

## BACKSTAGE LENSMAN

By Randall Garrett

The Lensman series, comprising, as it does, some six hundred thousand words, is still, to my mind, the greatest space opera yet written. It has, to use one of Doc Smith's favorite words, "scope."

E. E. Smith, Ph.D., had more scope, more breadth and depth of cognizance of the Cosmic All, than anyone before—or since.

He had his flaws; we all do. But the grandeur of his writing overpowered those flaws, made them insignificant.

I first wrote Backstage Lensman nearly thirty years ago. The original is long lost. There was no market for it in those days, and my moving about... well, it got lost. This is a re-creation from memory. It was a test of memory in another way, too not once, during the writing, did I look into the Lensman for descriptions or phraseology or situations to parody. I've read those books so often over the years that there was no necessity for it. The style came naturally.

Only once did my memory fail me. I was too accurate. I had to rewrite one paragraph because, when I checked with the original, it was word-for-word. And that's plagiarism.

Doc saw the first version of Backstage Lensman in 1949, and laughed all through the convention. It was his suggestion that I call the spaceship Dentless.

On a planet distant indeed from Tellus, on a frigid, lightless globe situated within an almost completely enclosing hollow sphere of black interstellar dust, in a cavern far beneath the surface of that abysmally cold planet, a group of entities indescribable by, or to, man stood, sat, or slumped around a circular conference table.

Though they had no spines, they were something like porcupines; though they had no tentacles, they reminded one of octopuses; though they had no wings or beaks, they seemed similar to vultures; and though they had neither scales nor fins, there was definitely something fishy about them.

These, then, composed the Council of the Meich, frigid-blooded poison-breathers whose existence at temperatures only a few degrees above zero absolute required them to have extensions into the fourth and fifth dimensions, rendering them horribly indescribable and indescribably horrible to human sight.

Their leader, Meichfrite, or, more formally, Frite of the Meich, radiated harshly to others of the Council: "The time has now come to consider the problem of our

recent losses in the other galaxy. Meichrobe, as Second of the Meich, you will report first.”

That worthy pondered judiciously for long moments, then: “I presume you wish to hear nothing about the missing strawberries?”

“Nothing,” agreed the other.

“Then,” came Meichrobe’s rasping thought, “we must consider the pernicious activities of the Tellurian Lensman whose workings are not, and have not been, ascribed to Star A Star.

“The activities and behavior of all members of the never-to-be-sufficiently-damned Galactic Patrol have, as you know, been subjected to rigid statistical analysis. Our computers have come to the conclusion that, with a probability of point oh oh one, the Lensman known as Gimble Ginnison either is or is not the agent whom we seek.”

“A cogent report indeed,” Meichfrite complimented. “Next, the report of Meichron, Third of this Council.”

“As a psychologist,” Meichron replied, “I feel that there is an equal probability that the agent whom we seek is one whose physical makeup is akin to ours, rather than to that of the fire-blooded, oxygen-breathing Tellurians. Perhaps one of the immoral Palanians, who emmfoze in public.”

“That, too, must be considered,” Meichfrite noted. “Now to Meichrotch, Fourth of the Meich...”

And so it went, through member after member of that dark Council. How they arrived at any decision whatever is starkly unknowable to the human mind.

On green, warm Tellus, many mega parsecs from the black cloud which enveloped the eternally and infernally frigid planet of the Meich, Lensman Gimble Ginnison, having been released from the hospital at Prime Base, was talking to Surgeon-Major Macy, who had just given him his final checkup.

“How am I, Doc?” he asked respectfully, “QX for duty?”

Well, you were in pretty bad shape when you came in,” the Lensman surgeon said thoughtfully. “We almost had to clone you to keep you around, son. Those Axlemen really shot you up.”

“Check. But how am I now?”

The older Lensman looked at the sheaf of charts, films, tapes, and reports on his desk. “Mmm. Your skeleton seems in good shape, but I wonder about the rest of you. The most beautiful nurses in the Service attended you during your

convalescence, and you never made a pass-never even patted a fanny.”

“Gosh,” Ginnison flushed hotly, “was I expected to?”

“Not by me,” the older man said cryptically.

“Well, am I QX for duty? I have to do a flit.”

Surgeon-Major Macy handed Ginnison an envelope. ”Take this to the Starboard Admiral’s office. He’ll let you know. Where are you flitting for?”

“I’m not sure yet,” Ginnison said evasively, taking the envelope.

“Right. Clear ether, Gimble.”

“Clear ether, Macy.”

True to an old tradition, these two friends never told each other anything.

The Starboard Admiral slit open the envelope and took in its contents at a glance. “According to Macy, you’re fit for duty, son. Congratulations. And, in spite of everything, that was a right smart piece of work you did on Mulligans II.”

Ginnison looked at the tips of his polished boots. “Gee whiz,” he said, blushing. Then, looking up: “If I’m fit for duty, sir, I’d like to make a request. That mess on Cadilax needs to be cleaned up. I’m ready to try it, sir, and I await your orders.”

The Starboard Admiral looked up into the gray eyes of the young, handsome, broad-shouldered, lean, lithe, tough, hard, finely-trained, well-muscled, stubborn, powerful man who stood before him.

“Gim,” he said firmly, “You have disobeyed every order I have ever given you. It always came out all right, so I can’t gripe, but, as of now, I’m getting out from under. I’ve talked to the Galactic Council, and they agree. We are giving you your Release.”

The Release! The goal toward which every Lensman worked and so few attained! He was now an Unattached Lensman, responsible to no one and nothing save his own conscience. He was no longer merely a small cog in the mighty machine of the Galactic Patrol

He was a Big Wheel!

“Jeepers!” he said feelingly. “Goshtimighty!”

“It’s all of that,” the Starboard Admiral agreed. “Now go put on your Grays, take the Dentless. and get the hell out of here!”

“Yes, sir!” And Ginnison was gone.

He went to his quarters and took off his black-and-silver uniform. Then he proudly donned the starkly utilitarian gray leather uniform which was the garb of the Unattached Lensman. And as he did so, he made that curious gesture known as Gray Seal. No entity has ever donned or ever will don that Gray uniform without making that gesture. It is the only way you can get the zipper closed.

In his office, solidly sealed against both thought and spy-ray beams, the Starboard Admiral sat and stared at the glowing Lens on his wrist, the Lens which was, and is, the symbol of the rank and power of every Lensman of the Galactic Patrol.

But it is far more than merely a symbol.

It is a lenticular structure of hundreds of thousands of tiny crystalloids, and each is built and tuned to match the ego of one individual entity. It is not, strictly speaking, alive, but its pseudolife is such that when it is in circuit with the living entity to whom it is synchronized, it gives off a strong, changing, characteristically polychromatic light. It is a telepathic communicator of astounding power and range, and kills any being besides its owner who attempts to wear it.

Thus, it is both pretty and useful.

Manufactured and issued by the mysterious beings of dread and dreaded Arisia, it cannot be counterfeited, and is given only to those entities of the highest honor, integrity, honesty, and intelligence. That knowledge made the Starboard Admiral, as, indeed, it did all Lensmen, feel smug.

The mighty Dentless. from needle prow to flaring jets, was armed and armored, screened and shielded as was no other ship of her class and rating. Under the almost inconceivable thrust of her mighty driving jets, she drilled a hole through the void at her cruising velocity of a hundred parsecs per hour.

Not in the inert state could she so have done, for no body with inertial mass can travel faster than the velocity of light, which, in the vast reaches of the galaxy, is the veriest crawl.

But her Bergenholm, that intricate machine which renders a spaceship inertialess, or "free," permitted her to move at whatever velocity her ravaging jets could achieve against the meager resistance of the almost perfect vacuum of interstellar space. Unfortunately, the Bergenholm, while it could completely neutralize inertial mass, never quite knew what to do with gravitational mass, which seems to come and go as the circumstances require.

As the Dentless bored on through the awesome void toward her goal, Ginnison and

Chief Firing Officer Flatworthy checked and rechecked her mighty armament. Hot and tight were her ravening primary beams, against which no material object, inert or free, can offer any resistance whatever. When struck by the irresistible torrents of energy from a primary, any form of matter, however hard, however resistant, however refractory, becomes, in a minute fraction of a second, an unimaginably hot cloud of totally ionized gases.

Equally tight, but not so hot, were the ultrapowerful secondaries, whose beams could liquify or gassify tungsten or even the ultras resistant neocarballoy in the blink of an eye.

The inspection over, Ginnison lit a cigarette with a tertiary and Lensed a thought to an entity in another part of the ship. "Woozle, old snake, I hate to disturb your contemplations, but could you come to my cabin? We have things to discuss."

"Immediately, Ginnison," that worthy replied, and shortly thereafter Ginnison's door opened and there entered a leatherwinged, crocodile-headed, thirty-foot-long, crooked-armed, pythonish, reptilian nightmare. He draped himself across a couple of parallel bars, tied himself into a tasteful bow-knot, and extended a few weirdly-stalked eyes. "Well?"

Ginnison looked affectionately at the horribly monstrous Lensman. "Concerning l'affaire Cadilax," he began.

"I know nothing about it, fortunately," Woozle interrupted. "That gives you a chance to explain everything."

"Very well, then. As you well know, I have spent a long time searching for clues that will lead me to the top echelon of Boskonian-Boskonian, that frightful, inimical, soul-destroying, intergalactic organization which is so ineradicably opposed to all the moral values which we of Civilization hold so dear."

Woozle closed a few eyes. "Yes. Continue."

"On Leonabar," Ginnison continued, "I got a line through Banjo Freeko, the planetary dictator, but only after I blew up the mining industry on his planet and killed a few thousand innocent people—regretfully, of course. But I do that all the time. It revolts me, but I do it."

"What boots it?" Woozle asked. "You got your line, didn't you? You humans are so squeamish."

"To continue," said Ginnison. "This is the line I traced."

And in Woozle's mind there appeared a three-dimensional representation of intergalactic space. Two galaxies floated there in the awesome awfulness of the unimaginable vastness of the intergalactic void.

From Leonabar, in the First, or Tellurian, Galaxy, a thin, hard red line ran straight

through and past the Second Galaxy, out into the vast reaches of the intergalactic space beyond.

“Isn’t that rather overdoing it?” came Woozle’s thought. “You think this line may extend beyond—?”

Ginnison shook his head. “Not really. There’s nothing along that line for half a billion parsecs, and that’s a Seyfert Galaxy.”

“Tough about them,” Woozle opined. “Let’s get back to Cadilax.”

“Oh, yes. Well, Cadilax is clear across the Galaxy from Leononabar, so that would give us a good baseline for our second triangulation.”

“I trust,” Woozle thought, “that you have a better reason than that for picking Cadilax.”

“Certainly.” Rising from his seat, Ginnison paced across the deck of his cabin, turned, and paced back. “In the past several months, all hell has broken loose on Cadilax. The drug trade has gone up three hundred percent. Thionite, heroin, hashish, nitrolabe, cocaine, bentlam, and caffeine—all of them have increased tremendously, and Narcotics can’t find the source. The adolescents have gone wild; the boys are wearing their hair long, and the girls have given up perms. Illicit sex is rampant. They live in unstructured social groups.” He took a deep breath, and said, in a hushed voice: “There have even been demonstrations against the way the Patrol is running the Boskonian War!”

“Madness, indeed,” Woozle agreed, “but are you certain that your information is up-to-date?”

“Reasonably certain,” Ginnison pondered. “The latest information we have—”

At that point, a sharp, cold, Lensed thought intruded.

“Lensman Ginnison, greeting. I humbly request communication with you.”

Ginnison recognized that thought. It was that of Shadrack, a poison-blooded, frigid-breathing Lensman he had known of yore.

“Sure, little chum; what is it?”

“I do not interrupt?” Shadrack quavered.

“Not at all. Go ahead.”

“I trust I do not intrude upon matters of far greater importance than that of my own meager and faulty information?”

“Certainly not,” Ginnison reassured.

“As is well known,” continued the soft thought, “I am a yellow-bellied,

chicken-livered, jelly-gutted coward—a racial characteristic which I cannot and do not deny. Therefore, I most humbly apologize for this unwarranted intrusion upon your thoughts.”

“No need to overdo it, little chum,” said Ginnison. “A simple grovel will be enough.”

“Thank you, Ginnison,” Shadrack snivelled gravely. “Then may I inquire, in my own small way, if you are aware of the existence of an entity known as Banlon of Downlo? He is, like myself, a creature accustomed to temperatures scarcely above zero absolute, but of far greater courage and bravery than any of my race possess.”

“BANLON!” Ginnison’s Lensed thought fairly shrieked. “Klono, yes, I know of him!” Then, more calmly: “He’s been out after my hide since we destroyed Downlo.”

“That, I fear, is true,” Shadrack commented. “Even now, he has, according to the information which my poor powers have allowed me to glean, englobed the Dentless with a fleet of twelve ships which are prepared to blast you out of the ether.”

“Klono’s curving carballoy claws arid gilded gadolinium gizzard!” Ginnison roared mentally. “Why didn’t you say so in the first place?”

“I am devastated,” Shadrack replied. “It is, again, a racial characteristic which I cannot avoid. It took me too long to apologize.” A pause, then: “I fear, even now, that I may have been too late,” Shadrack apologized. “Clear ether, Ginnison.”

“Clear ether, little chum,”

The Lensed connection cut off, and Ginnison flashed a thought to the control room, only to discover that, indeed, the Dentless was surrounded.

In a black, undetectable, refrigerated speedster, many parsecs from the soon-to-be scene of battle, that entity known as Banlon of Downlo gloated over his instruments as he watched the englobement of the Dentless take form.

Like the Meich, and like Shadrack, he was of a race whose normal temperature was near that of boiling helium, and thus required extra-dimensional extensions in order to gather enough energy to survive. Superficially, that sounds glib enough, but, unfortunately, your historian knows less about dimensional analysis than you do, so let’s drop it right there.

To return to our narrative, Banlon, a safe distance away from the impending conflict, observed minutely the behavior of the Boskonian squadron which had englobed the Dentless. Each captain of the twelve Boskonian warships had done his job to perfection.

“Very well,” Banlon radiated harshly to his minions, “englobement is now complete. Tractors and pressors on! Cut your Bergenholms and go inert! Blast that ship out of

the ether!

Inertialess as she was, the mighty Dentless, caught in a web of tractor and pressor beams, could not continue at speed against the resistance of an inert combined mass twelve times that of her own. Relative to the Boskonian squadron, she came to a dead halt in space, easy prey for the Boskonians.

At Banlon's order, all twelve Boskonian ships fired at once toward the center of their englobement, where the apparently helpless Patrol ship floated.

Beams, rods, cones, stilettos, icepicks, corkscrews, knives, forks, and spoons of energy raved against the screens of the Dentless. Quasi-solid bolts of horrendous power chewed, gnawed, flared, snarled, and growled against the energy screens of the Patrol ship, seeking eagerly to blast through them to the hull metal. All of circumambient space was filled with the frightful discharge of those tremendous bolts of power.

The screens of the Dentless flared red, orange, yellow, green blue, and into the violet. From there, they went into the ultraviolet and x-ray spectrum. But still they held.

Gimble Ginnison, teeth clenched and jaw muscles knotted, stared with unblinking gaze of grey eyes at the plate before him, listening to the reports from the officers commanding the various functions of the ship. But only one of those reports was really important.

“Screens holding, Lensman!”

“Fire secondaries” the Lensman ordered crisply.

The prodigious might of the Patrol ship's secondaries flared out toward the twelve Boskonian ships. Those screens, too, blazed up the spectrum toward the ultraviolet, then toward blackness.

“Primaries one through twelve! Ready?”

“Ready, sir!”

“At my order, then.” Ginnison watched his plate closely.

“Five seconds! Four...Three...Two...One...FIRE”

Twelve primary batteries flamed forth as one, each ravaging beam smashing into, through, and past the already weakened shields of the Boskonian battleships. Like tissue paper in the flame of an oxyhydrogen torch, the dozen ships dissolved into whitehot gas.

As far as his detectors could scan, Ginnison could see that there was not a single



threat in the ether about the Dentless.

“Navigator,” he ordered crisply, “continue toward Cadilax.”

From his coign of vantage, so many parsecs away, Banlon stared in unbelief at his instruments, knowing to the full what they had reported. But after that first momentary shock, the ultrahard logic of his ultracold brain reasserted itself.

“Shit,” he thought. And, flipping his speedster end-for-end, he turned around and ran.

Came, betimes, to Cadilax, a bum.

He showed up, unobtrusively, in the streets of Ardis, the capital of that disturbed planet. He was, apparently, a man approaching sixty—graying, flabby, rheumy-eyed, alcoholic, and not too bright. He was so typical of his kind that no one noticed him; he was merely one of ten thousand such who wandered about the streets of the various cities of Cadilax. He hung around the bars and bistros of the spaceport, cadging drinks, begging for small change, leering innocuously at the hookers, and telling stories of the days of his youth, when he was “somebody.” He claimed to have been a doctor, a lawyer, a pimp, a confidence man, a bartender, a judge, a police officer, a religious minister, and other such members of highly respected occupations, but he could never produce any proof that he had ever been anyone of them.

And no one expected him to, for that was the sine qua non of the spaceport bum. He was what he was, and no one expected more of him. He called himself Goniff, and, because of his vaguely erudite manner of speech, soon became known as “Professor” Goniff.

He was never completely sober, and never completely drunk.

The student of this history has, of course, already surmised that beneath this guise lay the keen mind and brain of Gimble Ginnison, Gray Lensman, and he is right.

Throughout this time, Ginnison was searching out and finding a wight bedight Gauntluth.

It had taken time. The Gray Lensman’s mind had probed into the depths of degradation, the valleys of vileness, the caverns of corruption, in the dregs of the noxious minds of the foulest folk of a planet before finding that name and that individual. He might have found him earlier, had he not been enjoying himself so much.

At first, only vaguely had he been able to construct from the clues available a picture of the all-powerful drug baron and pirate who ruthlessly ruled the underworld of Cadilax. Then, as time went on and more and more data came in, his visualization of

Gauntluth became complete.

Gauntluth was tall, lean, and tough, with the all-pervading cadaverous blue of a Kalonian. His headquarters were in the Queen Ardis Hotel, the biggest luxury hotel on the planet, which catered only to the top fringe of the upper crust of the ultra-ultra.

There, in his superbly screened and shielded suite of offices, Gauntluth controlled, through an intricate webwork of communications' and by a highly efficiently organized army of minions, the drug traffic of half a dozen solar systems.

For long Ginnison pondered, and came to the obvious conclusion that "Professor" Goniff could in no wise gain admission to the elite society of the Queen Ardis Hotel. Therefore Goniff the bum vanished.

Instead, it was Lester Q. Twodyce, cosmopolitan, and wealthy playboy, who checked into the Queen Ardis with an entourage of flunkies and yes-men, not one of whom could easily be detected as an officer of the Galactic Patrol. As was de rigeur on Cadilax, everyone of Twodyce's men wore a thought-screen.

Carefully, step by step, Ginnison laid his trap. Through the highest ranks of Gauntluth's organization, it became known that Lester Q. Twodyce had something valuable that he was eager to sell. It became clear, even to Gauntluth, that whatever it was Twodyce had, it was certainly worth investigating.

Thus it came about that one evening, when the impeccably dressed Mr. Twodyce was seated at a table in the grand dining room of the hotel with two of his hard-faced gunmen, he was approached by two equally well-dressed men who bowed politely and smiled pleasantly.

One of them said: "Good evening, Mr. Twodyce. I trust we do not interrupt your repast?"

Twodyce looked up. "Not at all," he said. "Will you be seated?"

Then, almost as an afterthought: "May I order you drinks? Such distinguished men as yourselves deserve only the best, of course."

"You know, then, who we are?" asked the spokesman.

"Certainly, Mr. Thord," replied the Lensman suavely, "you and Mr. Thield are hardly anonymous." Drinks were brought.

"These—" he gestured toward the men on either side of him. "—are my associates, Mr. Kokomo and Mr. De Katur."

After several minutes of preliminary conversation, the apefaced Thord finally broached the subject which they had all been anticipating.

"I hear, Mr. Twodyce," he said, "you are here to do business."

“Not primarily,” said the Lensman nonchalantly. “I am here to enjoy myself. Business is not a primary concern of mine.”

“I understand,” said Thord, “for such a man as yourself...”

“Nevertheless,” continued Ginnison, “I do have a small trifle which I am willing to dispose of for a proper price.”

The lizard-like Mr. Thield spoke. “And that is?”

Twodyce said off-handedly, “Fifty grams of clear-quill thionite.”

There was a stunned silence from Thord and Thield.

Thionite! Thionite, that dreadful and dreadfully expensive drug which, in microgram doses, induces in the user clear, three-dimensional, stereosonic visions in which he indulges in his every desire to the point of ecstasy. Every desire, base or noble, mental or physical, conscious or subconscious. Whatever pleasurable experience he wishes for himself, he experiences. It is addictive to the nth degree. It is the ultimate high, but the slightest overdose is deadly.

It is also purple.

One milligram of that dire drug was enough for a thousand doses, and the insouciant Mr. Twodyce was offering fifty thousand times that amount!

“Gad!” murmured Mr. Thield.

“Indeed?” said Thord. “If that is true, we are prepared to offer...”

“You will offer nothing,” Ginnison said calmly. “I do not deal with underlings.”

Thord’s face darkened. “Underlings? Underlings? To whom do you think you are speaking, Mister Twodyce?”

“To underlings,” said the unruffled Twodyce. “And you may tell Gantluth I said so.”

There was a momentary silence from Thord and Thield as their eyes darted from Ginnison’s face to those of the bodyguards. Each bodyguard was fingering his necktie, his right hand only inches away from the DeLameter that was undoubtedly in a shoulder holster concealed by the loose-fitting dress jacket that each man wore.

Thord and Thield rose, superficially regaining their composure. “We will speak to you later, Mr. Twodyce,” said Thord.

“You will not,” said Ginnison in a low, deadly voice. “I have no desire to see either of you again. Gantluth may contact me if he so wishes. Tell Gantluth that I caution him to think of a hamburger.”

“A...a hamburger?” gasped Thord.

“Precisely. A hamburger.”

“—But—”

“You may not be able to figure it out,” Ginnison said coldly, “but your boss will. Now go.”

Without another word, the two underlings turned and went.

That night, in his own suite, Lester Q. Twodyce was Lensing a thought to Lieutenant-Admiral Partisipple, the Lensman in charge of the Patrol base on Cadilax.

“Partisipple?”

“Yes, Ginnison, what is it?” came the Lensman-Admiral’s thought,

“This thing’s about to bust wide open,” Ginnison declared, “and I’ll need some help.”

“Anything you want, Gray Lensman.”

“Good. Can you get me about fifty logons?”

“Logons?” Lensed the base commander in astonishment. “LOGONS!”

There was reason for his astonishment, for the logon, or Cadiligian rateagle, is one of the nastiest, most vicious, and intractable beasts in the galaxy. Its warped mind is capable of containing but one emotion: HATRED! The Cadiligian rateagle hates anything and everything living, the only desire in the small compass of its mind being to reduce that life to something edible.

The logon resembles the Tellurian rat at its worst, but it is the size of a Tellurian terrier and has the wings and claws of an eagle. Logons do not make nice pets.

“Yes, logons,” Ginnison replied. “I can control them.”

“With your superior mental equipment,” the base commander thought humbly, “I am sure you can. How do you want them packaged?”

“Put them in a ‘copter. Have the pilot ready to release them on my order, within one kilometer of the roof of the Queen Ardis Hotel.”

“Certainly. Clear ether, Gray Lensman.”

“Clear ether, Partisipple.”

Then, another Lensed thought to Woozle, in the Dentless, hovering invisibly in orbit high above the surface of Cadilax. “Woozle, old serpent, here’s the story so far.” And in flashing thoughts he told the reptilian Lensman his plans. “So have Lieutenant

Hess von Baschenvolks and his company of Dutch Valerians down here and ready to go.”

“Will do, Ginnison. Clear ether.”

“Clear ether.”

In the office on the top floor of the Queen Ardis Hotel, the inscrutable face of Gauntluth stared thoughtfully at the banks of screens, meters, switches, dials, indicators, knobs, buttons, and flickering lights on the panels and control boards which surrounded him.

Finally, after long pondering, he touched a button on one of his control panels. “Give me suite 3305,” he said.

Ginnison was waiting for the call when it came. The cadaverous blue face of the gaunt Gauntluth appeared on his visiscreen. “Yes?” he said calmly.

“I am told,” came Gauntluth’s rasping voice, “that you are in a position to deal with me concerning a certain—ah—article.”

“As long as the deal is on the up-and-up, I am,” replied Ginnison. “Of course, the usual precautions must be taken on both sides.”

“Of course, my dear fellow,” Gauntluth said agreeably. “Shall we, then, make arrangements that are agreeable to both sides?”

“Let us do so,” said Ginnison.

On cold and distant Jugavine, the planet of the Meich, the First of the frightful Council, Meichfrite, radiated harshly to the others: “you have all scanned the tapes containing the report of our agent, Banlon of Downlo. Somehow, by what means we know not, the Lensman, Ginnison, escaped the trap Banlon set for him. Twelve of our ships have vanished utterly, and Banlon’s report is neither complete nor conclusive. I would now like to hear your comments. Meichrobe.”

“It seems to me,” that worthy radiated, “that the strawberries are—”

“Forget the goddam strawberries!” Meichfrite riposted. “What about Ginnison?”

“Well, then,” Meichrobe thought raspily, “our computers have calculated that with a probability of point oh oh four, Gimble Ginnison has either gone to Cadilax or somewhere else.”

“Indeed,” Meichfrite thought thoughtfully. “Meichrodot, Fifth of the Meich, give us your thoughts on this subject.”

“Our reports from Cadilax,” informed Meichrodot, “indicate that all is going smoothly. There is no trace of the Lensman on or near the planet. However, Banlon’s agent Gantluth has reported through Banlon that he is running short of thionite. He wants to make a buy.”

Meichfrite turned his attention to the Sixth of the Meich. “Meichroft, this is your department.”

“Banlon,” Meichroft emitted, “must go to Trengo.”

Trengo! That planet was, and is, unique. Its atmosphere and its liquid are its two outstanding peculiarities. Half of the atmosphere and almost all of the liquid of the planet is a compound with an extremely low heat of vaporization. It has a boiling point such that during the day it is a vapor and it condenses to a liquid at night. The days are intensely hot, the nights intensely cold.

The planet rotates on its axis in a little less than twenty-six hours; during the night it rains exactly forty-seven feet, five inches-no more and no less, every night of every year.

The winds are of more than hurricane velocity, rising to some eight hundred miles per hour, accompanied by blinding, almost continuous lightning discharges.

What makes the planet unique, however, is that, with compounds of such low latent heat, the energy transfer is almost nil. Theoretically, the hot days should evaporate that liquid as quietly and gently as a ghost evaporates in a spotlight, and during the night it should condense as softly as dew from heaven falling upon the place beneath. Thermodynamically speaking, the planet Trengo should be about as turbulent as a goldfish bowl. Nobody can figure out where those winds or the lightning come from.

Be that as it may, Trengo was, and is, the only planet where the plant known as Trenconian broadleaf grows, and that plant is the only source of thionite in any of several galaxies.

In addition, Trengo has a strong Galactic Patrol base, manned by Rigellian Patrolmen whose sole job it is to kill anyone who comes to Trengo. One can well understand why thionite was, and is, so expensive.

“Ah, a cogent thought indeed!” radiated Meichfrite. “Very well, then, relay to Banlon that he is to proceed at speed to Trengo and pick up a cargo of broadleaf, to bring here for processing. Meantime he is to order his underling Gantluth to report directly to us.”

In his office atop the Queen Ardis, Gantluth the Kalonian watched with hard, steel-blue eyes as a figure on his spy-ray plate moved toward his suite of offices.

Twodyce, with the exception of the DeLameter in his shoulder holster, was unarmed; he was carrying nothing else but the hermetically sealed container which bore within itself fifty grams of almost impalpable purple powder.

A smile twisted Gantluth's face. "Fool!" he gritted harshly under his breath.

He continued to watch as Twodyce came to the outer door and activated the announcer. He activated the door-opener. "Come in, Mr. Twodyce," he spoke into a microphone. "Down the hall and first door to your left."

Gimble Ginnison, fully alert, strode down the corridor and opened the door. Alone behind his desk sat the unsuspecting Kalonian.

"I perceive," said the zwilnik, [A zwilnik is anyone connected with the drug trade.] "that you have brought the thionite with you."

"I have," said the Lensman. "Have you the payment ready?"

"Certainly. Half in bar platinum, half in Patrol credits, as specified. But first, of course, I must test the thionite."

"First I test the platinum," said Twodyce impassively.

Gantluth blinked. "We seem to be at an impasse," he murmured. "However, I think I see a way around it. Know, Twodyce, that you stand now in the focus of a complex of robotic devices which, with rays and beams of tremendous power, will reduce you to a crisp unless you hand over that thionite container instantly."

"Since it is inevitable," Ginnison said calmly, "I might as well enjoy it." He carefully put the thionite container on Gantluth's desk.

Gantluth needed no further check. Directing his thought toward a lump of force in a nearby corner of the room, he sent a message to Jugavine.

This was the moment for which Ginnison had been waiting. In an instant, he effortlessly took over the zwilnik's [A zwilnik is still a zwilnik.] mind. He allowed Gantluth to send the message, since it would only further confuse all those concerned. Gantluth reported in full to Meichfrite that he had, indeed, obtained a goodly supply of thionite.

"Excellent," the cold thought returned. "There will be more coming. End communication."

By main force and awkwardness, Ginnison held Gantluth's mind in thrall. He now had his second line to the Boskonian base, but Gantluth, although taken by surprise at first, was now fighting Ginnison's mental control with every mega-erg of his hard

Kalonian mind.

“Think you can succeed, even now?” sneered the still-rigid Kalonian mentally. And, with a tremendous effort of will, he moved a pinkie a fraction of a millimeter to cover a photocell. Every alarm in the building went off.

Ginnison’s mind clamped down instantly to paralyze the hapless zwilnik. [See above.] With a mirthless smile on his face, Ginnison said: “I permitted that as a gesture of futility. You did not, as I suggested, contemplate a hamburger.”

“Bah!” came Gauntluth’s thought. “That childishness?”

“Not childishness,” said the Lensman coldly. “A hamburger is so constructed that most of the meat is hidden by the bun. My resources are far greater than those which appear around the edge.”

Then Ginnison invaded Gauntluth’s mind and took every iota of relevant information therein, following which, he hurled a bolt of mental energy calculated to slay any living thing. Perforce, Gauntluth ceased to be a living thing.

Meanwhile, from a hidden and shielded barracks in a subbasement of the Queen Ardis came a full squadron of armed and armored space-thugs, swarming up stairways and elevators to reach the late Gauntluth’s suite. Closer, and, at this point in space and time, far more dangerous, were the DeLameter-armed, thought-screened executives and plug-uglies who were even now battering down the doors of the suite.

Calmly and with deliberation, Ginnison flashed a thought to Wozle:  
“HE-E-E-ELP!”

“At speed, Ginnison,” came the reply.

Ginnison went into action. Snatching the hermetically sealed thionite container from the desk at which lay the cooling corpse of Gauntluth, he broke the seal and emptied the contents into the intake vent of the air conditioner. He had, of course, taken the precaution of putting anti-thionite plugs in his nostrils; all he had to do was to keep his mouth shut and he would be perfectly safe.

The impalpable purple powder permeated the atmosphere of the hotel. There was enough of the active principle of that deadly drug to turn on fifty million people; since the slightest overdose could kill, every person in the hotel not wearing anti-thionite plugs or space armor died in blissful ecstasy. Most of Gauntluth’s thugs were wearing one or the other, but at least the Galactic Patrol need no longer worry about interference from innocent bystanders.

With lightning speed, Ginnison grabbed a heavy-caliber, water-cooled machine rifle that just happened to be standing near Gauntluth’s desk, swiveled it to face the



doors of the office, and waited.

At the same moment, a borazon-hard, bronze-beryllium steel-prowed landing craft smashed into the side of the Hotel Queen Ardis at the fifteenth floor. Steel girders, ferroconcrete walls, and brick facing alike splattered aside as that hard-driven, specially-designed space boat, hitting its reverse jets at the last second to bring it to a dead halt, crashed into and through the bridal suite. The port slammed open and from it leaped, strode, jumped and strutted a company of Dutch Valerians in full space armor, swinging their mighty thirty-pound space axes.

No bifurcate race, wherever situate, will voluntarily face a Valerian in battle. Those mighty warriors, bred in a gravitational field three times that of Tellus, have no ruth for any of Civilization's foes. The smallest Valerian can, in full armor, do a standing high jump of nearly fifteen feet in a field of one Tellurian gravity; he can feint, parry, lunge, swing, and duck with a speed utterly impossible for any of the lesser breeds of man. Like all jocks, they are not too bright.

Led by Lieutenant Hess von Baschenvolks, they charged in to block off the armed and armored space-thugs who were heading toward the top floor. As they charged in, the Lieutenant shouted their battle-cry.

“Kill! Bash! Smash! Cut! Hack! Destroy! Bleed, you bastards! Bleed and die!” And, of course, they did.

A thirty-pound space axe driven by the muscles of a Valerian can cut its way through any armor. Heads fell; arms were lopped off; gallons of gore flowed over the expensive carpetry. Leaving behind them dozens of corpses, the Valerians charged upward, toward the suite of offices where the Gray Lensman awaited the assault of Gauntluth's men, fingers poised, ready to press the hair triggers of the heavy machine rifle.

The news of the attack, however, reached those winsome wights long before the Valerians did. They knew that, unarmored as they were, they stood no chance against those Patrolmen. They headed for the roof, where powerful 'copters awaited them for their getaway.

It was not until they were all on the roof that the logons, released from the special 'copter less than a kilometer away, and individually controlled by the mighty mind of Gimble Ginnison, launched their attack. The zwilnik [Forget it.] executives and plug-uglies had no chance. Only a few managed to draw and fire their ray guns, and even those few missed their targets. Within a space of seconds, the entire group had been slashed, cut, scratched, bitten, killed, and half-eaten by the winged horrors that had been released upon them.

In Gauntluth's office, Ginnison waited behind the machine rifle, his fingers still poised on the hair-triggers. The door smashed and fell. But Ginnison recognized the

bulky space-armored eight-foot figure that loomed before him. His hands came away from the triggers as he said: "Hi, Hess!"

"Duuuhh...Hi, Boss," said Lieutenant Hess von Baschenvolks.

In a totally black, intrinsically undetectable, ultrapowered speedster, towing three negaspheres of planetary antimass, Gimble Ginnison cautiously approached the hollow sphere of light-obliterating dust which surrounded the dread planet Jugavine of the Meich.

With his second line of communication, it had been a simple job to locate exactly and precisely the planet which had been the source of the disruption which had hit the planet Cadilax.

Further, that mental communication had given Ginnison all the information he needed to wipe out this pernicious pesthole of pediculous parasites on the body politic of Civilization.

The negaspheres were an integral part of the plan.

The negasphere was, and is, a complete negation of matter. To it, a push is, or becomes, a pull, and vice versa. No radiation of whatever kind can escape from or be reflected by its utterly black surface. It is dense beyond imagining; even a negasphere of planetary antimass is less than a kilometer in diameter. When a negasphere strikes ordinary matter, the two cancel out, bringing into being vast quantities of ultrahard and very deadly radiation. A negasphere is, by its very nature, inherently indetectable by any form of radar or spy-ray beam. Even extra-sensory perception reels dizzyingly away from that vast infinitude of absolute negation...

Like the Bergenholm, the negasphere can never really make up its mind about gravity; gravity is, was, and always has been a pull, and it should act as a push against a negasphere; since it does not do so, we must conclude that there is something peculiar about the mathematics of the negasphere.

It is to Ginnison's credit that he had perceived this subtle, but inalterable, anomaly.

Into the hollow cloud of black interstellar dust that surrounded frigid Jugavine, there was but one entrance, and into that entrance the Gray Lensman's speedster, towing with tractors and pressors those three deadly negaspheres, wended its intricate way.

In his office, the Starboard Admiral glowered. "I don't like it. Ginnison should have taken the full fleet with him."

The personage he was addressing was Sir Houston Carbarn, the most brilliant mathematical physicist in the known universe. He was one of a handful of living entities who could actually think in the abstruse and abstract language of pure mathematics.

“I don’t like his going in there alone,” the Starboard Admiral continued. “If that hollow sphere of dust is as black and bleak as he says it is, he will have nothing to guide him but his sense of perception.”

“ $\text{DIV } B = 0$ ;  $\text{CURL } B = \text{je} - + (dE/dt)$ ;  $\text{DIV } E = P_e$ ;  $\text{CURL } E = 0 - (dB/dt)$ .” said Sir Houston Carbarn thoughtfully. “True,” agreed the Starboard Admiral. “but I can see no way for him to illuminate such a vast amount of space with the means at his command. That hollow globe is two parsecs across, and contains within it only a single solid body-the planet Jugavine. How can he possibly get enough illumination to find the planet?”

“ $X^2 + y^2 + Z^2 = r^2$ ,” murmured Sir Houston, “ $E = MC^2$ .”

“Yes, yes, obviously” snapped the Starboard Admiral, “but in order to illumine the interior of that hollow globe, he will have to find Jugavine first, and to do that he needs illumination. It seems to me this involves a paradox.”

“pq ? qp.” Sir Houston snapped forcefully.

“Ah, I see what you mean,” said the Starboard Admiral. “But what about Banlon of Downlo? According to Ginnison’s report, Banlon is returning to Jugavine with a cargo of Trenconian broadleaf which he somehow managed to steal from under the very noses of Trigonemetree, the Rigellian Lensman in charge of our base on Trengo. If Ginnison destroys Jugavine, Banlon’s sense of perception will immediately tell him that the planet no longer exists, and he will not fall into Ginnison’s trap. How is he going to get around that?”

“?” mused Sir Houston abstractedly.

Gimble Ginnison, Gray Lensman, had no need of slow, electromagnetic radiation to locate the planet of the Meich. His tremendous sense of perception had pinpointed that doomed planet exactly. Calculating carefully the intrinsic velocity of his first negasphere in relation to that of the planet of the Meich, he released that black, enigmatic ball of negation toward its hapless target.

The negasphere struck. Or perhaps not. Is it possible for nothing to strike anything? Let us say, then, that the negasphere began to occupy the same space as that of Jugavine. At the hyperdimensional surface of contact, the matter and antimatter mutually vanished. Where the negasphere struck, a huge hole appeared in that theretofore frigid planet. The planet collapsed in on itself, its very substance eaten away by the all-devouring negasphere. The radiation of that mutual annihilation wrought heated havoc upon the doomed planet. Helium boiled; hydrogen melted; nitrogen fizzed; and all fell collapsingly into the rapidly diminishing negasphere.

When the awful and awesome process had completed itself, there was nothing left. Thus perished the Meich.

When the process was completed, the Gray Lensman hurled his two remaining negaspheres toward the exact same spot in space.

Then he sat and waited for Banlon of Downlo.

Time passed. Ginnison, ever on the alert with his acute sense of perception, at last detected Banlon's speedster entering the globe of dust. Banlon could not detect, at that distance, the flare of radiation which had resulted from the destruction of Jugavine. That radiation, struggling along at the speed of light, would require years to reach the interior surface of the globe.

Ginnison, waiting like a cat at a mouse hole, pounced at the instant that Banlon entered the globe. One flash of a primary beam, and Banlon of Downlo was forced into the next plane of existence. He ceased to be, save as white-hot gas, spreading and dissipating its energy through a relatively small volume of space.

Immediately, Ginnison Lensed his report back to Prime Base, then made his way out of the hollow globe and back to the Dentless.

The Starboard Admiral frowned and looked up at Sir Houston Carbarn. "I'm afraid I still don't understand. After Jugavine was destroyed, Banlon, with his sense of perception, which is instantaneous and is not hampered by the velocity of light, should have detected the fact that the planet no longer existed. Why did he continue on in toward a non-existent planet?"

Sir Houston Carbarn smiled. " $(-1)(-1) = +1$ ," he informed.

The Starboard Admiral slammed his palm on the desk. "Of course! The principle of the double negative! Two negaspheres made a posisphere! Banlon thought it was Jugavine! Our Gray Lensman has genius, Sir Houston!"

"!" agreed Sir Houston.

When Gimble Ginnison strode into his quarters aboard the Dentless, Woozle was waiting for him. "What now?" queried that sapient serpent.

"Now for a decent meal, Woozle." He activated a communicator. "Galley? Send up a two-inch-thick steak, rare. Mashed potatoes and thick brown gravy. And a quart of black coffee."

"Yes, sir," came the reply. "And what about dessert, sir?"

Ginnison sat down in his chair with a triumphant sigh of relief. "Now, at last," he said, "I can enjoy that for which I have waited so long."

"The strawberries, sir?"

"Exactly. The strawberries."