he saw the gold star on the bow of a great cruiser and knew from that ship that the Commander must be seeing their own below. Then he eased gently forward on a tiny ball--forward and forward, while the compensating floor of the control room swung up behind them and seemed thrusting up with unbearable weight.

There were flashes from the cruisers above, and flashes of red on the ice behind with fountains of shattered ice and rock; detonite works its most terrible destruction on a surface that is brittle and hard. But of what avail are detonite shells against a craft whose speed builds up to something greater than the muzzle velocity of a shell?--a silvery craft that sweeps out and out toward a black mountain range; then swings slowly up in a curve of sheer beauty that bends into banked masses of clouds--and ends.

But within the control room, Chet Bullard, no longer Master Pilot of the World, but master, in all truth, of space, knew that his ship's flight was far from ending. He turned to grin happily at his companion.

"We're off!" he shouted. "And it's thanks to you that we made it. If Haldgren's alive he'll have you to thank; for it's you that has done the trick so far!"

But Spud O'Malley answered soberly as he stared up and out into the blackness of levels he had never seen.

"I've helped," he admitted; "I've helped a bit. But it's a devil of a job of navigatin' that's ahead. And that's up to you, Chet Bullard; 'tis no job

for an old omadhaun like mesilf!"

Chet felt the lift of the Repelling Area as they shot through. Ahead was the black velvet night that he knew so well; its silent emptiness was pricked through with bright points of fire.

"I found the Dark Moon," he said slowly, "and that you can't see at all. This other will be easy."

There was no boastfulness in the tone, and Spud O'Malley nodded as he glanced respectfully at the young man who threw back his disheveled mop of hair from a lean face and marked down some cryptic figures on a record sheet.

Chet Bullard was on the job ... and his passenger, it would seem, was satisfied that his unbelievable adventure was well begun.

CHAPTER IV

Life Monstrous and Horrible

"It looks," said Spud O'Malley, "as if some bad little spalpeen of the skies had thrown pebbles at it when 'twas soft. It's fair pockmarked with places where the stones have hit."

He was staring through a forward lookout, where the whole sky seemed filled with a tremendous disk. One quarter was brilliantly alight; it formed a fat crescent within whose arms the rest of the globe was held in fainter glowing. By comparison, this greater portion was dark, though illuminated by earthlight far brighter than any moonlight on Earth.

But light or dark, the surface showed nothing but an appalling

desolation where the rocky expanse had been still further torn and disrupted--pockmarked, as O'Malley had said, with great rings that had been the walls of tremendous volcanoes.

Chet was consulting a map where a similar area of circular markings had been named by scientists of an earlier day.

"Hercules," he mused, and stared out at the great circle of the moon. "The crater of Hercules! Yes, that must be it. That dark area off to one side is the Lake of Dreams; below it is the Lake of Death. Atlas! Hercules! Suffering cats, what volcanoes they must have been!"

"I don't like your names," objected O'Malley. "Lake of Death! That's not so good. And I don't see any lake, and the whole Moon is wrong side up, according to your map."

Chet reached for the ball-control, moved it, and swung their ship in a slow, rotary motion. The result was an apparent revolution of the Moon.

"There, it's right side up," Chet laughed; "that is, if you can tell me what direction is 'up' out here in space. And, as for the names, don't let them disturb you; they don't mean anything. Some old-timer with a little three-inch telescope probably named them. The darker areas looked like seas to them. Astronomers have known better for a long time; and you and I--we're darned sure of it now."

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The great sea of shadow, a darker area within the shaded portion whose only light came from the Earth, was plainly a vast expanse of blackened rock. An immense depression, like the bottom of some earlier sea, it was heaved into corrugations that Chet knew would be mountain-high at close range. Marked with the orifices of what once

had been volcanoes, the floor of that Lake of Death was hundreds of miles in extent.

But as for seas and lakes, there was no sign of water in the whole, vast, desolate globe. An unlikely place, Chet admitted, for the beginning of their search, and yet--those flashes of light!--the S O S! They had been real!

The bow blast had been roaring for over an hour; their strong deceleration made the forward part of the ship seem "down." And down it was, too, by reason of the pull of the great globe they were approaching. But the roaring exhaust up ahead was checking their speed; Chet measured and timed the apparent growth of the Moon-disk and nodded his satisfaction at their reduced speed.

"This will stop us," he said. "I didn't know but we would have to swing off, shoot past, and return under control. But we're all right, and there is the place we are looking for--the big ring of Hercules, the level floor of rock inside it. And over at one side the smaller crater--"

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He was gazing entranced at the mammoth circle that had been a volcano's throat--the very one he had seen flashed on the screen. He moved the control to open a side exhaust and change their direction of fall. He was still staring, with emotions too overwhelming for words, and Spud O'Malley was silent beside him, as the great ring spread out and became an up-thrust circle of torn, jagged mountains some thirty or more miles across and directly below.

They fell softly into that circle. Its mountainous sides were high; they blocked off the view of the enormous terraces beyond that had been the crater's sloping sides.

From the direction that had suddenly become "east," the rising sun's strong light struck in a slant to make the bar rocks seem incandescent. On one side the giant rim of the encircling mountains was black with shadow. The shadow reached out across the vast, rocky floor almost to the foot of the opposite wall many miles away. It enveloped their falling ship like a cushioning, ethereal sea: velvety, softly black, almost palpable.

It was wrapping them about in the darkness of night as Chet's slender hand touched so delicately upon the ball-control—checked them, eased off, drew back again until the thundering exhausts echoed softly where their ship hung suspended a hundred feet above a rocky floor. The shrouding darkness erased the harsh contours of mountain and plain; it seemed shielding this place of desolation and horror from critical, perhaps unfriendly eyes of these beings from another world. And Chet laid their ship down gently and silently on the earthlit plain as if he, too, felt this sense of intrusion—as if there might be those who would resent the trespass of unwanted guests.

But Spud O'Malley must have experienced no such delicacy of feeling. He let go one long pent-up breath.

"And may the saints protect us!" he said. "The Lake of Death outside, and inside here is purgatory itself, or I don't know my geography. But you made it, Chet, me bhoy; you made it! What a sweet little pilot you are!"

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"There's air here," Chet was telling his companion later; "air of a sort, but it's no good to us."

He pointed to the spectro-analyzer with its groupings of lines and light bands. "Carbon dioxide," he explained, "and some nitrogen, but

mighty little of either. See the pressure gage; it's way down.

"But that won't bother us too much. We've got some suits stowed away in the supplies that will hold an atmosphere of pressure, and their oxygen tanks will do the rest. We were ready for anything we might find on our Dark Moon trip, but we didn't need them there. Now they'll come in handy."

"That's all right," O'Malley assured him; "I've gone down under water in a diving suit; I've gone outside a ship for emergency repairs in a suit like yours when the air was as thin as this; I can stand it either way. But what I want to know is this:

"What the devil chance is there of findin' your man, Haldgren, in such a frozen corner of purgatory as this? How could he live here? Here you've come in a fine, big ship, and his was a little bit of a bullet by comparison. Yet I doubt if you could live here for five years with all your big oxygen supply. Now, how could he have done it with his little outfit?

"And what has he eaten? Does this look like a likely place for shootin' rabbits, I ask you? Can a man catch a mess of fish in that empty Lake of Death? Or did Haldgren bring a sandwich with him, it may be?"

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Chet Bullard shook his head doubtfully.

"Don't get sarcastic!" he grinned. "You can't think of any wilder questions than I have asked myself.

"He couldn't have lived here, Spud; that's the only answer. It just isn't humanly possible. All I know is that he did it. I can't tell you how I know

it, but I do. Those lights were a human call for help. No living man but Haldgren could have flashed them. He's alive--or he was then; that's all I know."

Spud crossed the control room as he had done a score of times to look through a glass port at the world outside. Chet, too, turned to the lookout by which he stood and stared through it. The men had found themselves surprisingly light within the ship. They had been compelled to guard against sudden motion; a step, instead of carrying them one stride, might hurl them the length of the room. This lowered gravitational pull helped to explain to the pilot that outer world.

There, close by, was the rocky plain on which he had landed the ship: Smooth and shiny as obsidian in places, again it was spongy gray, the color of volcanic rock, bubbling with imprisoned gases at the instant of hardening. It stretched out and down, that gently rolling plain, for a thousand yards or more, then ended in a welter of nightmare forms done in stone. It was like the work of some demented sculptor's tortured brain.

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Jutting tongues of rock stood in air for a hundred--two hundred--feet. Chet hardly dared estimate size in this place where all was so strange and unearthly. The hot rock had spouted high in the thin air, and it had frozen as it threw itself frantically out from the inferno of heat that had given it birth. The jets sprayed out like spume-topped waves; they were whipped into ribbons that the winds of this world could not tear down, and the ribbons shone, waving white in the earthlight. The tortured stone was torn and ripped into twisted contortions whose very writhing told of the hell this had been. Its grotesque horror struck through to the deeper levels of Chet's mind with a feeling he could not have depicted in words.

From the higher elevation where their ship lay he could look out and across this welter of storm-lashed rock to see it level off, then vanish where another crater mouth yawned black. Here was the inner crater! It had seemed small before; it was huge now--a place of mystery, a black, waiting throat into which Chet knew he must go--a place of indefinable terror.

But it was the place, too, whence strange flashes had come, flashes that had told of the distress and suffering of men since the time when wireless waves had been widely used. The old call--the S O S!--it had come from that throat; it had seemed a call sent directly to him! And Chet Bullard's eyes held steadily toward that place of mystery and of a sender unknown.

"I'm going down," he told himself more than O'Malley. "There's something about it I can't understand, something pretty damnable about it, I admit. But, whatever it is, that's what I am here to find out."

"'Tis a devil of a place to die," said O'Malley, "and not one I'd pick out at all. But it may be we won't have to. I'm goin' along, of course."

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The master pilot was reaching for the flexible metal suit he had brought from the store room. It was air-tight, gas-proof; it would hold an internal pressure far beyond anything the wearer would demand; and its headpiece was flexible like the body of the suit, and would fit him closely.

He drew the suit up over the clothes he wore and closed the front with one pull of a metal tab. Within, soft rubber-faced cushions had interlocked; the body would fasten to the headpiece in the same way. But Chet paused with the headpiece in his hand.

He looked at the glass window that would be before his eyes; at the thin diaphragms that would come over his ears and that would admit all ordinary sounds; and he tried out the microphone attachment that he could switch on to bring to his ears the faintest whisper from outside. All this he examined with care while he seemed to be thinking deeply. Then he straightened and looked at his companion.

"No, Spud, you're not going," he said. "This is my job. You'll stay with the ship. You and I make a rather small army: we don't know yet what we may be up against, and we mustn't risk all our forces in one advance. I'll see what is there; and, in case anything happens, you can take the ship back. I've taught you enough on the way over; I had this very thing in mind."

He slipped the helmet over his blond head before O'Malley could reply.

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The ear-pieces and the microphone allowed him to hear. Another diaphragm in the center of the metal across his chest took his own voice and shouted it into the room.

"Sure, I know you want to go. Spud; but you'll have to stay in reserve. Now show me how well you can fly the ship. Lift her off; then drift over that crater, and we'll have a look-see!"

Spud O'Malley's face was glum as he obeyed. Spud had seen nothing but death in this place of horror--Chet had observed that plainly--yet it was equally plain that the Irish pilot was finding the order to live in safety a bitter dose. But Spud knew how to take orders; he lifted the little ball gently and swung the ship out toward the blackness of that deeper pit.

Chet was watching the changing terrain. He saw the place of solid-spouted rock end; saw it flatten out to an undulating surface that had rolled and heaved itself into many-colored shapes. Even in the earthlight the kaleidoscopic colors were vivid in their changing reds and blues and yellow sheens. Then this surface sloped sharply away, though here it was rough with broken rock where half-hardened lava coughed from that throat, had fallen back and adhered to the molten sides.

This rock in the inner crater was gray, pale and ghostly in the earthlight. It went down and still down where Chet's eyes could not follow--down to an utter blackness. Chet was staring speculatively at that waiting dark when the first flash came.

Blindingly keen! A flash of white light!--another and another! It blazed dazzlingly into their cabin in vivid dashes and dots--the same signal as before was being repeated!

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A hundred yards away was a little shelf of rock. Chet jerked at O'Malley's shoulder with his metal-cased hand and pointed. "Set her down!" he ordered "Let me out there! We can't put the ship down where those lights are; the throat is too narrow; there may be air-currents that would smash us on a sharp rock. I'll go down! You wait! I'll be back."

He was opening the inner door of the entrance port. Another closure in the outer shell made an air-lock. He took time for one grip at the hand of Spud O'Malley, one grin of excited, adventurous joy that wrinkled about his eyes behind the window of his helmet--then he picked up a detonite pistol, examined again its charge of tiny shells, jammed it firmly into the holster at his waist and swung the big door shut behind him.

And Pilot O'Malley watched him go with a premonition that he dared not speak. He heard the closing of the outer door; saw the tall, slender figure in a metal suit like a knight of old as Chet waved once, settled the oxygen tank across his shoulders and picked his way carefully over a waste of shattered stone that led down and down into the dark.

Then the Irishman looked once at the suit he had expected to wear, stared back where the figure of Chet had vanished, then dropped his head upon his hands while his homely face was twisted convulsively.

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It had come so soon! The great adventure was upon them before he had realized. The reconnaissance--the flashes--and then Chet had gone! And now he was alone in a silent ship that rested quietly in this soundless world. The silence was heavy upon him; it seemed pressing in with actual weight to bear him down. It was shattered at the last by the faintest of whispered echoes from without.

Spud was on his feet in an instant, his eyes straining at one lookout after another, each giving him a view of only the desolation he knew and hated.

What could it have been? he demanded. He found and rejected a dozen answers before he saw, far down in the black crater-mouth, a flash of red; then heard again that ghost of a sound and knew it for what it was.

Thick walls, these of the space ship, and insulated well; and the thin atmosphere of this wild world could cut a blast of sound to a mere fraction of its volume! But the walls were admitting a fragmental echo of what must have been a reverberating voice. They were quivering to

the roar of exploding detonite!

It was Chet! He was fighting, he was in trouble! Spud's trembling hands steadied upon the metal control; he lifted the ship as smoothly as even Chet might have done, and he drove it out and down into a throat too narrow for safety, but where the tiny, red flash of a weapon had called with an S O S as plain as any lettered call--a message to which brave men have everywhere responded.

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He saw Chet but once. The master pilot had shown him the flare release lever; he moved it now, and the place of darkness was suddenly blinding with light. There were rocks close at hand; the crater had narrowed to a funnel throat that was cut and terraced as if by human hands. Below, it ended in a smooth stone floor where the lava had sealed it shut.

From a terrace came the gleaming reflection of Chet's suit. Miraculously the gleam was doubled, as if another in similar garb stood at his side. And beyond, from blocks of stone, came leaping things--living creatures!

The light died. Spud realized he had not opened the release lever full. He fumbled for it--found it, jammed it over! And in the light that followed he saw only empty, terraced walls where nothing moved, and a lava floor below that, for an instant, gaped open, then again was smooth and firm.

And the thunder of his ship's exhausts came back to him from those threatening walls to tell of a loneliness more certain and terrible than any solitude he had found in the silence where he had waited above.

But through all his dismay ran an undercurrent of puzzled

wonderment. For here on a dead world, where all men agreed there could be no life, he had seen the impossible.

Only one glimpse before the light had died; only for an instant had he seen the things that leaped upon Chet—but he knew! Never again could any man tell Spud O'Malley that the Moon was a lifeless globe ... and he knew that the life was of a form monstrous and horrible and malign!

CHAPTER V

"And I've Brought You to This!"

The master pilot, when he stepped forth upon that weird globe which was the Moon, found himself plunged into a spectral world. Even from within the air-tight suit, through whose helmet-glass he peered, he sensed, as he had not when inside the ship, the vast desolation, the frozen emptiness of this rocky waste.

His suit of woven metal was lined throughout with heavy fabric of insuline fibers, that strange product brought from the jungle heat of the upper Amazon to keep out the bitter cold of this frozen world. His ship was felted with the same material between its double walls; without it there would have been no resisting the cold of these interstellar reaches.

But, despite the padding within his suit, he felt the numbing cold of this dead world strike through. And the bleak and frigid barrenness that met his gaze was so implacably hostile to any living thing as to bring a shudder of more than physical cold.

No warming sun, as yet, reflected from the rocks. About him was the blackness of a fire-formed lithosphere, whose lighter veining and

occasional ashy fields were made ghostly in the earthlight.

One slow, all-seeing glance at this!--one moment of wondering amazement when he tilted his head far back that he might look up to the mouth of the crater and see, in a dead-black sky, the great crescent of earth--a vast, incredible moon peeping over the serrate edge. Then, as if the interval of time since leaving the ship had been measured in hours instead of brief seconds, he remembered the flashing lights that had signaled from below.

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His first step carried him, slipping and sprawling awkwardly, across a rocky slope white with the rime of carbon dioxide frost. He came to his feet and turned once to wave toward the ship where he knew Spud O'Malley must be watching from a lookout. Then, moving cautiously, to learn the gage of his own strength in this world of diminished weights, he started down.

Rough going, Chet found; the wall of this great throat had not hardened without showing signs of its tortured coughing. But Chet learned to judge distance, and he found that a fifty-foot chasm was a trifle to be crossed in one leap; huge boulders, whose molten sides had frozen as they ran and dripped, could be surmounted by the spring of his leg muscles that could throw him incredibly through the air. And always he went downward toward the place where the lights had flashed.

They came once more. He had descended a thousand feet, he was estimating, when the black igneous rocks blazed blindingly with a reflected light like that of a thousand suns.

Another hundred feet below, down a precipitous slope, was a broad table of rock. He saw it in the instant before he threw one metal-clad

arm across the eye-piece of his helmet to shut out the glare. And he saw, in that fraction of a second, a moving figure, another like himself, clad in an armored suit whose curves and fine-woven mesh caught the light in a million of sparkling flames.

It was Haldgren, he told himself; and there was something that came chokingly into his throat at the thought. That lonely figure—one tiny dot of life on a bleak and lifeless stage! It was pitiful, this undying effort to signal, to let his own world know that he still lived.

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Chet did not put it into coherent words, but there was an overwhelming emotion that was part pity and part pride. He was suddenly glad and thankful to belong to a race of men who could carry on like this—who never said die. And, as the glare winked out, he threw himself recklessly down that last slope and brought up in a huddle at the feet of the one who had started back in affright. There was one metal-cased hand that went in a helpless gesture to the throat; the figure, all silvery white in the dim Earth-glow, staggered back against a wall of rock; only by inches did it miss a fall from the precipice edge where the rock platform ended.

From the floor, where his fall had flung him in awkward posture, Chet saw this; saw it and marveled vaguely. What picture he had formed of Haldgren—what he had expected of him—he could not have told. Certainly it was not this slenderly youthful figure, nor this reaction that was more of fright than startled amazement. And the voice! Surely he had heard an involuntary, half-stifled scream!

He came slowly to his feet. And he was wondering now if his deductions had been wrong. He had been to sure that the sender of those messages was an Earth-man; he had been so certain of finding Haldgren.

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Slowly he crossed the table of rock toward the waiting figure; gently he extended his hands, palms upward, in a gesture of peaceful promise. Whoever, whatever this was--this Moon-being who had signaled and in doing so had happened upon the letters that had a definite meaning of Earth--Chet knew he must not frighten him. One outstretched hand touched the metal that cased an arm; moved upward to the headpiece, as close-fitting as his own; tilted it that the light of Earth might shine within and show him what manner of being he had found.

And Chet, who had seen strange creatures on that Dark Moon where he and Harkness had explored, was prepared, despite the suit so like his own, to see some weird being of this newer world. But for what the soft light of that distant Earth disclosed he was entirely unprepared.

Eyes, blue and lovely as an azure sea but wide with terror and dismay; eyes that showed plainly a consternation of unbelief that changed slowly, as the blue eyes stared into Chet's gray ones, until they were suddenly misty with tears; and the figure sagged and would have dropped at his feet had he not caught it in his arms.

He heard his own voice exclaiming in wonderment: "A girl! One of our own kind! Out here! On the Moon!"

And another voice, sweetly tremulous, replied:

"Oh, it's true--it's true! You have come! You read my call! Oh, I hardly dared hope--"

Then the thrilling ecstasy of happiness in the voice gave place to

accents of dismay as some horror of fear swept in upon her.

"And I've brought you to this! You will be lost! Quick! Climb for your life! I will come after. Quick! Quick!"

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There was agony in the voice now, and the figure wrenched itself from Chet's arms to point one slender hand upward in frantic urging, while yet the head turned that the eyes might look backward as if some danger threatened from below.

"I've got a ship," Chet assured her. "God knows who you are or how you got here, but it's all right now. We'll leave."

He had regained his grip upon one of those slender hands and was preparing to swing her up to the top of an incredibly high rock. Her scream checked him and sent his one free hand to the detonite pistol at his waist.

"Behind you!" she cried. "Look back! They have come out!"

The crater-pit behind and below them was black with the inky blackness of smooth, fire-formed rock. Its many facets were smooth and polished; they made mirrors, many of them, for the earthlight reflected from the crater mouth. They served to diffuse this dim light and throw it again upon the monstrous blacknesses that were swarming from below.

"Men!" thought Chef in one instant of half-comprehension. Then, as he saw the chalk-white bodies, the dead and flabby whiteness of their faces from which red eyes stared, he revised his estimate; here was nothing human.

The pistol was in his hand, but as yet he had not fired. Only the terror in the girl's voice had told him that these were enemies; he waited for a closer view or for some direct attack, and needed to wait but a moment.

Only an instant after he had seen, the chalk-white bodies clustered below were in motion. They came leaping up the smooth expanses of rock, and they were obscured at times as if by black curtains that were drawn across their bodies. Then they would flash out again in dead-white nakedness.

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It was uncanny. Chet had a feeling that they were wrapping themselves in black invisibility. Only when a score of the white things threw themselves out into space did he know the truth.

Out and upward they sprang, to soar above Chet's head and land on the slope above. All escape was cut off now; but it was not this thought that held Chet motionless for that moment of horror. It was the glimpse he had had against the light of the crater mouth of beating, flailing wings that whipped the thin air above him; of curved claws; and of long, horrible tails that might have belonged to giant rats. And the demoniac cries that the thin air brought him were no more suggestive of devils unleashed than were the leathery wings and the fleshy tails of the beasts.

Yet it was not this alone that stunned the mind of the master pilot, but the horrible incongruity, of this monstrous inhumanness allied with the human form of their bodies. And throughout he observed, with a curious sense of detachment, the furious beating of the wings, almost useless in the thin air, and the expansion and contraction of sac-like membranes on each side of the necks which he took to be auxiliary lungs.

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It was the girl's action that brought Chet to his senses. She moved slowly across the smooth table of rock toward the three or four beasts who had gained its level. Her head was bowed in utter dejection; Chet sensed it as plainly as if she had spoken. She held out her hands helplessly toward the creatures--and in that instant Chet's pistol spoke.

Tiny shells, those of a detonite pistol, and the grain of explosive in the tip of each bullet is microscopic. But no body, human or inhuman, be it made of flesh, can withstand the shattering concussion of that exploding shell.

The beasts beside that figure, slenderly girlish even in its metal sheath, fell into the pit beyond; their screams rang horribly as they fell. There were others who took their places, and they, too, vanished under the smashing shots.

And then, after timeless moments of waiting, while the only sound was the half-audible voice of the girl who sobbed: "Now you are surely lost. They will kill you--you should not have fired--I should never have brought you here"--there came the familiar thunder of a ship's exhausts.

Down from above, a black shadow came silently crashing; a blaze of light terrific in its brilliance brought an exclamation to Chet's lips and hope to his heart.

"Spud! You old fool, you're coming to get us!"

But the words ended with an avalanche of bodies that threw themselves down the black slope. There were others coming from

below, leaping from the stones. The ledge was filled with them.

Chet was firing blindly as he felt himself borne down--felt long fingers that ripped, then closed about his throat and jammed the metal of his suit in chokingly. He heard the beating of giant wings about him; felt himself half-carried and half-thrown toward a floor of rock far below.

There was an opening that loomed blackly in that floor; one glimpse of his surroundings Chet had before the press of bodies closed him in. They were forcing the shining, silvery figure of a girl into that black opening--dropping her! Then he felt himself hurled into the same void, while above him a ship of space thundered vainly from her great exhausts as if roaring in rage at her own futility.

CHAPTER VI

Heart of the Moon

In the grasp of the winged creatures' long, clawed hands Chet was helpless. He was struggling vainly when they released their hold and he felt himself falling into a pit that, as far as he knew, was a bottomless abyss. He was still struggling to right himself in mid-air when he struck.

To fall even so short a distance on Earth would have meant instant death. Here, where gravitation's pull was but one-sixth that of Earth, he still struck on a rocky floor with a thud that made him sick for lack of breath.

Above him was a pale circle of light. Tipping the edge of a vast crater mouth high above was a rim of brilliance. Earthlight! Chet was suddenly certain that he was seeing that glow for the last time as the circle went black, and there came to him the unmistakable clang of

metal where a door was shut.

Through the countless mingled emotions that filled him he was wondering what manner of creatures these were into whose hands he had fallen. Intelligent, beyond a doubt, in their own way; he could not question the evidence of his own eyes and ears. They were able to work in metals and to seal the mouth of this lunar tomb.

But he was still alive; he could not give up now. This adventure upon which he had launched with such high hopes had turned out differently than expected; but, he told himself, it was not ended yet.

And, instead of a lifeless globe, he had found this: a place peopled with strange, half-human life. And, more marvelous still, instead of Haldgren, whom he had come to seek, there had been a girl!

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Chet had recovered his ability to breathe, had made sure that the oxygen tank was intact; and now he called softly into the blackness of this dark vault where he had seen her thrown.

"Are you alive?" he asked. "Can you hear me?"

For answer came quick rustling of moving bodies, the smooth rasping of wings on leathery wings, hands that fumbled for him, then closed about arms and legs and throat, while in his ears was a chattering of high-pitched squeals. Again he was lifted in air, held there in the grip of a score of lean, long-fingered hands. He was nerving himself to undergo without flinching whatever new torture might be in store. Yet he thrilled inexplicably as through the sounds of these things about him, he heard a muffled: "Yes--yes! Oh, I am glad--"

The sentence was unfinished. Before Chet's eyes a light was growing. A mere slit at first, it grew to a luminous circle in the rocky floor. And as it opened, he felt the pressure of his metal suit upon his body, where before it had been slightly ballooned by the pressure of oxygen he had maintained.

With the opening of this door to another subterranean chamber had come a renewed atmospheric pressure. And now, in the denser gas, he saw, in ghastly silhouette against the lighted pit, flying figures that floated and soared on outstretched wings of inky black.

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Beside him and above he heard the swishing flutter of other wings; he felt himself lifted from the floor; he was being floated out above the luminous pit by the flying things that held him.

No direct glare came from below, but a soft violet radiance. It shone full upon him--past him--to light up and give detail to those faces that had been featureless before. Chet had just one moment of fascinated staring into the diabolical, pasty faces where narrow, red eyes stared back into his. Then the squealing voices were stilled!

One, louder than the rest, rasped an order. And again Chet felt the hands relax; once more he was falling, down--down--and still down--until he knew that his velocity of fall meant an impact he could never survive.

And, curiously, as he fell, his mind was entirely unconcerned with his own fate. For himself, he had accepted death. But he saw for what seemed like hours a vision of a familiar control room and an Irish pilot who sat by the controls. He was looking sharply ahead, he was checking speed, he was landing softly--safely--on a familiar field of Earth....

That passed; and, following, came a feeling of regret, a deep hurt and a rage at his own inability to be of help. For, above him, through the luminous air, he saw another body falling, and he knew that the girl, too, had been thrown to the same fate.

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Those eyes of blue had locked with his for but a few brief seconds. Who she was--what she was--he had no way of knowing. But in that instant of mental meeting there had passed a flash between the two that had burned deeply into Chet's real and hidden self.

Chet, himself, had he been in laughing mood, might have smiled at the idea of affection being born in that brief time. Yet he might have asked instead how long was needed to bridge the sharp gap of a radio-power transmitter; how much time was needed for anode and cathode each to recognize the other. Something of this was passing in confusion through his mind while his more conscious faculties were tensing his body for the fatal impact he knew must come.

Without thinking the thought in words he knew that the luminous walls had receded. They were more distant now; their glow came to him from far above, and, as his falling body turned again and again in air, he saw that below him was nothing but a vast emptiness filled with luminous vapors that swirled and writhed.

Then the last gleam of lighted walls faded; he was falling at terrific speed through a black tempest whose winds tore and screamed about him.

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It was his own falling speed that made these winds; there remained

with him enough of reasoning power to realize this. And he waited, and marveled that he could fall so tremendous a distance. First had been the great shaft down which he had plunged; then, as it widened, had come this greater void. The crater of Hercules must have opened, into a vast shell or a cavern of incredible depth. The winged things of the Moon knew of it; they had cast him to his death--him and the girl.

Her slowly turning body was not far away; it was as if they two hung suspended in air, while frightful blasts of whatever gas filled this space whipped and shrieked past and wrapped them round with a terrific pressure. And then the tempest ceased. Slowly the blasts diminished; the pressure relaxed; gradually the sense of falling passed away, and with this there came a glimpse of light.

Again the walls glowed as they had before, but far off in the distance. Chet saw them grow luminous while he seemed hung motionless in space. Then once more they drew away from him; once more he knew he was falling away from that light--plunging again into the depths he had traversed.

And now, despite the oxygen that came to him uninterruptedly, he found his head swimming. The limit of human endurance had been reached.

Desperately he tried to bring his reason to bear upon this miracle that had happened. He had not struck; instead of falling to his death he had cushioned against something; he was falling again where, not far away, another metal-clad figure hung limply in air and fell as he fell. And with that knowledge the whirling turmoil within his brain ended in a blood-red flashing that went finally to merciful darkness....

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That darkness still wrapped him thickly about when he regained consciousness--a darkness saved from utter black only by a faint luminosity that seemed to penetrate and be part of the air about him.

Still hardly more than half-conscious, lying, it seemed, on a soft bed where he was weightless, he stirred and flung out one arm. From his fingertips he saw whirls of violet light sweep out and away, as vortices might have been set in motion by a swimmer in a more liquid medium.

Fascinated, failing utterly to comprehend where he was, he moved his hands deliberately, swept one arm from side to side--and a number of luminous whirlpools went spinning out into space. And then he remembered.

He remembered the terrific fall that miraculously brought him back to a place of light like that where his fall had begun. He remembered beginning the second fall; and, while he still could not know what it meant, he knew that he must have been unconscious for hours. And, with that, his thoughts came back to the girl. For the first time he found leisure to give mental voice to his wonderment.

The mystery of it all!--of her presence here on the Moon! Again he was overwhelmed with the wonder of his surprising discovery. It was nearly beyond belief; almost he doubted the reality of what his own eyes had seen.

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But there was no doubting his own presence here in this strange place. The unreality of it--the strangeness of his own sensations--were borne in upon him. Where was he? he asked. What was this soft cushion upon which he rested so lightly? He tried to sit up and found that he merely twisted his body and set other eddies of light

into motion.

Cautiously, he swung one arm out as far as he could reach. There was nothing there. He moved the arm down; reached with his hand beneath him--and still there was nothing tangible! Through his mind swept a gripping fear, a wordless, incoherent terror of something he could not name. Desperately he wanted to touch something firm and solid; lay his hands upon something he knew was real; and he flung out arms and legs in a paroxysm of futile effort.

He seemed hung in nothingness, an utter emptiness where nothing moved; only the ghostly whirls of light that ran lazily away from his beating hands until they died silently away into darkness, swallowed up in this unspeakable horror of soundless space. And, when he had quieted again, he knew with a dreadful certainty that there was nothing there; he was suspended in a great void--immersed in an ocean of some unknown gas.

The sense of loneliness that filled him was devastating. He could have faced death as he had faced it before, unflinchingly; that was all in the day's work. But here was something that tested sanity itself. Could he but touch something substantial, he told himself, it would help him to keep a grip on reality; even to see and feel one of the winged horrors would be in a way a relief.

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His struggles had ceased; all about him the atmosphere was quivering and writhing with whirling light that swirled and danced and mingled one glowing vortex with another. Then it, too, died; and, through the dark that was relieved only by the faint luminosity of the quiescent gas, he saw far off a point of light.

Here was something to which he could pin his eyes; something

outside of himself and the horror of nothingness in which he was immersed. He stared through the window of his helmet while the light grew and expanded into nebulous, cloudy glowing that faded and was gone.

Again it came and died; and a third time. And then Chet Bullard swore loudly and harshly within the silence of his own metal sheath, while he cursed his own dullness that had kept him from instant comprehension.

That light was far away, but, "Keep moving!" Chet called, hoping that his voice might span the void. "Keep moving so I can see your light! I'll try to swim over."

He threw himself over with a convulsive jerk and flattened the palms of his hands in a breaststroke, while he kicked with his feet against the dense atmosphere about him. And he saw with delight that the whirling ripples of light moved back of him; he felt that he was making some headway, slight though it must be.

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He saw her at last, and heard her call:

"I am swimming, too," she cried. "How wonderful to see you! This loneliness! It is horrible--unbearable!"

"I understand," Chet said; "it is pretty bad."

Then, at sound of a stifled sob, he gripped one reaching hand hard and tried to bring himself out from under the pall that numbed his own mind; he even attempted to force a note of lightness into his words.

"I've flown everything with wings," he told her, "but this is the first time

I ever flew myself. Guess I was never properly designed."

Feeble, this attempt at humor; but there was none to note the strained edge in his tone, only a girl, whose metal-clad hand closed in a tight hold upon his.

"You can joke--*now*," she said with a catch in her voice that showed how desperately hard she was trying to meet Chet's fortitude and force her own words to steadiness. "That takes--real nerve. I like that!"

Then she added: "But it's hopeless; you know that. They've got us. And now that some of them have been killed they will--they will--"

And the trace of Chet's strained smile that lingered on his lips, could she have seen it, would have appeared grim.

"Whatever it was you didn't say, I agree with. I imagine the finish will not be pleasant." Once more he was facing the inevitable; and, as before, he faced it squarely and knowingly, then put it completely from his mind. There was so much he must know before that adventure's end was reached.

"Tell me," he demanded, "who are 'they'? Where are they? How many are there of them? And where have they got us? What kind of a place is this, where all natural laws are suspended, where gravitation is at zero?

"And, for heaven's sake, tell me: who are you? Where are you from? How did you get here on the Moon?"

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That uncontrollable catch in the girl's voice had taken on a trace of

brave laughter that overlay the trembling sob in her throat.

"That is a lot of information," she said, "and I am afraid it will not make much difference if you know. Oh, I wish I had some atom of encouragement for you! I do not know who you are either--and you have been so brave! You have come here, I brought you with my signals for help--brought you to your death.

"For it *is* death! This is the end of our adventuring--mine and yours as well--here at the center, the exact center of the Moon."

"Ah-h!" answered Chet Bullard softly, as understanding came to him. "I should have guessed it. The atmospheric pressure and density--and we fell past the center, then back again; we've been vibrating back and forth until we came to rest at last. And now we die! Well, it might have been worse."

He was staring out through the little window of his helmet, staring into the faintly luminous atmosphere, facing the end of his brave fling with fortune. It was an instant before he realized that there was something moving in the void. He pressed softly upon the hand he held and pointed.

"See!" he said in a hushed tone. "There is something there!"

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It took form slowly, a shapeless, round blur in the pale light. Inch by inch it drifted toward them, until Chet moved one hand abruptly and found he had created a ripple of light by which he could see more clearly. And he saw before him a bulging, membraneous sac.

It had been smoothly spherical before; it heaved itself into strange protuberances as he watched. He flipped his hand to set up another

vortex of light, and he saw the first rip that formed in the membrane.

Before his staring eyes the bag burst open; and Chet, who had wished for some substantial thing, even a denizen of this wild world, found his wish fulfilled. For the thin membrane tore in a score of places to release a body from within--a shapeless, huddled mass of chalk-white flesh in a wrapping of black leather that unfolded before his eyes and became wings which waved feebly in their first attempt at flight.

The pallid body, supple as a giant worm, jerked spasmodically and turned sightless eyes toward the watching Earth-folk. Then, as if drawn by some magnet, invisible in the distance, the black wings began to beat the air, and the creature moved off in a straight line toward some unknown goal.

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Another of the membraneous spheres drifted past in the light that came from those fluttering wings. A second showed in repulsive shininess. Chet was aware that there were many of the things about.

"Eggs!" he exclaimed with a disgust that partook of nausea, "And the damnable thing hatched--right here!--before our eyes!"

And the girl gave the final explanation: "The Moon is just a great shell. They lay their eggs, these half-human creatures that you saw, and attach them to the inner surface of that shell. Then at a certain period they come loose and float away. I never knew what became of them; now I understand at last."

"You know all this!" protested Chet. "How can you know it? How long have you been here?"

"I kept track of time for a while," said the voice beside him; "then I forgot it when they took Frithjof away. But it must be about five years. Five years of terror and vain hopes and wild plans for escape! And now it ends--after five years!"

And Chet Bullard, within his metal helmet, was repeating in bewilderment: "Five years! Haldgren left five years ago! What does it mean?"

Nor did he pause to realize that through his amazement was woven a thread of another hue, tinged faintly with jealousy that demanded of him: "Frithjof! Who is Frithjof who was taken away?"

Chet's mind was filled with a confusion of questions that jostled one another to silence when he tried to give them expression. And there was little time for questioning.

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He saw other floating eggs whose membraneous coverings had turned leathery and opaque. And he saw white phantom figures who gathered those eggs. One came near till Chet could make out the repulsive face and black, staring eyes with their fiery red center. It was one of the things that had captured him; he saw it move swiftly on broad wings. It held a leathery egg in its curled-claw hands while its long tail whipped around and laid the egg open with one slash of a sharp spiked point.

One more of the young of this horrible species was liberated and went winging away into the dark, only the whirls of light in the atmosphere marking the beating of its wings.

Chet's eyes followed it to see far out beyond a light that expanded as it drew near. The beaten atmospheric gas was whipped to cold flame

where some ten or a dozen phantom demons came swiftly on toward the waiting humans.

They were swarming about in an instant. Chet had no time for even a shouted warning before he felt himself seized by their long, bony claws. Then a net of rough-fibered rope was flung about him, and he felt it draw tight as the winged beasts lifted him up and out into the void.

"Wrong again!" Chet told himself ruefully. "We don't die at the center of the Moon, after all!" But, as the whipping wings drove whirling blasts of violet light back upon him he could find nothing of comfort in the thought that some different experience still lay ahead.

CHAPTER VII

The Gateway to Hell

Spud O'Malley, at the controls of the ship, held the craft in a vertical lift while his eyes clung in horrible fascination to the mirrors that showed from a lower lookout the volcanic floor falling away. Amazement had almost stifled his breathing, until at last he let go a long breath that ended in a curse.

"The outrageous, damned things!" he breathed. "Jumping, they were, and leaping, and flying on their leather wings like a lot of black bats out o' hell! And I'm thinkin' that's where they've taken Chet Bullard, and never again will he hold a ship like 'twas in the hollow of his hand, and him settin' it down like a feather!

"And: 'Fly back home!' he says to me. I can do it, too; thanks to his teachin'. But fly back and leave that bhoy in the hands of those murderin' devils!--'tis little he knows the Irish!"

He was talking half under his breath, murmuring to himself as if it helped him to see clearly the situation that must be faced.

"But to get to him--that's the trouble. I saw a big door go shut in that stone floor. They're cunnin', clever beasts; I'll say that for 'em. And there was a raft of 'em; and plenty more down in hell where they live, I've no doubt."

He moved forward on the ball-control, and the great ship swept like a silvery shadow through the night toward the distant, lighted crater rim. This he could see clearly, but the other side of the ring of mountains was black with shadow.

And, far out beyond, spread like a cloud over all the desolate world, was blackness. Spud drove the ship up another five thousand feet, and still that darkness spread out in inky pools where only an occasional mountain peak caught the flat rays of the sun.

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And what had Chet called these dark areas? "Lake of Dreams" and "Lake of Death." Spud's superstitious mind was a-quiver with dread and an ominous premonition to which the empty, frozen wastes below him gave added force.

"I'll have to wait," he told himself. "The light of the Moon--I mean the Earth--is bright, but not bright enough. I'll just wait till the Sun climbs higher. When it shines down into that hole that is the gateway to hell--and well I know it--then I can see what is there. Then, maybe, I can find some way to get inside; and I hope the lad lives till I get there."

He circled back; swept down in a long, leisurely flight, and came again to the place of gently sloping rock where Chet had first landed.

And he searched till he found the identical spot and laid the ship down on a level keel.

Far away the Sun was gilding the hard outlines of mountains that ringed them in. Spud did not know how long he must wait. Had he realized that it must be a matter of days it is probable he would have donned the metal suit and started out. But instead he busied himself in a careful investigation of the storeroom and a check-up of ammunition and supplies that were there.

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The lunar day, as all Earth-men know, is a matter of nearly fifteen of Earth's days. Spud O'Malley was wild with impatience when at last the Sun was striking less flatly across the land and he knew that the time had come when he could start.

He had sensed the change that took place in the world outside; from the lookouts of the control room he had seen the bare rocks lose their white markings of hoar frost and at last actually quiver with heat as the Sun beat upon them. He had seen the growing things that crept from every crevice and hollow--pale, colorless mosses that threw out long tendrils which licked across the hot rocks as if hungry for the nourishment the thin air brought.

Spud knew nothing of the carbon dioxide which these pale green growths could combine with water under the Sun's hot rays and build into vegetable tissue. But he marveled again and again at the hungry things that made a mesh of ropy strands across the smooth area about the ship. They even hung in drooping masses from the weird rocks beyond; and, so light they were, they raised their heads hungrily in air, while the corded tendrils even threw themselves in contorted writhings at times when the Sun struck with increasing warmth.

"A dead world!" said Spud scornfully. "How much the scientists back there don't know! First those livin', flyin' devils; and now this! The whole place is fairly wrigglin' with life."

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It was then that he made one last flight over the inner crater and saw light on the floor of stone in the funneled depths. Then he sent the ship like a rocket down to the shelf of rock where Chet had begun his descent; and he worked with trembling fingers to adjust the metal suit and regulate the oxygen supply.

He waited only to strap a couple of detonite pistols about him; then, with never a backward look, he let himself out through the air-locking doors and started pell-mell toward the inner crater.

Like Chet, he had learned to gage his tremendous strength; like the master pilot, he threw himself down the rocky slope. But where Chet had leaped and stumbled in the darkness, O'Malley worked in full light.

He came at last to the rocky floor where molten stone in ages past had hardened to seal the throat of this vent. Hundreds of feet across, Spud estimated; smooth in appearance from above, but broken with deep crevasses and excrescences where hot, fluid stone had frozen in its moment of bubbling turbulence. And, in one place, where the floor was smooth, Spud found what he was searching for: a circular, metal ledge that projected above the smooth rock; and, within it, a still smoother sheet of what appeared to be hammered metal.

"A door it is," whispered the pilot, half-fearful of listening ears, "and the gateway to Hell!" He grinned broadly at some thought. "And here I've been told 'twas, of all places, the easiest to get into; one little slip from grace and there you were! Sure, and the priests were as wrong

as the scientists. It must be Heaven that's easy to crash, for the front door of Hades is shut fast without even a keyhole to peep through."

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Then his face sobered to its customary homely lines. "The poor bhoy!" he exclaimed. "I've got to get in some way. I wonder how hard and thick it is."

He was raising a mass of black, shining rock in his hands—a fragment that his strength would not have moved a fraction of an inch on Earth. He steadied it above his head, preparing to crash it upon the metal door; then waited; stared incredulously at the black metal sheet; lowered the great stone silently and turned to leap mightily yet with never a sound for the shelter of an upflung saw-toothed ridge.

And, from its shelter, he watched the black door swing smoothly into the air, while, from the gaping black mouth of the pit beneath, incredible man-shapes of fish-belly white drew themselves up to the edge of the pit and perched there, where they might stretch their long necks into the light of the Sun.

Below them, Spud saw, dangled long, rat-like tails; and their wings, black and leathery, hung down too from their backs or dragged on the rocks behind where some three or four of the owl-eyed creatures crawled out and walked across the rock toward the place where an Irish pilot waited and stared with unbelieving and horrified eyes from the concealment of his rocky fort.

CHAPTER VIII

The Fires

Great vortices of whirling light rolled out to either side in an endless pyrotechnical display to show the power of those flailing wings that were bearing Chet and his companion through the dark void--bearing them to some destination Chet could not envisage.

His body turned in space at times, and he saw the spreading cone of luminous gas behind them like the wake of a great ship in a phosphorescent sea. The hiss and threshing of many wings came unceasingly. Once he swung close to another body clad like his own and, like him, enmeshed in a net. And he saw in the light of the luminiferous air the girl's wide, staring eyes. Then she was gone, and all about was only the whip of wings and the flashing whirls of light.

He tried to form some picture of this sphere through whose center, empty but for this gas, he was being swung. That first fall had carried him down the tube of some volcanic blow-pipe; he had fallen straight for what seemed like hours. And that had been through the crust of this great, hollow globe. Then the center!--but of this he dared make no estimate; he knew only that the huge leather wings were threshing the dense air in an untiring rhythm and that he was being carried for a tremendous distance at remarkable speed.

It became soothing, that rushing, swinging sweep of his body through space. There was death ahead, without doubt--but what of that? He was sleepy--sleepy--and beyond this nothing mattered. Just to sleep, to drift off in spirit into a void like this through which he was swinging....

And so traveled Chet Bullard, one time Master Pilot of Earth, through, the heart of another world--on and endlessly on, while leather-winged demons dragged him after, flying straight away from the center of the Moon toward a place and events unknown.

But Chet Bullard had ceased to note the passing hours or the swirling

gases that came alight at the beating of those wings; he was asleep in a stupor that was as deep as it was timeless.

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He opened his eyes at last; it seemed but a moment that he had slept. But now there was no rushing hiss of air, nor was he being lifted in a great net. He lay instead upon a support of some kind, and about him all was still.

Not at first did he observe the exquisite carving of the yellow bed on which he lay; that came later. The fact that its massive gold and its scrollwork of inlaid platinum were worth a fortune meant nothing to him then. His eyes were held by the immensity of the great room and the intricate series of arches that made up a vaulted ceiling.

It shone with a light of its own, that carved ceiling; no least lovely detail was lost. And Chet found his eyes roving from one to another of angel figures that seemed suspended in air.

The white of purest alabaster was theirs; and their outstretched wings, too, were white. He realized confusedly that they were like the black demons--like them and yet entirely unlike. For, where the black-winged ones had been ugly of feature, with every mark of degeneracy, these were the ultimate of loveliness in face and form. Figures of men he saw, stalwart and strong, yet perfectly proportioned; and the others--the women and girls--were superhuman in their ethereal beauty.

"Angels!" breathed Chet and turned his head slowly to see the exquisite figures that seemed hovering above the whole vast room in silent benediction. "Angels--no less! And they're carved from stone! Those black devils never did it. What does it mean? What does it mean!"

And not until then did Chet realize a wonderful thing. So enthralled had he been by the wonder of this hovering angel band he had not realized that he was seeing them with no helmet glass between; he was lying disrobed on his couch of pure gold.

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For an instant, panic seized him. Without his helmet and the oxygen supply, he must strangle. And then he knew that he was breathing naturally in an atmosphere like that of Earth but for the strange fragrances that swept to him on the soft, warm air.

He came slowly to his feet and steadied himself with one hand on the scrollwork of the bed. Then memories rushed in upon him, and he lived again the long, sickening fall through the heart of this world, the finding of the girl of mystery, hung like himself in the immensity of the inner world, their capture; and the band of black-winged ones who swung them through space in nets that drew tightly about them.

The girl! Again he saw the clear look from those eyes of blue. It was she who had signaled; it was she whom he had come through vast space to rescue. And now she was lost!

Chet stared slowly about him at the magnificence of the tremendous room. He saw more delicate figures done in inlay on the walls; he knew that he was in a place whose beauty and wealth should have set his nerves tingling; and all he sensed was the loneliness of this place where he was the only living occupant.

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He found his Earth-clothes beside the golden couch. He had put them on and was examining the suit and helmet to learn with relief that they

were intact when the first sound came to him. From an arched entrance across the room were coming shuffling figures whose black wings were wrapped about their chalk-white bodies. Only their pallid faces showed, ghastly and inhuman, as the eyes glowed redly from their deep black sockets. Chet still held the suit in his hands as the black-winged ones came toward him across the floor, and he carried it with him as he moved unresistingly where they led him with the pull of their claw-like hands upon his arms.

"No gun!" he told himself hopelessly. "Not a chance if I put up a fight! They've got me and got me right. Now what I need to do is to be good--lay low--find out something about all this, and find her!" He could not name the girl whose eyes were haunting him in their appealing loveliness; he could think of her only as the mystery girl, and he accepted without surprise or denial the fact that the finding of her outweighed all else that this new world might hold for him.

As the shuffling figures closed about him and led him away he found relief in the thought of his ship, of Spud's safety, and of his return to the world that they both knew as home.

"Never again for me!" said Chet softly beneath his breath. "But Spud will get there. Perhaps he is there now--no telling how long I have slept!"

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He saw it all so plainly: saw the Irish pilot bringing the ship to rest at the great Hoover Terminal. And he saw, too, a relief expedition that would be organized by Harkness and that must arrive too late. To suppose that any help might reach him here inside this wild world was too much; Chet looked with judicially appraising eyes at the things about him and could not allow himself to be deceived. There was no hope; but he made one resolve and made it grimly in words

that never reached his lips.

"Give me half a chance at them, Walt," he promised, "and if ever you do get inside here, you'll know where I've been. I'll find the girl first--I must do that--then I'll give these devils something to remember me by before they put us away for good!" And now the face of the pilot was almost happy as he stared at the snarling, twisted features of those that led him unresistingly through a series of stone rooms that seemed without beginning or end. He even disregarded the spiked tails that whipped at him with heavy blows to hurry him along.

"If I had a gun," he told them inaudibly, "I'd take you on right now. But you got that, or I lost it in the scuffle, so I'll just twist your scrawny necks in my bare hands when the time comes. And it's coming, you ugly devils! It's coming!"

Their claws pulled roughly at him to hurry him into another room. And where before he could see nothing of a beautiful room because of the absence of a pair of smiling eyes, he now saw nothing else for their presence. For, across the great hall, whose walls and ceilings glowed softly with yellow light, his eyes swept unerringly to a slim figure in a pilot's suit--to an oval face and blue eyes and red lips that could still curve into a trembling smile of welcome as he drew near.

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Forgotten was the grip of sharp-spiked, clawing hands; even the anticipated sweets of revenge were lost from Chet's mind. He knew only that he had found her--the mystery girl--and that the blue eyes were locked with his in an intimacy that set something deep within him into a turmoil of emotion.

And instead of the countless questions he had expected to launch upon her when again they met, he found his lips trembling and

wordless--until they uttered one hoarse ejaculation of: "Thank God!"

But the girl seemed to understand, for she reached one slender hand to touch him lightly upon the arm where these gripping claws had been. "Yes," she whispered; "I was afraid, too--afraid for you!"

More whispered words, but they were lost to Chet in the babel of sound that engulfed them. Those who had brought him had moved silently, and the throng of some hundred or more that waited beside the girl had been mute. But now they burst into a chorus of shrill cries whose keenness stabbed at Chet's ears.

A pandemonium of the same high-pitched squeals, he had heard before--this was all that he could distinguish at first. Then the shrill sounds broke into words and unintelligible phrases, and he knew they were talking among themselves.

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They quieted at a sound from the girl. She had turned to face them, and she forced her own soft voice into a shrill pitch as she spoke to them. Their clamor broke out once more as she ceased, but it was more subdued. Chet could hear her as she turned toward him.

"They think you are Frithjof," she explained.

"You talked with them?" asked Chet incredulously.

"But certainly; have I not been here for five years? They have their language--but enough of that now. They are angry. They sent Frithjof away; they tell me now that he escaped; they think you are he--that you have changed your appearance with magic--that the ship they saw was summoned by your magic. They say they will kill us both; throw us to the fires!"

"Wait!" almost shouted Chet to make himself heard above the din of shrieking voices. "I've got to know! Who are you? Who is Frithjof? How did you get here? Where are you from? Tell me quickly! It may give me something to go on; it may mean a chance for delay."

And if Chet had not been out of breath from the shouted questions he would surely have been left breathless by their amazing answer.

"I thought you knew," said the girl as the din of shrillness subsided. There seemed to Chet a note of hurt in her voice. "I thought you knew, that you had come here knowing. I am Anita, and Frithjof is my brother--Frithjof Haldgren! I stowed away on his ship; he did not know. I was only thirteen then.... And now, is Frithjof forgotten back in that world that we left?"

Again that note of disappointment; the pilot sensed it even through the tenseness of the moment when both Earth-folk knew that death stood close at their side. He answered quickly:

"I came for your brother. I saw your signals. I came to find Haldgren and to save him. And I have failed. But if death, as you say, is all we can expect, let me say this: 'I have failed, but I have found you; and whatever comes I am content.'"

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The blue eyes were wide; they were looking at him with a searching glance that changed to a childish candor while a flush stole over the pale face. She reached out one hand toward his. "We could have been happy," she said simply; "and now--now we must face the fires--together."

"I don't know just what you mean by that," spoke Chet softly, "but, whatever it is, there is a little matter of a fight first."

He released her hand and moved swiftly between her and the nearer of the throng; and his blood pulsed strongly through him as he faced a battery of hostile red eyes and knew that he was preparing for his last fight.

A hand clutched at his arm. "Not now!" begged Anita Haldgren's voice. "Wait! They will not all come. I too, can fight; but we cannot face so many!"

The rat-tails of the nearest beasts were whipping to and fro; the eyes in the chalky faces were like living coals where the ashes have been freshly blown. Chet stepped back beside the girl, and he made no protest as the black claws seized him and the sharp talons dug into his flesh. But he whispered to the one who was hurried along beside him: "You are right; I'll be good as long as we stay together. But if not--if we're separated--if they take you away--"

And the girl nodded quick agreement with his unspoken words.

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Chet set his teeth together to make more bearable the pain of those gripping claws; but the hurt was easier to bear when he saw that the girl was more carefully treated. She was close ahead as his captors hustled him from this room into others and yet others, all carved from the solid rock.

What a people this must be who could do such work as this! Again the sense of amazement struck through to Chet despite the pain--amazement and a feeling of an inexplicable incongruity when he saw the leather-winged creatures that had him in their grip. And again there were figures high overhead--white, floating figures on pinions of pure white; their faces, kindly and serene, looked down upon the

motley throng.

"Look above you!" gasped Chet. "Anita! What are they? Not like these devils!"

And the girl ahead half-turned her head to answer: "Ancestors! A thousand generations back! They have come down to this state now--degenerated."

Chet saw one of the beasts who held her jerk her sharply about, and he knew that his remaining questions must wait--wait forever, perhaps, and remain unsaid.

They came at last to a place where Chet found the answer to one question he had not dared ask; a place where gaping chasms in the floor glowed red with the wrath of unquenched fires. And the girl, Anita, when they had been placed by themselves against a glowing, lighted wall of rock, stared steadily at those pits and the sulphurous fumes that vomited out at times; then turned and spoke to the pilot in a voice steady and sure.

"It will be over quickly," she assured him. "Frithjof said that the heat, like the warmth of this whole inner world, comes from the contraction of the rocks in the cold of night. There is great pressure developed ... but he never learned the source of the light in the walls."

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Talking to still the beating of a heart pulsing with dread, perhaps! Chet had no mind for explanations. Before him were a score of yawning clefts in a rocky floor; one was larger than the rest; there were figures whose white bodies glowed red in its reflected light as they floated on black wings high above; the light of those hidden fires blazed and died intermittently. There death was waiting, while these

demons--these degenerate half-men, living products of a dying race--whipped the air in a frenzy of expectation as they darted above those chasms that were like rifts in the rock roof of hell.

Chet did not answer the statements of the girl. Instead he turned and gathered her once into his arms, while his lips met hers to find a ready response. Her face, so calm and pale, was turned upward to his. And his own voice trembled at first; then was steady and firm.

"I love you. I've come a long way to tell you, and I didn't know why I came. And now it is too late."

"Anita Haldgren," he said, and let his voice linger as he repeated the name, "Anita Haldgren--a beautiful name--a beautiful soul! And now--" He released her quickly and swung to meet a rush of beastly things that half-ran, half-flew across the great room.

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Outstretched arms of white that ended in black claws! Snarling, grinning teeth in faces of dead-white flesh! Barbed tails that hissed through the air as they swung down upon him! And Chet Bullard, his blond hair shining like the gold that was inlaid and encrusted upon the walls of the room--Chet Bullard, Master Pilot, once, of a distant Earth--did not wait for the assault to reach him, but sprang in upon the beastly things with swinging fists that came up from beneath to crash into grinning faces; to smash dully into white, scabrous flesh; or catch beneath the angle of out-thrust jaws jolt the ghastly faces into awkward angles.

They went down before him at first. Then the long rat-tails came whipping over, the demon-heads, ripping down with slashing blows on the pilot's head and shoulders. Off at one side, a dozen paces away, a slender figure tore loose from gripping claws. Chet saw it; he

freed himself for an instant to leap to her side. She was tugging at a bar of gold, a scepter in the hands of a sculptured figure in the wall. It would have been a serviceable weapon, but it bent slowly. Another of the beasts was upon her as Chet sprang.

This one went down beneath the chopping right that Chet shot to a lean, white jaw; then a barbed tail caught him a blow that laid his shoulder open. Another descended--and another. The pilot sank to the floor. Anita was beside him, shielding him with her own body from the rain of blows. Then they were buried beneath a great weight of odorous bodies--till Chet, after a time, felt himself dragged to his feet.

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His head, was ringing with the shrieks of the shrill-voiced mob. He was still struggling, still fighting blindly, as the clamor ceased. Then he stood erect and motionless as he heard the voice of Anita Haldgren.

"It's Frithjof!" she cried. "Oh, my dear--my dear! It's Frithjof! I heard him! But he can't reach us--he can't help us! I will try to reason with these beasts--bargain with them--make them afraid! I will tell them it is magic."

And, as her voice, high-pitched in the language of this race, rose in protest against them, Chet heard what the girl had detected first: a sharp, metallic rapping within the wall, a rapping that was dulled by distance but whose separate blows were distinct; and he knew, with a knowledge that came from somewhere else than his bewildered brain, that the raps were forming dots and dashes. They were talking Morse!

The girl's frenzied appeal ended in a din of shrieks; a horde of man-beasts swept into the air and launched themselves in a solid mass

upon the two. Chet saw Anita for one instant as he felt himself lifted in air. About him was a pandemonium of flailing wings; ahead and below was the red of hidden fires. They were being lifted out and over the pits.

One instant only, while tortured eyes smiled bravely into his; then a great pit-mouth that gaped a horrible welcome up ahead. So plainly Chet saw it! He could not tear his eyes away. He saw the red, smoking breath of it; he saw a rocky lip that shone like one great ruby.

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It was impossible! Even the blast of air that tore at him meant nothing at first! But it was happening! Before his eyes it was happening! Chet watched dumbly, uncomprehendingly, as that great overhanging rock tore itself into fragments that rose screamingly into the air or fell to the depths beneath.

Another section of solid floor erupted a hundred feet across the room! The destruction was being kept away, Chet knew. And then, while a roar like all the thunders of Earth reverberated deafeningly through the rock room, the claws that gripped him relaxed their hold.

He fell, nor felt the impact of his fall. He came to his feet, ran stumblingly to the edge of the nearest pit where he threw his arms about the body of a girl and dragged her to safety. And while he did it he was babbling in broken sentences:

"It's detonite! Your brother!... Where did he get it?... Detonite!... Oh, my dear--my dear!"

And his arms were tight about her while he held his body between her and the explosions that tore at the floor in an inferno of crashing

explosions out beyond--until three of the demon-beasts, red with the reflected fires of that subterranean hell, flew down like black-winged bats bent on vengeance. And Chet, laughing at their numbers, sprang out with hard fists swinging in well-directed blows, and welcomed them as only an Earth-man could.

CHAPTER IX

O'Malley Investigates

Spud O'Malley's twinkling Irish eyes had seen strange sights in his years of piloting an Intercolonial freighter; he had touched at odd corners of the Earth. But never had he seen such creatures as confronted him now.

Sheltered behind a jagged ridge of volcanic rock in the inner crater of the great ring of Hercules, he stared in utter horror at the figures that approached. For to Spud, with all his inherited ancestral faith in gnomes and pixies, these bat-winged things were nothing less than people of the under world--demons from some purgatory of the Moon--devils, living and breathing, spewed out from that buried hell for a moment of relaxation from their horrid work.

And, coming directly toward him across a level lava bed, three of the things, with leather wings trailing, were approaching. Spud was unmoving; his feet might have been one with the volcanic rock on which he stood for any ability of his to raise them. Only his eyes turned slowly in their sockets to stare wildly at the three who drew near; who glimpsed his awe-stricken eyes behind his helmet glass; and who uttered shrill, screaming cries that brought the rest of the unholy crew leaping and flapping across the rocks.

And, within that helmet, Spud's lips moved unconsciously to repeat

prayers he would have sworn were forgotten these many years. There was a pistol at his belt where his hand was resting; another hung at his other side. But the man made no move to defend himself; he was struck numb and nerveless, not through fear, but through that horror which comes with seeing one's most gruesome superstitions come true. Spud O'Malley, who would have laughed at devils and believed in them while he laughed, knew now that they were real. They had captured Chet; they were about to take him, too, to the hell that was their home.

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And still he did not move while the demon figures pressed closer, while their wild, shrieking cries echoed within his helmet; while they lashed their scaly tails, and at last leaped in unison upon the helpless man.

And then, with that first touch, Spud O'Malley, who had not only seen strange creatures but had fought with them, came to himself--and the hand that rested upon a detonite pistol moved like the head of a striking snake.

The roar of detonite was strained and thin in the light atmosphere of this globe; it seemed futile compared with its usual thunderous report. But its effects were the same as might have been expected on Earth!

Spud was hurled to the rocky floor, as much by the closeness of the exploding shells as by the weight of the bodies that came upon him. He fell free of the first leaping things that went to fragments in mid-air as his pistol checked them. And he made no effort to arise, but lay prostrate, while he swung that slender tube of death about him and saw the winged beasts shattered and torn--until there were but five who ran wildly with frantic, flapping wings; and these the tiny shells from Spud's gun caught as they ran when the Irishman sprang to his

feet and took careful aim across the jagged rocks.

"Saints be praised!" the pilot was saying over and over. "Saints be thanked!--even the Devil's imps can't stand up to detonite shells! And Chet, the poor lad!--his gun must have been knocked from his hand; he was fightin' in the dark, too! And they took him down there, they did!--down where I'm goin' to see if the lad is still livin'."

And Spud O'Malley, though he believed fully in the demoniac nature of these opponents and never for an instant thought but that he was descending into an inferno of the Moon, strode with steady steps toward the portal of that Plutonic region and lowered himself within.

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That ring of metal, huge and accurately formed, made Spud pause in thought; the massive metal door that came up from below to fit that ring snugly--that, too, looked more like the work of human hands than of demons. The pilot was frankly puzzled as he tentatively moved a lever down below that door and saw the huge metal mass swing shut.

About him the walls were glowing. He saw, in the floor, another circular door, but found no lever with which to operate it. Nor did he search for one, since he could have no way of knowing that here was where Chet had gone. But, from the corridor where he stood other lighted passages led; and one slanted more steeply than the rest.

"That's the way I'm goin'," announced Spud. "I know that, and it's all I do know; I'm goin' down till I find some place where the devils live and where Chet may be."

The passage took him smoothly down. It turned at times, and smaller branches split off, but he followed the main corridor that he had selected for his route. And he paused, at last, beside a metal frame

in the rock wall, where the door that fitted so tightly in the frame was not like the others he had seen. For the first ones, though cleverly fashioned and machined, were of iron, rusted red with the ages; while this one that was before him now was paneled and decorated with sweeping scrolls. And, above this portal that seemed hermetically sealed, was a white figure such as Chet had seen.

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Spud's gaze traveled up to it slowly, and his knees were trembling as they had not done when facing the black-winged ones. "'Tis an angel," he whispered, "or the statue of one! And that explains it all. 'Tis them that has done all this--these passages, and the sweet-fittin' doors. And do they live here? I wonder. Heaven help me if I meet them, for never could I shoot at one of them, the pretty things!"

He was still gazing in rapt wonder that was near to worship when the great door began to move. He saw the first hair-line crack, and the thin line of light was like a hot wire across his eyes, so quickly did he respond. Beyond, where he had not yet gone, was a branching passage. All the walls glowed softly with light--no shelter of darkness was his--but Spud leaped for the little passage and raced down it until a turn screened him from sight.

"That's movin'!" he congratulated himself. "What an athlete I'm becomin'!" And it was fortunate for the pilot that the ceiling was high, for his tremendous Earth-strength propelled him in unbelievable bounds.

He still moved on silently, for far ahead in the corridor something had caught his eyes. And he stopped finally beside a little car; then saw that he had been following a single rail, buried under the dust of ages on the corridor floor.

The monorail car lay on its side. At one end of it was a motor. Not a motor such as men had built, Spud confessed, but an electric motor none the less. And beyond this, where the passage ended, was a wall veined thickly with gold.

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Ropy strands of the metal shone reddish-yellow in the soft light of the walls; detached pieces lay on the floor and in the car itself. Spud regarded it with amazement, but the wealth he was witnessing left him cold; another thought was forcing itself into his brain.

That thought took more definite form when another corridor took him to rooms where great metal cases were neatly stacked; other adjoining rooms held strange machinery and appliances on metal stands.

"Lab'ratories!" said the amazed man explosively. "And storehouses, too! Neither angels nor devils did this; 'tis the work of men--and I know how to get along with men. I'll go find them. Belike they have saved the lad, Chet, and he'll be waitin' to see me."

He raced back along the corridor, but stopped short at its end, where he had taken flight from the larger passage. There was sound of shrieking voices, and Spud dropped to the floor to present as small a view as possible to the half-human things that trailed their black wings past the metal entrance; then he crept cautiously to peer around the corner, when the last one had gone.

They were waiting out beyond; Spud watched them intently. They had great nets of rope in which were living things that struggled and writhed.

He saw one of the creatures stoop to break off a protruding end of

pinkish, nameless substance; the thing seemed to struggle in his hands while he took it to his mouth and munched on it. Even when Spud realized that this living food was vegetation of some sort, he was still sickened with the sight of its being taken alive into the bodies of these Moon-beasts.

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One of the ugly figures raised a black-clawed hand to seize a lever let flush into the wall. It had been concealed. Spud saw the door open; saw the waiting horde troop through, dragging their loaded nets; and he saw the door close silently, while the actuating lever moved back to its former position.

And Spud, speaking half aloud, counted slowly to a hundred, then another hundred, as a gage of the time while he waited for those beyond the door to move on. But at the count of two hundred his eager hands were upon the lever, while his eyes were hungry to stare beyond the opening door.

They found nothing but emptiness when the door swung wide. Another room of luminous walls; another door in the farther wall. The man moved slowly through the doorway one cautious step at a time and stared about.

He found a lever like the others, moved it--and saw the door close silently behind him. Another lever was near the second door; he pulled carefully, steadily, upon it.

There was no movement of the door, but something had occurred as he knew by the hissing sound that came from above his head. Its source he could not find; its result was most startling. For, where before his suit had bulged out roundly with the inner pressure of one atmosphere, it now became less taut--and it hung loosely about him

when the hissing ceased.

"An air-lock," said Spud joyfully, "or I'm a rat-tailed imp myself! That means a heavier air-pressure inside. And now I know 'tis men folks I'm goin' to see!"

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The lever moved easily now, and the second door swung open and closed behind him as before. Spud tore recklessly at the fastening of his suit, regardless of the fact that an increased pressure might still come from some gas that would mean death to a human. But, like Chet, he found the air fragrant and pure, and he rid himself of the encumbering suit, strapped the pistols at his waist, rolled the suit to a bundle he could sling over one shoulder, and moved carefully as a cat as he went forward through a corridor that led down and still down.

As he went the empty labyrinth of halls filled him with a horrible depression; yet there was beauty everywhere--beauty whose delicacy of curve and color filled even the untrained mind of Spud O'Malley with a thrill of delight.

There were halls and vast rooms without number; there were carvings that glowed with a light of their own--figures so filled with the very spirit of livingness that they seemed stepping out from the cold walls to greet him; there were more celestial hosts of purest white poised apparently in mid-flight.

There were marvelous, rioting waves of color that pulsed and throbbed through the walls and the very air of some rooms; and there were articles of furniture--carved tables, chairs--objects whose purpose Spud could not guess. But, except for the occasional sound of shrill, squeaking voices in the distance, there was no sign of the presence of the builders, the men Spud had hoped to find.

And he knew at last that his quest was hopeless. The dust of uncounted centuries that lay thickly upon all was evidence as convincing as it was mute.

"There's naught but the devils!" Spud despaired. "The others--saints be helpin' of them!--have been gone for more years than a man dares think of. So, the devils it is; I'll follow them--I'll go where they are. But I'm not so sure at all of findin' the lad now."

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That high-pitched chattering that had come to him at times was his only guide now. It seemed echoing in greater volume from one passage that slanted down more sharply than the rest. Spud followed it, clinging with hands and feet to the steep-pitched floor; but some sudden impulse seized him and compelled him to stop at intervals while he drew a pistol from his belt. Its grip was of steelite that rang sharply as a bell when he struck it upon the walls. And he tapped out the general call of the Service time after time; then strained his faculties in eager listening until he went hopelessly on.

But he repeated the call. "For the lad may hear it and be heartened," he argued. "And if he's free to do it he'll answer--though I think I'd break down and cry with joy did I hear an answerin' rap."

And still the chattering grew louder, while the watching, creeping man moved stealthily on. A wave of gas came to him once and set him choking, while far ahead he saw a reflected glow more red than the pale, lucent shimmering of the walls.

He stopped dead still as once more there flooded through him a thousand unnamed fears of this domain of the Evil One where he would trespass. But he forced his feet to carry him on until he could

peer down through a rift in the rock floor to behold another room whose walls glowed redly with the light of fires far down in hot-throated pits.

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There were figures whose white bodies shone as redly in that glow--figures that floated on outspread leather wings of dead black. Small wonder that the mind of Spud O'Malley found here the confirmation of his worst fears; small wonder that his trembling lips whispered: "'Tis Hell! 'Tis Hell, at last!"

But there was that which froze his quivering nerves to cold quiet, which set his lips into a grim, straight line and held him motionless above the opening from which he saw the room below--as, from a flurry of bodies against one far side, he saw a girl emerge.

She was in the hands of the black-winged beasts who carried her into the air then swung out toward the fiery pit. And Spud's incredulous: "Oh, the poor, beautiful darlin'!" rose unconsciously to his lips to die away in a quick-drawn breath. For, from the mass of bodies, another figure was tossed up into the air to be gripped by black, waiting claws--and Spud knew that he was seeing Chet Bullard, fighting, struggling, in the grasp of these demons from the Pit.

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The fumes from that inferno rose straight up. They passed out at another funnel-shaped throat except for an occasional eddy that whirled back toward the watching man. But Spud O'Malley, hanging precariously from that opening above, knew nothing of the sulphurous fumes or of the tight band they clamped about his throat. He was taking careful aim at the first of the flying beasts, found Chet in his

line of fire, and snapped forward his pistol to fire at the lip of the pit instead. And he slipped forward the continuous discharge lever that caused the pistol to shake in his hand as it emptied its capacious magazine in a furious rain of bullets whose every end was tipped with the deadliest explosive of Earth.

The floor rose up toward him in a spouting volcano of fire, while Spud glared wildly through glazed and blinded eyes and swung his pistol to rake the flying horde where he knew Chet was not.

He saw, through the haze that was sweeping before him, Chet's sprawled body on the floor; he saw him leap to his feet and rush to the rescue of the girl. Then the empty pistol slipped from Spud's nerveless hand; and his other, that had clung with unshakable grip to a sharp edge of rock, relaxed, while he plunged headlong toward the floor below.

CHAPTER X

One Stroke for Freedom



In that subterranean chamber of the Moon, where the angry red of still deeper fires flared fitfully; where winged demons, like evil creatures of a drug-crazed dreamer's mind, darted shrieking through the sulphurous air, it was a slender, blue-eyed girl who took control of events.

She it was who, when the explosions of detonite had ceased, saw the fall of a body from high above. She saw it strike upon a mound of dead Moon-beasts; saw the homely, human features as the body rolled to the floor; and it was she who threw herself upon it protectingly when one of the enemy wounded dragged his broken wings trailing across the stone that he might reach that human face with his distended claws.

"A man!" Anita Haldgren screamed. "It's a man--help me!" And Chet was beside her in an instant to drag the limp body to safety.

"Spud!" he shouted. "It's Spud O'Malley! He never went back! He came down here to save us!"

He grabbed up the gun where it had fallen; saw the empty magazine; then flung himself down beside the unconscious figure of Spud while he tore at the fastenings of the second weapon.

"His suit!" he shouted to the girl. "Get his suit! It's there where he fell! Bring yours and mine, too!"

He was hardly able to gage his own strength here where all weights were one-sixth of their equivalent on Earth. He stooped and swung the chunky body of Spud across his shoulder as easily as he would have lifted a child. And, having done it, he was entirely at a loss as to where to go.

Across the great room was a throng of leaping, flapping things; more were pouring in from open doors. Chet stood hesitant and bewildered, until Anita spoke.

"Come!" she called, and darted toward a narrow entrance.

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The clamorous shrieking from the horde of Moon-beasts marked their swooping assault upon the two, and Chet paused to send them three shots that checked the advance. Then, with the body of Spud held tightly, he sprang where Anita had gone.

She was waiting, but gave Chet no chance to question her. "Come!" she commanded again, and ran on as before. But, as Chet gained her side, she offered between gasping breaths an explanation.

"Five years they kept us ... like animals in a cage ... but there was a place ... a sacred place ... they let us go there.... And they let us make signal lights from outside ... they called it magic.

"And now Frithjof has escaped ... he will go to the sacred room ... only there would he be safe...."

They had turned and twisted through narrow passages. Anita, it seemed, was plotting a course through less frequented thoroughfares of this strange city. But they came at last to a vast auditorium into which they peered from a half-opened door.

The room was of preposterous size, and Chet marveled at the minds that had conceived and wrought so tremendous an undertaking. And he saw plainly in his own mind the throngs of serene-faced beings who must have folded their white wings softly about them to gather there for worship. But more plainly still he saw the jostling, squealing crowd that was there that instant before his eyes.

Hundreds of them--thousands, it might be--and the sound of their shrill voices made hideous echoes from the high-flung ceiling of the great hall. The dry rustling of their leather wings was an unceasing rush of sound.

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Some who seemed to be leaders stood above the rest on a platform which formed the base of a terraced formation against the far wall of the room. Even at a distance Chet could see and wonder at the simple beauty of that place of metals and jewels where the great ones of an earlier race had once stood.

Back of those who harangued the crowd the terraces built themselves up to a pyramid against the rock wall; and on either side, opening upon the platform base, was a doorway of noble proportions, whose metal doors of burnished reds and browns were closed.

"The sacred room," whispered Anita, "beyond those doors. Frithjof has closed them. He is there. I know it--I know it!"

Chet was still holding the body of O'Malley. Only his choked breathing showed that he still lived, but now he stirred and struggled in Chet's grasp, while he struck out blindly and hoarse sounds came from his throat.

Chet clapped one hand over the pilot's mouth. "For the love of heaven, Spud," he said fiercely, "be still! Don't speak--don't say a word! It's Chet--Chet Bullard! I've got you, we're all right!"

The pilot's struggles ceased, and Chet eased him to the floor where he sat still gasping for breath; the fumes from that place of death had been strangling in his throat.

Beside him Chet heard the girl repeating in softest tones the name she had heard for the first time.

"Chet--Chet Bullard! How odd a name! But I love it--I couldn't help but love it."

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In the great room were some who had turned toward the sound of Chet's scuffling; they were walking slowly toward the half-opened door.

"Come!" said Anita Haldgren again, and fled like a slender, golden-haired wraith down the narrow hall.

More twisting passages until Chet was hopelessly lost. But he no longer needed to carry O'Malley, who was running beside him, and he had implicit faith in the girlish guide who went before. He was not surprised when they came after many detours to a narrow door of wrought metals in white and gold, whose inset designs were worked in glowing jewels.

Nor was he surprised when the door opened in response to a series of knocks from Anita's hand that spelled SOS in the code he knew, and a man, whose long hair and beard hung about a face as handsome as that of a Viking of old, stood motionless in that

doorway.

But the surprise of that flaxen-haired giant can be only imagined when a young man whom he had never seen on Earth or Moon stepped forward from his sister's side with outstretched hand.

"I am Bullard," said the slim young man, "Master Pilot of the World--or at least that was my rating up to the time I left in search of you. And now, Pilot Haldgren, we've a ship outside, and, if you'd care to go back with us--"

And with equal casualness the blond Viking replied: "You came in search of us! You saw our signals! After all this time! Yes, we shall be glad to go back with--we shall be glad--yes--"

But his deep, rumbling voice broke into something like a sob, and he turned with outstretched arms to stumble blindly toward his sister, who buried her face in his torn and ragged blouse.

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"You came in search of us--you came through space just to find and rescue us!" Haldgren, it seemed, could not recover from the effects of this unbelievable fact. He was gripping hard at the hand of Chet Bullard, while his other great arm was thrown about the shoulders of Spud O'Malley.

"But now that you are here, what is to be done? Every exit will be guarded; we are shut off from the outer world by a hundred locked doors and by thousands of those beasts."

He took his arm from Spud's shoulder to point toward the great doors, beyond which was a rising clamor of shrill sound.

"They will break in here soon; they would have been here before had they known of the old lost entrance of the priests that Anita and I found. We're as bad off as ever, I am afraid. There will be no holding them now."

"I can hold some," said Chet, and touched his weapon. Haldgren nodded his shaggy head.

"Some, but not many of the thousands we must face before ever we fight our way through to the outer world. No, my friend Bullard, that will never save us; we are doomed!"

But Chet, unwilling to accept or share the other's convictions, was seeing again the great room beyond those doors--a room of vast proportions; of high-arched, vaulted ceiling where sweeping curves all centered and ended in one tremendous central point. It hung down, that point, a blazing pendant--an inverted keystone; through some magic of that ancient people all the colors of the spectrum had been made to ebb and flow like rainbows of living light.

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But something deeper than the beauty of this had impressed Chet. A master pilot does not study design of structures, even structures meant for travel through the air, without gaining knowledge of architectural fundamentals; his mind, subconsciously, had been following strains and stresses through those super-imposed curves. He turned abruptly to Haldgren with a question.

"It seemed to me when I was following Anita that we climbed upward; we were always running upward through the passages. We must be near the surface of the Moon; is that true?"

Haldgren nodded slowly. "I think so--yes! In the great room out there

are windows of quartz high in the ceiling. You could not see them from where you were, but they are there. I have seen them lighted; I think it was the light of the sun."

"In that case," said Chet quietly, "I will ask you to open those doors."

"But they will come in!" the big man protested.

"They will not come in."

Chet turned to the girl. "I will ask you, my dear, to accompany me--if you have faith."

And, to that, Anita Haldgren granted not even a word of reply. She moved more swiftly than her brother to a controlling lever in the wall ... and the ponderous doors swung slowly back.

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Beyond those opening doors a din of shrieks went abruptly still. They rose again in a squeaking babel of amazement and again were silenced as Chet Bullard stepped through the arch. Beside him was the slender figure of Anita; following was a stocky man whose unhandsome, face was alight with a broad grin.

"Go to it, my bhoi!" Spud O'Malley was saying. "I don't know what you're up to, but you'll be countin' me in--and here's hopin' you give those devils hell!"

And, behind them all, in great strides that brought him up with the rest, came Haldgren, recovered now from the stupefaction that had held him momentarily. The four went silently where Chet led to the highest point of the great terraced rostrum.

It was a stepped pyramid, Chet found, split in half and the half placed

against the wall. There was a stairway of smaller steps where priests, some thousands of years before, had made their way to the top. And the dust of centuries arose in smoky puffs as the four trod that path where the holy ones had gone. Below them the silence was ending in sibilant hissing calls as the black-winged beast-men watched that procession to the heights. Some few had launched themselves into the air, Chet saw when he turned.

"Tell them to go back," he said to Anita; "tell them to listen to what I have to say!" There followed immediately the sound of Anita's soft voice distorted to shrill sounds that echoed throughout the hall.

"Tell them now," said Chet when the hall was still, "that I have come from another world. Tell them that I hold the thunderbolts of their ancient gods in my hands. Then tell them if they permit us to depart we will go and leave them in peace. But if they try to harm us, the temple of their gods will be destroyed, and they, too, shall die. Tell them!"

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There was something of unwonted solemnity in the voice of the master pilot--something of quiet power and the dignity that became a messenger of the gods--as he gave his orders and faced the throng.

And there was the patience of a god who is sickened of slaughter as he faced the discordant din and the threatening forward surge of the demon throng below. The girl had spoken, and the air was black with their threshing wings, while still Chet waited with outstretched hand.

To the creatures below--the things half-men and half-beasts--the shining tube in that extended hand meant nothing of threat. And even to the Irish pilot, who stood silently watching, the gesture seemed futile.

"You've overplayed your hand, lad," he said in a tone of despair. "'Tis no little gun like that will stop them now!"

He was watching that hand and the shining tube; watching in amazement as he saw it swing slowly up toward the advancing horde risen level with them in the air--up above their massed blackness of wings--on and up, until the tube was pointing toward the base of a carven pendant, whose blending colors were fairy lights at play.

And still the weapon waited until the snarling faces of the enemy were close. Then the pistol cracked once, and the roar of its exploding shell came thundering after.

For an instant all motion ceased; the very wings of the flying beasts seemed frozen rigid in mid-flight. Then the whole of the vast room was in motion.

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A rush of escaping air whirled upward the black-winged monsters in an inverted maelstrom of shrieking winds. And, falling to meet them, came an enormous pendant whose rioting colors seemed glorying in their own death. And with that came the swift disintegration of the vaulted arches where the one central supporting point of their intricate maze had been shattered; till, with a crashing avalanche of sound that obliterated the thundering echoes of the detonite charge, the entire ceiling, that seemed now like the roof of a mighty world, roared down to destruction.

The pyramidal rostrum was at one side. A cascade of shattered rock fell like a curtain before it--a kindly curtain that hid from human sight the hideous slaughter of a demoniac mob. It was still falling; the imprisoned air was gathering added force to rush upward, screaming

as if the very winds were insane with joy at their release, when the great arms of Frithjof Haldgren closed about the others of the group and half carried them, half hurled them, down the slope.

* * * * *

The echoing clang of great doors was still with them as the bellowing voice of Haldgren was heard.

"Get into your suits! The internal pressure is lost." Even as he spoke the big man was clutching at his throat, though the closing doors of the sacred room had given them respite. "Quick! They have emergency doors. They will close them--but this part is cut off. In only minutes there will be no air!"

But it was Chet who snapped shut the closure of Anita Haldgren's suit before he pulled on his own. And he grinned happily through the glass of his helmet as he saw the others safely encased, while their suits slowly bulged as the pressure of the air about them went down and their own tanks of oxygen took up the task of maintaining one atmosphere of pressure.

In silence the great doors of the sacred room swung back; in silence, as before, the Earth-folk passed through where chaos had reigned. Chet checked them; he threw one arm clumsily around the figure of Anita Haldgren while he turned to her brother.

"The door is open, Frithjof Haldgren," he said, and pointed upward at the black vault of the heavens where a massive ceiling had been. In that immensity of space, framed in the torn outlines of a shattered world, shone a great globe--a globe like a giant moon. The Earth, unbelievably bright, was beckoning them once more.

"The door is open," Chet repeated; "do you still wish to go home?"

CHAPTER XI

"Bullard, of the I.B.C.!"

The controls of a meteor ship held steady without the touch of the pilot's hand. Chet Bullard was staring at a radiocone on the instrument board in the control room where a voice from some super-powered station was calling. His own radio had been crackling a call, and now this response was coming across the void.

"Orders from the Stratosphere Control Board: You will proceed at once to New York. Radiobeacon 2X12 will guide you down. Your message received and we acknowledge report of the finding of the space-flyer, Pilot Haldgren. Do not discharge any passengers and land nowhere else than at New York without direct orders of the Board. Keep your directional signal on full power; our cruisers will pick you up in the highest level. Signed: Commander of Air."

Spud O'Malley, it was, who broke the silence of the room where only the sound of the terrific exhaust came thinly through.

"May divils confound him! And it's back on the Moon with those other beasts I'm wishin' I was. At least a man can get close enough to slam them in their ugly faces; but the Commander and his cruisers! Sure, there's nothin' we can do!"

"Just take our medicine," said Chet Bullard quietly. "But I have proved him wrong; Haldgren, here, is the living evidence of that. And I said I would laugh him from the Service--well, I'm not so sure of that."

"But surely," broke in Haldgren's booming voice, "there will be only praise for what you have done. I do not understand--"

"You don't know the Commander, my boy," Spud broke in dryly. "And you don't know that the lad, here, defied him to his face and ran the gantlet of his cruisers' guns to get away and go after you."

"Ah!" grunted the giant. "And now I understand. It is the old story--an incompetent man in a place of authority--"

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Chet broke in.

"Not quite right; this Commander of ours has done much--he is a driver of men--but there are some of us who think he lacks vision. He can never see beyond the stratosphere he rules so ably; and his position is supreme."

"There is still the Governing Council--we will appeal--"

But the master pilot was not listening to Haldgren's words; his slim, sensitive hand was reaching for the ball-control to build up still more the tremendous blast of a forward exhaust that was checking their speed and making them as heavy as if their bodies were of meteoric iron.

A forward lookout showed a black globe; its circle was rimmed with fire from the Sun that it blotted out. A hemisphere of night lay below--the black, mysterious night of a waiting Earth. But one strong signal came in on the instruments at Chet's side to show him where on that horizon was New York; and the call of a flagship of cruisers was flashing before him as the lift of the Repelling Area was felt.

"Follow!" flashed the order. "You will follow to New York!" And, through the black night, faint flashes of light marked the fleet of swift guardians of the skies that closed in, then swept downward and out--

an impregnable convoy about the speeding, roaring ship.

And there was that in Chet's face as he handled the controls that brought Anita Haldgren to his side that she might lift his free hand in wordless comfort and press it to her face.

* * * * *

That venerable and beloved man, the President of the Federation Aeronautique Internationale, stood silent before a vast audience. Throughout the great auditorium was silence; each of the gathered thousands was listening to the shrieking sirens from the landing field on the roof overhead.

Skylights above showed the night air ablaze with red, through which the vivid green of landing signals pierced in staccato bursts. From the roof of that building to the highest level of the stratosphere the air was cleared; no craft of the Service would venture to pierce the barrage of light and radio waves that hemmed that aerial shaft. And down the shaft, in a thunder of roaring exhausts, came a shining shape.

She sparkled and flashed in the crimson and green of that emergency light, and from her bow poured a tornado that blasted the air, then streamed out behind in hot gas like a comet of flame. Then the thunders died; the shining shape turned once slowly in air to show her blunt nose and cylindrical body before she settled softly as a homing bird to the embrace of great waiting arms of steel. And, inside the building, a white-haired man was saying:

"They are here! Thank God, they are here! Their radio has prepared us; our signals have guided them home. And now it is not New York, nor even the United States of America alone who attends; the whole world will be summoned. Look!"

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Behind, and high above him on a wall, was a radio panel. Its signal lamps went suddenly dark. The thin, blue-veined hand of the speaker was pointing.

"Only twice has the world-call flashed: once when the Molemen came and the future of the world was at stake; once when the Dark Moon crashed down from the void and the serpents of space menaced aerial traffic. And now--once again!--the whole world is summoned! Every city and hamlet of Earth--every ship of the air and the sea--every vessel on the ocean, under the ocean, and in the air levels above--"

His voice broke sharply. From the panel there came a thin call, a quivering that was more a trembling than a sound; it reached out to touch raspingly the nerves of every listener. Then the whole board burst forth in a flash of fire where a flaming crystal leaped to life--and none could see that pulsing flame without thrilling to the knowledge that it was calling a whole world with its wordless summons.

The light died; a television detector whined as its motors came to speed; and each watcher knew that the waiting world was connected with that auditorium in New York; all that happened, there--each sight and sound--was circling the globe.

An announcer's voice roared briefly before the regulator cut down on its volume.

"You are seeing the Radio-central Auditorium in New York. On the landing stage above, after a journey of five hundred thousand miles, a strange craft has settled to rest. Its pilot: Chester Bullard, once rated as Master Pilot of the World! Its journey, now safely completed: from

the Earth to the Moon, and return!

"The world is waiting to greet Pilot Bullard, though of this he, as yet, is unaware. World-wide radio control is now transferred to Radio-central Auditorium in New York! They are coming! They are entering!"

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But the thousands gathered in that great hall heard no other words from the radiocone. Their attention was focused upon the broad stage, where, descending from a lift, a strange group stepped out upon the stage, stood an instant in startled wonder that was near embarrassment, then took the seats to which they were shown.

And again the venerable President of the Federation Aeronautique Internationale was speaking.

"It is less than a month since I stood here before you, when, as again is true to-night, the entire personnel of the executives of the Stratosphere Control Board was gathered to do honor to the pioneers of space--the discoverer--"

On the stage near the speaker, Chet Bullard stared in consternation at a girl in a pilot's suit as grimed and ragged as his own. His gaze passed on to the set features of Pilot O'Malley--to the blue eyes of a flaxen-haired giant--then on to where Walt Harkness and Diane, his wife, sat regarding him with happy smiles. Dimly Chet heard the man at the speakers' stand.

"--and on that other occasion, Mr. Bullard refused a decoration tendered him and marking him as the first to travel through airless space.

"I have here"--the speaker smiled slightly as he extended his hand

where a jewel flashed fire from a velvet case--"the identical jewel and medal. And to-night, while the peoples of Earth are gathered throughout the world to do honor to Mr. Bullard, it has been given to me the proud privilege of welcoming him home."

* * * * *

He turned and held out a beckoning hand toward Chet. In a daze the younger man arose and moved beside the one who had called him.

"And now, Chester Bullard, on behalf of the Governing Council of the Ruling Nations of this Earth, I greet you: Pilot of the Stratosphere no longer--but Pilot of Endless Space! The world welcomes you; and, through me, it places in your hands this jewel.

"But you will observe that we older ones may still learn, and we do not repeat our former mistake. We hand you this medal, emblematic of the first penetration of space, to do with as you will."

The thin hand was shaking as the speaker turned and swept the audience with one all-inclusive gesture.

"To you who are before me now; to you out beyond wherever parallels of longitude and latitude are known--I present the Columbus of the Stars!--Chester Bullard!"

And suddenly Chet found himself alone in a pandemonium of sound. From the countless faces that blurred into one unrecognizable sea came a roar of human voices like waves thundering against storm-worn cliffs; above the clamor was the sound of shrieking sirens; and through all, when it seemed that no other sound could be heard, came the full-volume, nerve-stunning clangor from the radiocone's wide-opened throat as the trumpets and brass of all the monster bands of Earth broke forth, under radio control, in one synchronous

song--till even that was drowned under the roaring welcomes in strange tongues as the nations of Earth cut in.

* * * * *

And Chet Bullard, his blouse still torn where a Commander of Air had ripped off a three-starred emblem of a Master Pilot, shook his blond head to clear it of the confusion that seemed beating him down. And he stared and stared, not at the rioting throng before him, but at something he could in part comprehend--a glowing, flashing jewel that rested in his hand. And slowly there crept into his eyes a look of understanding, while a ghost of a smile twitched and tugged at the corners of his mouth.

The hall, which one instant was a bedlam of roaring voices, went silent as Chet Bullard raised his hand. He was still smiling as he bowed toward the white-haired man whose happy face belied the moisture in his eyes; then he faced the throng, and his voice held no hint of trembling or uncertainty.

"The Columbus of the Stars! I thank you for that title, which I can accept only most humbly. For I ask you to go back with me into history and remember, as I am remembering, that before Columbus there were others whose names are lost.

"The Norsemen--those Vikings of old!--who dared the unknown seas, were first. And again history repeats. But this time the pioneer will not remain unknown. I have been to the Moon; I have reached out into space--but I followed another's trail.

"Frithjof Haldgren!" he shouted, and extended a hand toward the gentle giant whose face was aflame as he came to Chet's side. "Frithjof Haldgren, I present you to the world. Only one can be the first; and yours is the honor and glory. This medal is yours alone; I place it

where it belongs!"

* * * * *

And Frithjof Haldgren, white of face and lips now instead of fiery red, stood silent and trembling while Chet fastened a jewel upon his grimy tattered blouse; then retired to his chair as if beaten back by the rolling waves of sound.

But to Chet, as he watched the man go, came a quick sense of disappointment. Unconsciously, his hand went to the same place on his own chest where had rested an emblem he had prized above all else--and now his searching fingers found only the mark of his disgrace. Then he knew again that the aged President was speaking, while he held Chet beside him with one detaining hand.

"We older ones have served, perhaps; we have done what we could; we pray that the world is better for our efforts! And we shall continue to serve; yet it is to youth that we must look for the progress which is to come.

"Today we face a new life whose horizons, once bounded by the limiting air, have been pushed back. We have conquered space, and before us is the waiting marvel of man's extension of his activities throughout the universe.

"How far shall we go in this new and endless sphere? With interplanetary travel, what is our goal? Only youth can give the answer. And in the hands of youth must the command of this great adventure be placed.

* * * * *

"Gentlemen, the Governing Council of the Ruling Nations of this Earth

has created a new command. By the acts of this man who stands beside me, and by his fellow-explorer, Walter Harkness, the Council has been forced to take this step.

"That command will rank second only to the Governing Council itself; a body of men shall compose it who shall be known as the Interstellar Board of Control." He turned squarely toward Chet. "I am placing in your hands, Mr. Bullard, your commission as Commander of that Board. The best minds of all nations will be at your call. Will you accept--will you gather these men about you and do your part in this great work for the greater future of mankind?"

The ears of a listening world waited long for an answer. But the eyes of that world saw a figure whose blond head was suddenly lowered as if to hide a betrayal of what was in his heart; they saw him raise his bowed head to stare mutely toward a girl whose eyes of blue were swimming with happy tears as she gave him a trembling smile--and only then did they see Chet Bullard draw himself erect, while his voice went out with the speed of light to a waiting world.

"I accept, Mr. President. Proudly--humbly--I accept!"

And the eyes of the world, if they were understanding eyes, must have smiled with his, as the Commander of the Interstellar Board of Control grasped, among others, the congratulatory hand of his subordinate, the Commander of Air.

But if there were any who expected to read mockery in those smiling eyes, they had yet to learn the measure of Commander Bullard--"Bullard, of the I.B.C.!"

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