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Slave Raiders from Mercury

by Don Wilcox

Lester Allison and June O'Neil found they faced more than death on Mercury; the Rite of the Floating Chop

An A\NN/A Preservation Edition. [Notes](#)

“THIS way, ladies and gentlemen!” shouted the sideshow barker, pounding on a tomtom. “Open to the public for the first time. The greatest mystery attraction ever offered for fifty cents. A rocket ship from the outside world!”

A few customers paid and passed through. Above the brightly painted canvas fence, the huge black chrysalis-shaped hull gleamed in the midday sun. Lester Allison gazed. He dropped the wisp of foxtail grass from his teeth and edged toward the front of the crowd.

“Step right up, you handsome farmer boys,” the barker sang out, with one eye on Allison. “It’s brand new. There’s no fake about it. It was found last week in a wheat field and this carnival bought it for your entertainment. Come one, come all, only fifty cents!”

Lester Allison yelled up at the speaker, “Who was in it when they found it?”

“Not a soul, my boy, not a soul!”

“Then how’d it find its way to the earth?”

“Ah, there’s the mystery! An empty ship from an outside world, and not a foot-track around it. Come in and get the whole story!”

Lester Allison looked around for someone to take in with him, but saw no one he knew. However, he gave a second look to the pretty girl who brushed past his shoulder.

The girl gave a quick anxious glance back through the crowd; apparently she was trying to get away from someone. She bolted through the canvas gateway without stopping to pay.

“Hold on, lady!” The barker made a pass at her.

“Here,” said Lester Allison, slapping down a dollar. “For two.”

“Thanks so much,” the girl breathed a moment later. Lester Allison followed her through the open airlocks into the black ship.

“The luck’s all mine,” he said.

“*Mine*,” said the girl, “if he doesn’t follow me in—that is,” she talked excitedly, “I’m running away—from home.”

They pushed through the cluster of spectators within the ship.

“You oughtn’t to wear such a bright yellow dress if you’re trying to make a getaway. It caught my eye first thing—it and the yellow hat and your black hair and—”

At a curious smile from the girl Allison concluded he’d better not catalog any more of the items about her appearance that had attracted him. Nevertheless his gaze lingered on her pretty face.

“Pretty young to be running away, aren’t you?”

Suddenly her dark eyes were intent on the door.

“Oh—” she began distressedly.

A slender young man came in and looked about furtively. The moment he spied the girl, he marched back to her.

“All right for you, June O’Neil,” he said in a surly voice. “Your dad said come home. He meant it, too. He’s sober and he’s mad.”

June O’Neil refused to speak. The young man tried to take her arm. She jerked away and scrunched down in her seat in the ship. He sat down beside her.

“Big-hearted of you,” he said sarcastically, “to make me pay fifty cents to come in here and get you.”

“You haven’t got me,” said the girl.

“Oh, *no*? Don’t make me laugh!”

“Listen, Ted Tyndall!” The girl’s voice was low but every word was packed with fury, and the flash of her dark eyes gave Lester Allison a quickened heartbeat.

"I'm not coming home. That's final. I've had all of home and drunken fathers and quarrelsome boy friends that I can stand!"

"Zat so?" Ted Tyndall mocked. Then his eyes took in Lester Allison, who stood, an easy six feet of country-bred manhood, at the other side of June's chair.

"Who's that?"

"I don't know," said June O'Neil quietly.

"I'm Lester Allison." The words were accompanied by a genial smile which met with an expressionless stare from Ted Tyndall.

THE sideshow barker stepped inside the rocket ship and rapped for attention.

"Ladies and gentlemen—" (The group was mostly men; there chanced to be only one other lady besides June O'Neil.) "You are now in the main cabin of a mystery space ship whose secrets not only baffle science, they even baffle me. Mystery Number One: no controls are visible. Mystery Number Two: as I walk to the front of the cabin, the airlocks automatically close."

With a *swish* the doors folded, to become an imperceptible part of the black metal walls.

Ted Tyndall grumbled to the girl, "Now see what you've done. I'm stuck here for a lecture."

By this time most of the eighteen or twenty spectators were seated in the deep-cushioned chairs. Lester Allison started toward a seat as the carnival man continued.

"Mystery Number Three: the black metal of this ship is unlike anything found on this earth—"

Brum-brrr-row-wrr—*wham!*

* * *

LESTER ALLISON awakened with the vague feeling that the universe had jumped a cog.

That dull aching roar—most of it seemed to be in his head. Some of it came through the wall that cramped his shoulder. He was too groggy to open his eyes. What a clamor of voices! That woman's unrelenting scream—again and again and again. Men shouting and wrangling and fighting. And, near at hand, the voice of that pretty girl, June O'Neil, her low-spoken words fraught with terror. Lester Allison opened his eyes.

"He's alive, didn't I tell you?" the girl gasped.

Ted Tyndall's only response was, "Get me out of here! What the hell—"

"But he's hurt! He might be dying!" The girl's hands tugged at Allison's shoulders.

"Let him rot!" Ted Tyndall fairly screamed. "Get me back to the ground!"

Lester Allison took a deep breath and rolled onto his elbows and knees.

"I'm all right," he mumbled. "A little stunned. That sudden fall—"

His words were lost against the continual screaming. He staggered to his feet. He saw June O'Neil's frightened, imploring face, heard her say,

“No one knows why we took off. No one knows what to do.”

Allison’s attention turned to the distant sun blazing out of a black sky. It shot through the front cabin window, illuminated the frantic figures chasing through the aisles of the space ship. Some stood at the windows paralyzed with fear; some were fighting. Allison moved up the aisle toward the fight. Three or four enraged men had closed in on the carnival barker.

“You trapped us, you lousy—”

“I did not!”

“Get us back to Earth or we’ll kill you!”

“What’s the game, you crazy—”

“I tell you I didn’t—” the barker protested.

“This knife means business!”

The sun flashed from the open pocket-knife. The carnival man backed into a corner.

“Don’t be a fool!” Allison snapped as he pushed through to the chief threatener. “Don’t—”

HE caught the wrist that held the weapon, bore down with severe strength, and faced the threatener.

“Take it easy, friend.”

“Take it easy! This fellow coaxed us in, didn’t he? And locked the doors and—” The struggling man’s grip relaxed as Allison’s steel fingers tightened. The knife dropped.

“Let it lay!” Allison snapped. “And don’t be simple. That carnival guy’s no space pilot. He’s not *that* smart!”

Eyes turned toward the barker, whose jaw dropped with a comical effect. One of the threateners snorted, another chuckled, and the situation eased.

“Besides,” Allison went on, “where are the controls? There aren’t any. Say—how the heck does this darn thing operate, anyway?”

Naturally no one on board could answer that question. Lester Allison calmly picked up the pocket-knife, folded it and slipped it into the owner’s jacket.

“Hey—where do you think we’re heading for?” another passenger spoke up.

Allison glanced out the window. “Either Mercury or Venus, near as I can judge. But probably Mercury, because we seem to be heading pretty close toward the sun—an’ Mercury’s the planet nearest the sun.”

“Mercury!” the sideshow barker puffed. “And I only charged you fifty cents. Am I a dope!”

Ted Tyndall made his voice heard. “All right, smart fellow, if you know all the answers, turn us back.”

Lester Allison’s eyes roved along the walls hopefully. He wondered whether the adjoining rooms might contain the answer. However, some of the men who had had time to explore shook their heads.

“We’ve searched high and low,” said a one-armed man. “There’s food and water and sanitary facilities, but nothing that looks like a control lever.”

“Then we’re in for a space jaunt,” Allison muttered. “We may as well stop howling and make up our minds to it.”

The other lady passenger, who had become hysterical, stopped crying for a moment, and then burst out afresh.

Ted Tyndall yowled, “You mean we can’t get home tonight?”

“No, dear,” the carnival barker mocked, mopping his forehead. “Better drop a note to mamma.”

“Shut up, you damned—”

“Sit down!” Allison cracked the command, and Tyndall obeyed. “We’ve had enough roughhouse. Whatever we’re in for, we may as well have order.”

“You’re elected to keep it,” said the carnival barker.

Whether or not the barker meant it for a taunt, Lester Allison took it as a challenge. He looked from one to another of his fellow passengers.

An odd assortment, surely. A fat unshaved tramp, a one-armed man, a poorly dressed Negro, a bewildered old man who was deaf, several men who might have been machinists or farmers or white collar workers.

“You’re elected,” another of the men echoed.

In that moment Lester Allison forgot he was only twenty-three years old and that most of those years had gone into handling stubborn mules and running farm machinery. His eyes turned toward the woman who stood at the rear window, crying hysterically.

“Does anyone here know that woman?” he asked. No one did. He walked back to her. “Lady, we’re going to put you in a room by yourself until you get quiet.”

Immediately the terrified crying ceased. Quiet reigned. From that moment Lester Allison’s authority was established. Whatever unknown destiny awaited the ship, for the present he was its master.

CHAPTER II

Inhabited Chasms

MERCURY grew like a crescent-shaped cloud bearing down upon the nose of the space ship. By this time the sun was far to the side. Lester Allison watched and wondered how soon the ship would cut its speed. A queer feeling, being tossed through the universe at the whims of—well, of *what?*

The men hovered close about Allison. No one talked. Everything had been talked out. Now there was nothing left but to wait and watch their common fate unfold.

Through Lester Allison’s mind surged the memories of recent hours. The hysterical woman’s shocking suicide... the bottle of deadly poison... the erratic note that proved she had been frightened crazy...

Allison had taken the bottle and hid it within his pocketbook for safe keeping. As soon as the dead body had been given a space burial, via the disposal chute, Allison had diverted the passengers’ morbid thoughts as best he could.

Games had proved the best way. He had had the men make some bean shooters—bean shooting had

been a favorite sport in his own boyhood—and he had organized a bean shooting tournament, good for several hours. But as the planet Mercury grew larger, the contestants' nerves became less steady, and the games had petered out.

Once when most of the passengers were asleep, June O'Neil had come to Allison at the front window to help him keep watch. That hour had burned deep in his memory.

"You aren't a bit scared, are you?" he had said.

"I haven't been since you took over. Whatever may come to us, there's nothing we can do now."

Then the girl had laughed in a quiet confidential way.

"Really, it's almost funny. All these men try to help me keep my courage up, and I think they're worse scared than I am."

Allison had smiled at that, and his eyes must have looked at her long and intently. For he had never before in his life been so impressed by a girl's spirit, nor so stirred by a girl's beauty.

To change the subject he had said:

"Is the boy friend still sulking? Don't worry, he'll come out of it."

June O'Neil had blushed with resentment.

"He's not *my* boy friend!"

Now her words still echoed in Allison's mind as the girl stood silently beside him. Ted Tyndall was at the other side of her, and silent passengers were all around. The great unfathomable mass of Mercury grew closer, half lighted, half shadowed. They were headed toward the line that divided the misty white foam from the dark.

"Stormy over there," said Allison, pointing.

"I could do with a storm," grunted the carnival barker. Anything to break the monotony...

"We're gonna crash! We're gonna crash!" Ted Tyndall gasped the words over and over.

The purring ship plummeted down—down—through the clouds, through layers of blackness and brown twilight and gray fog. Down between banks of mountains, down—

"We're headed for that abyss!"

"*Which* abyss, Allison?"

They watched in awe as the vast crevasses among the mountains gaped larger. The whole landscape was stitched with ragged gashes. Now they recalled their previous discussions about Mercury. How the planet always kept the same face to the sun. How hot it would be—and what the effects of the uneven heating might have.

"GEE any signs of civilization, Allison?" someone asked.

The answer was obvious. On the surface, there wasn't any sign of life.

Was it at all possible that somewhere within those jagged depths there was a mind that contrived to

direct their course so skilfully? Down into a funnel of pitch blackness they slowly coasted. Interminably down, like a car on an endless grade. When at last their eyes saw light again, it was artificial light—the dull red of flares reflected from red rock walls.

They stopped.

The airlocks opened. A puff of warm air blew in. Heavy atmosphere was tinged with odors that were at once mellow and pungent. Allison sniffed and took a deep breath. He felt puffy enough to float, the air was so buoyant and the gravity so light.

He led the way out, cautiously at first; then, at the sound of friendly human voices, he dropped all restraints. His passengers filed out after him, bounding and leaping and striding, curious at the sensation of new power in their feet and legs.

They were greeted by a volley of welcomes that figuratively brought them back to earth. Welcomes shouted in good American slang—a puzzling thing, for they had conjured up all manner of perilous beasts and boiling cauldrons in their private nightmares.

But at the shouts of “What’s happened back in America?” and “Give us all the news!” and “Who’s the president now?” and “Anybody here from Indiana?” all dangers seemed suddenly removed; or at least postponed.

The questions came from a dozen or more half-uniformed men, who passed out handshakes indiscriminately and made the robot ship’s eighteen captives feel like prodigal sons. Then—

“A girl!” one of them uttered. All the uniformed men quieted, somewhat in awe, Allison thought, as if a fear or dread came into their thoughts.

“Where’s the boss here?” Allison inquired.

An uncomfortable shrug of the uniformed shoulders.

“In his laboratory. He’ll drop around and take care of you after awhile.”

“Who are you men, and what are you doing here?” Allison demanded.

The men glanced at each other and at their own distinctive garb; they seemed loath to answer. A curiously uniform group; all of them well-built men, youngish, perfect pictures of good health. The red lights gleamed upward across their muscular bodies. They were half naked, like Egyptian gods.

The form-fitting garments about their loins and the mantelets on their shoulders were of fine mesh woven from some unfamiliar red metal. Most of the brilliant mantelets were decorated with vertical white stripes—one over each shoulder, or in some cases two.

“We’re entitled to an explanation.” Allison bit his words off forcefully. “We’ve been taken against our wishes.”

A man with double stripes over his shoulders answered, and there was a note of pathos in his voice.

“It is not our part to make explanations. We are—slaves.”

“SLAVES—of *what*?”

“Of the Dazzalox.”

“The dazzle—*what?*”

“The Dazzalox. The natives of this underground world. We were brought to Mercury by the robot ship, the same as you. You will soon be sold as slaves too—though the market is slumping just now, owing to the current deaths of two Dazzalox potentates.

“But no matter what happens to the market price,” the man spoke as matter-of-factly as if he had been discussing the price of milk, “you’ll soon be slaves too.”

“The hell we will!” Allison’s belligerent attitude only evoked smiles from the mantled men. They recalled that they too had bristled with resistance when they first came.

Allison’s men began to mutter with anger, and their young leader voiced their sentiments.

“See here, we’ve come here by mistake. We need food and water, and a chance to rest before we start back.”

At this all of the slaves laughed. Then the double-striped spokesman said:

“Don’t mind us. We know just how you feel, but you don’t realize what a trap you’ve fallen into. Take it easy and you’ll be better off. Make yourselves comfortable on those circular benches and we’ll see that you get some food and rest first thing. But as for starting back—forget it.”

The exotic food might have been hothouse products: fruits and vegetables and nuts—rich blends of flavors and aromas and colors. Allison wasn’t surprised that some of his men couldn’t eat. The aged deaf man was definitely ill. Ted Tyndall had apparently lost all his appetite.

But June O’Neil ate with relish. The side-show barker and the man who had once threatened him with a knife feasted and joked together like old cronies on a picnic.

A deep-toned musical note resounded through a hundred distant caverns, and some of the slaves started away. Lester Allison finished his meal and started after one of them. A few light-footed bounds and he caught up.

“My name’s Smitt.” The man with the double stripes on each shoulder offered a friendly hand. “You want to look around, do you? I’m off duty now. On my way to the funeral—or rather funerals. Two of them. Big events on the Dazzalox social calendar. They love their funerals—or *farewells*, as they prefer to call them—Sure, come along.”

The deep-throated tone sounded again through the maze of red caverns. Allison glanced back at his party. They were stretched out on benches. Apparently they were in no danger. A few one-strippers were walking among them.

Smitt led the way over a red metal bridge that crossed a tiny gushing rivulet many feet below.

“We leave the Red Suburb here,” Smitt said. “From this point on is the civilization of the Dazzalox—a dying race, and the proudest, haughtiest, most ostentatious sons-of-guns you ever saw. We slaves retreat to the Red Suburb in our time off, but most of the time we’re at work here in the main city. Notice the change of colors?”

Allison saw that the red rock ended. Ahead were higher walls that stretched upward like fortresses of tightly packed columns—greens and blues and blacks. Apparently nature’s tricks of heating and cooling accounted for these formations.

“A fascinating staircase there,” Allison remarked.

“Thousands of years old, they say. My owner lives up there.”

ALLISON’S eyes followed the magnificent sweep of the stairs toward the spacious shelf in the wall toward the roof of the cavern. It was too lofty for one to see into the home, but the rows of torches burning along the upper levels indicated a wealthy and pretentious built-in mansion.

“My owner’s name is Naf,” Smitt continued. “Rich and lazy. Sleeps so much that I have a lot of time—more than most of the slaves.”

“Is Naf retired?”

“Rather! Everyone’s retired here—except us slaves. And even we are used more for displays and ceremonies than for hard work. Of course we gather and distribute the food. But the necessities of life were so well planned a few centuries ago that things almost take care of themselves—such as the gardens and underground orchards. Things live an interminably long time here—plants and people both.”

They hiked along the corridors and riverside streets at a good pace. All of Allison’s senses were on the alert, but he had yet to see his first Dazzalox.

He asked, “What do they do to pass their time?”

“You said it, brother!” Smitt laughed. “Well, not very much. They polish up their old traditions and have funerals and bloodless wars and bragging parties and feasts. But they don’t *do* anything—except eat and sleep. I’ve watched them for thirty years—”

Allison gave a skeptical look, for Smitt didn’t appear to be more than twenty-five.

“For thirty years,” Smitt repeated, “and when I stop to realize that the older ones have gone on this way for centuries, I say to myself, ‘No wonder they’re ready to walk into their graves with their eyes wide open.’ ”

Bewilderment was piling upon Allison almost too fast. By this time he had viewed six magnificent staircases cut in deep-colored rocks and polished from ages of use. His eyes were dancing from the rows of luminous purplish-white lamps that flanked the floorways. His ears rang with the untiring echoes of the funeral gong, drowned now and then by spouting waterfalls. Now he followed up a long narrow clay ramp, at last to look down upon a breathtaking sight.

“A stadium!” he gasped. “An underground stadium!”

“They call it the Grand March.”

From above the tiers of seats they looked down upon the wide-paved parade ground which ran from end to end like an elongated gridiron. The whole structure filled a vast underground valley.

“My stars! There’s room for two or three hundred thousand people!” Allison exclaimed.

“And only five thousand to fill it. A dying race. The native laborers died off a few centuries ago. The gardens needed so little care that the laborers became a superfluous class, who finally either died from misery or from trying to migrate under unfavorable conditions.

“Well, there’s your five thousand,” Smitt pointed down to the lower, sparsely filled tiers, “waiting for the first of the day’s funerals.”

Allison viewed the scattered audience incredulously.

“But those are people—humans.”

“No, they’re Dazzalox,” said Smitt. “You’ll notice a pronounced difference on closer inspection.”

THE flame of excited curiosity in Allison leaped up. “They stand and walk and sit like ordinary people. A little more spring and hop to their step—but the gravity could account for that. Do they have human natures?”

“That depends upon what you mean. Lots of things pass for human nature,” Smitt observed. “Most of it, I’ve noticed, has a lot to do with animal nature. These Dazzalox are as simple as children and as savage as beasts. Here come a couple of them now.”

The two men slipped back into a convenient hiding nook, from which they could watch at their leisure without having to make any explanations for Allison’s presence. The two Dazzalox, a male and a female, ascended the steps to take seats in the upper tier.

They were ornately dressed in highly colored mesh clothing. They were stockily bodied, but their bare legs were thin and sinewy, and their hard crusty bare feet were as ugly as an insect’s.

“Kub-a-zaz-ola-jojo-kak—”

Now Allison saw his face. The male Dazzalox spoke in a metallic voice. It was an expressive face, but it looked as if it were made out of yellow chalk. The female’s face was also of a single solid color, a slightly paler yellow. The female scolded like a bird.

“Is that a fair sample?” Allison asked. “What’s wrong with their hands and feet?”

“Nothing. Adapted to living in rocks,” said Smitt. “Did you notice their double eyebrows? Eyebrows below the eyes as well as above. I suppose their ancestors in the dim past enjoyed sunshine, but now most of their light comes from near the floors. *Lukle* gas torches. They’ve got *lukle* gas to burn, and plenty of other gases for other purposes.”

“What are they saying?”

Smitt listened for a moment. “They’re talking about the funeral that will follow this one. It’s high time for old Jo-jo-kak to die, they say, because he’s forty-five hundred years old.”

“Forty-five hundred!”

“That’s not as bad as it sounds, because we get a year here for every eighty-eight Earth days. By Earth time he’s more than a thousand years old.”

“But a thousand!” Allison searched his informant’s face to make sure he wasn’t being kidded. “Say, do they have old age pensions here?”

Smitt laughed. “If they did most everyone would be on the rolls. Long lives and a low birth rate are the custom here. However, it isn’t unknown for Dazzalox who are several hundred years old to still have children. Old Jo-jo-kak, for instance. Listen—”

The Dazzalox couple were still talking about old Jo-jo-kak, and Smitt interpreted their words.

“The language is simple. You’ll get onto it in no time. Unless, of course, you decide to—er—go back right away,” Smitt added with a wink.

“Sarcasm never ran a space ship,” Allison retorted. “Maybe that’s why you’re still here.”

SMITT laughed again, and Allison realized that in the past eventful hour a bond of friendship had sprung up between them.

“And speaking of space ships,” said Lester Allison, “there’s something that’s burning me up. How the devil can this dying race of powdery-faced Dazzalox, who evidently don’t have electric light, or automobiles, or radios—how the devil can they have robot space ships that slip out and gather up a load of Earth folks and chase back again like a homing pigeon?

“It’s inconsistent. There’s a loose screw somewhere around here, and it’s beginning to rattle in my ears worse than that funeral bell.”

“Ah,” Smitt sighed. “You’re hot on the trail of the *brains* in this set-up. There’s brains in these here hills, all right. Sometime soon I’ll give you a look back of the scenes, and you can draw your own conclusions.”

Allison pondered his friend’s words only to find that the mystery deepened.

The brains of this set-up?

Allison recalled an answer some slave had given him when he had just arrived: “The boss is in his *lab*.”

Well, whoever the boss was—whether man or beast or robot or spirit—Allison resolved to see him.

The funeral gong silenced and the first of the farewell processions came into view.

CHAPTER III

The Symbol of Death

THE central figure of the funeral procession was an old male Dazzalox with long yellow hair who stood in the center of a moving platform waving his arms at the crowd.

“Where’s the corpse?” Allison asked.

“That’s it—the old man waving his arms. He’ll be a corpse in a few minutes.”

Allison was aghast. “But why?”

“Because this is his day to die.”

“You mean he *has* to die, because it’s his turn or something?”

“He *wants* to die. He’s lived until he’s tired of living. There’s no sense waiting until you die a natural death here in Mercury. It just isn’t being done. Voluntary deaths are getting more popular right along because—well, after all, it’s the one way the Dazzalox have of escaping boredom.

“The old man set the date for this event a year or so ago. The same with Jo-jo-kak. It’s the only pleasure these fellows have left on their social calendars.”

“Pleasure?” Allison muttered. “Darned if I can see how death could be a pleasure!”

“You aren’t a thousand years old,” Smitt retorted wisely. “But you can see for yourself that it *is* a pleasure for that old gent.”

The procession was directly below them now. The crowd cheered in high chirping voices. Here and there the old man had the procession stop while he divested himself of a short speech, with many a vigorous shout and gesture.

“All memorized and practiced in private,” said Smitt. “My owner, Naf, is working on his farewell now, though he hasn’t set the date yet.”

The color scheme of the procession, Allison noticed, was simple but striking. The old man with the yellow hair was dressed from head to foot in a flowing costume of bold black, with a black mask and black and white-striped ankelets.

The moving platform was painted in black and white bars, and the human slaves who bore it wore mantelets with black and white stripes.

At last the procession came to a stop at the remote end of the Grand March, at a door in the rock wall also marked with *black and white vertical bars*.

“Those stripes must be the symbol of death,” Allison remarked.

Smitt nodded. “The door leads into a long tunnel that is filled with death gas. Another bounty of nature. Death gas is plentiful and it provides a painless way to die. Any slave would be happy if he only believed he would eventually die by death gas, rather than by some Dazzalox violence—the Floating Chop, for instance.”

The old man’s last moment had come and he apparently gloried in it. He gave a magnificent bow and, amid a flood of farewell cheers, leaped nimbly down from the platform and marched to the door. A slave opened it, the old man went in and the door closed... “What happens to the body?” Allison whispered after silent minutes.

“Bountiful nature comes to the rescue again. The body remains in the tunnel untouched, but twice each year—that is, every forty-four days, Earth time—the boiling seas from the sun side overflow through all these caverns and sweep everything away. The people’s homes, of course, are all high above the flood level, but the river beds and streets are washed clean.”

ALLISON abruptly rose. “I’m going back to the Red Suburb,” he announced.

“Come back in an hour or two,” said Smitt, “if you want to see old Jo-jo-kak’s farewell. In fact you might as well wait right here. There won’t be anything going on until it’s over. What’s the hurry?”

“I just remembered something.” Allison gave a wave and hurried off.

Smitt followed after him. “You’ll get a kick out of old Jo-jo-kak. He’s a bit eccentric... Allison, what the hell—”

Allison bounded down the long clay ramp with Smitt at his heels.

“That black and white door,” Allison panted, and kept on running. “I just remembered there was a door marked like that back at the Red Suburb. My folks don’t know the danger.”

“Wait, let me explain!” But Smitt was losing ground. However, Allison missed the way and came to a stop in a dead end, and then realized that his guide was still indispensable.

“That striped door is safe; that is, none of your gang will get in there *by mistake*. It’s there for a purpose.”

More explanation was demanded by Allison's searching gaze. Smitt tried to wave the matter aside.

"Hell, quit worrying about things. *You're* well built and *you'll* be a cinch for the slave market. No striped door is gonna cross *your* path."

Allison stared. "What are you driving at, man?"

"Well, you may have noticed that all of us slaves fall into a uniform physical type. That's been a tradition since the first load of slaves came in—about forty years ago. The boss found out that the Dazzalox like well-built young American men, so that's what *he* gives them. People who don't fall into that classification are—er—spared the humiliation of becoming slaves."

"*How?*"

"By a painless process of elimination—the striped door. It's really a kindness, in comparison to—"

"*Kindness!*" Allison roared. He grabbed Smitt by the arms and glared at him. "They'd better not try any *kindness* on *my* group!"

Smitt smiled calmly. "Relax, Allison. Don't misunderstand. I'm not hard-boiled. Down here the fates are different. I've learned to accept them. You'll have to, too."

"All right. What's the bad news?"

"Well, I glanced at your group. It was plain as day that there were five—er—unsuitable ones out of your eighteen. By this time they have been culled out—by way of the striped door."

"*Which five?*" Allison shouted.

"The deaf old man, the Negro—but only because he was sick; the one-armed man, the fat tramp, and—of course—the girl."

Down the cavernous lane they flew, Allison ahead, Smitt sailing after him in tow like a kite. When the red bridge came in sight, the gasping slave was left behind. Allison raced into the Red Suburb. A single glance at his group lying around on the benches, and he knew at once that some were missing.

"Where's June O'Neil?" he blurted to the first person he reached.

"Whose business is it?" Ted Tyndall retorted with a jealous smirk.

"*Where is she?*" Allison clutched the fellow by the shoulder.

"Damn it, what's the difference!" Tyndall snarled. "You're nothing to her. Layoff—"

TED TYNDALL sprawled to the ground without ever knowing what hit him. Other members of the party hurried up to Allison.

"She and some of the others went off with a fellow in a shiny white suit—a sort of big shot—"

"*Which way?*" Allison fairly screamed.

"Up toward that striped door."

The men swarmed after Allison as he raced up the red rock path. He bounded against the striped metal panel. It opened inward. Blackness. Blackness and a strangely sweet smell like old flowers pressed in a

book.

“Your flashlight,” Allison barked at one of the men.

“It’s dead.”

“Then keep the door open for me—but don’t breathe any of the air.”

Allison took a breath, entered, groped along the jagged walls, lost himself in the blackness. In two minutes he was back, bearing a dead body. It was the one-armed man.

He caught his breath and rushed back in. Another man followed him. Two minutes—three—The other man returned empty-handed. Three and a half minutes—four—Allison stumbled out again, also empty-handed. He started to speak but fainted instead, and for a minute or two he was out.

“It’s a death trap,” the other man gasped. “We located three more bodies—the old man, the Negro, and fat Tubby. Didn’t find the girl, did you, Allison?”

Allison shook his head. He breathed heavily, got up on his knees.

“I’m going back,” he muttered.

“Give yourself a rest,” said the man who had accompanied him. “Let someone else go.”

The man’s eyes turned to the sideshow barker, who quickly excused himself.

“I’ve got a weak heart,” said the barker. “Let Tyndall go. He’s got a crush on the girl.”

Ted Tyndall sneered. “The girl ain’t in there.”

“How do you know?” Allison growled, pulling himself to his feet dizzily.

“I saw the big shot lead her on down that path,” said Tyndall.

Allison bit his lips to keep from flying into a white rage. He looked down at the corpse of the one-armed man.

“Leave the other bodies where they are,” he said. “I’ll be back later.”

“And where are you going?” asked a slave with single stripes over his shoulders. Allison made no answer.

The one-striper snapped in an authoritative tone, “I have orders for thirteen new men. Get yourselves into these slave uniforms and memorize this list of rules. You are to be on the floor of the sales cavern in time to catch the funeral crowd. You’ve got less than two hours, and these rules are complicated, so get busy.”

Allison grabbed the pile of slave uniforms and hurled them across the red rock floor.

“I’ll take this up with the boss!” he said. “Where do I find him?”

“At the end of this path,” said the one-striper, “but it’s your neck.”

CHAPTER IV

A Female Slave

“THE brains of this set-up,” Allison muttered to himself as he sprinted. “A look behind the scenes—”

He stopped. Not twenty-five yards ahead of him the red rock path abruptly turned into an ornate entrance in the rock wall. Under red lights, the red stone carvings of the doorway glowed like a filigree of burning vines.

“The boss likes luxury,” thought Allison.

Hum of motors came from within the place, smooth rhythmic sounds, music to one who appreciates fine machinery. A strangely discordant sound came from somewhere overhead. A ragged *tap—tap—tap* on stone. Allison looked up.

His eyes beheld a solitary figure coming down a *zigzag* path. Where the trail came from Allison had no idea, but obviously it connected some other part of the maze of caverns to this red rock sanctuary of the big boss.

The solitary figure was a stone’s throw above Allison, with several switchbacks to go before he got down to the red rock level on which Allison stood. Though he tapped along at a lively gait, apparently he was an old, old man—no, a Dazzalox.

His yellow face was wrinkled. His coppery hair hung long and uneven, his double eyebrows almost concealed his tiny eyes, although his head was bent downward. The tapping came from a bright copper-colored sword which he used as a cane.

All this Allison caught in a glance. “*That* can’t be the big boss,” he muttered. He ran on.

RING BEFORE ENTERING

Allison was in no mood to heed signs. He had a single purpose: to make certain June O’Neil was alive and safe. He had thrown all caution to the roofs of the caverns. Now he dashed through the doorway and down a long glass-walled corridor. To his amazement this place was electrically lighted and had all the look of a gigantic subterranean power station.

“June!” he shouted. “June O’Neil!” His voice sang off into the hum of machines. He ran past room after room, and the passing sights fairly took his breath. Everywhere were manifestations of power.

“June O’Neil!”

No answer but the grinding of automatic engines came back, rolling out yards of shining metal goods. Ladles pouring molten red metal into ingots. Presses stamping out silvery ornaments. Charts of space routes flashing in neon. Automatic jewel cutters playing with precious stones under violet spotlights. Allison raced on. His voice rang weirdly.

He stopped to listen. Footsteps sounded dangerously behind him. He whirled to see a one-striper swing a club at his head. He went down.

His consciousness flashed back almost at once—before his captor got his hands and feet tied, in fact—but he was too helpless to struggle.

“Awake, eh? Hate to do this, brother,” he heard the human slave mumble, “but orders are orders. Kilhide doesn’t tolerate any rebellion.”

Allison grunted sourly. “That *would* be his name.”

“The big boss’ll have something to say to you. And then, if I was you, I’d get into a slave uniform like I was told.”

The slave picked up Allison bodily and carried him back through the corridors to a brilliantly lit room.

“Here’s your rebel, Mr. Kilhide,” said the one-striper. He eased Allison to the carpeted floor. Then at a flick of the finger from the big boss in the farther end of the room, he went out.

ALLISON got his slightly blurred eyes into focus—and gasped. There before him sat the most imperious, the most uncommonly handsome individual he had ever seen. Dark, luxurious hair, swept back rebelliously over a sensitive brow. Chiseled, somewhat disdainful nostrils. A smooth, creamy brown complexion that was yet a little too smooth, a little too bland. And large brown eyes, intelligent, magnetic, which sparkled even in repose—but sparkled with malice.

If Kilhide heard Allison’s little gasp of astonishment, however, he ignored it completely. It was only too evident that there was someone or something in the other end of the long room with which the big boss was preoccupied. With the man’s first words Allison understood.

“Now, Miss O’Neil, you realize how lucky you are that I brought you here instead of sending you with the others,” said the smooth oily voice.

Lester Allison gave a deep sigh. To know that June O’Neil was alive was cooling water to his thirsty soul. He could breathe again. The knots cut his wrists and ankles, his head hummed with pain where the club had struck him, but these things were trifles. June O’Neil was alive!

By squirming about Allison could see her at the farther end of the sumptuous parlor. She was looking at him; her dark eyes glistened and her firm breasts heaved. Allison could hear her strained breathing.

“Don’t mind that wretch, my dear,” said Kilhide, jerking a thumb toward Allison. “I get a problem child or two with every boatload. One snap of my fingers and they line up. More coffee? That’s my own brand.”

Allison had hated this man enough, sight unseen. But to find him a devilishly handsome American, gloating in riches gained from selling his fellow Americans into slavery—and now trying to twist this innocent girl around his little finger—well, it was enough to inflame Allison to an orgy of murder. But just now all he could do was listen. The big shot apparently wasn’t aware that his unctuous voice carried through the room.

“As I was saying, Miss O’Neil—June, if you don’t mind—my fabulous wealth and my unlimited powers have come to me because I’m smart. I know exactly how to play ball with these wealthy old Dazzalox potentates. From the day I cracked up with my trial rocket ship fifty years ago, I’ve played to their whims like nobody’s business. Because I’m smart.”

“I see,” said June O’Neil, trying not to let her eyes drift toward Allison.

“I give them everything they want. They give me everything *I* want. At first they were going to make a slave of me, but I convinced them they could have many more slaves if they would help me build a ship. I lost my first robot ship, but the second brought home the bacon.”

“Why didn’t you go back yourself?” the girl asked.

“To the earth? Hell, what’s the earth got that I haven’t got! Nothing but more stupid people.”

“Oh.” June shuddered to think that any human being could be so saturated with hate and egotism. She wanted to run, but she only sat, frozen, keeping one eye on Lester Allison.

“I suppose you think I can’t keep up with the earth’s scientific developments, living alone down here among these numbskulls,” Kilhide said.

June didn’t answer. She was terrified, and obviously there was no way to break out of this situation.

“Well, you’re wrong,” said Kilhide. “I get new ideas from every boatload of slaves. There are always some newspapers in the men’s pockets, and scientific discoveries are now regularly reported in the press. Whatever the earth is building I eventually find out about—and duplicate. And do a better job of it, because my various red and black metals are superior to any steels or tungstens on the earth. Besides,” the man stroked his little trick mustache, “I’m smart.”

“Mr. Kilhide,” the girl rose and spoke boldly, “do me a favor.”

“I’m doing you a favor, child. I’m going to marry you.”

THE girl shrank back to her chair. “What more could you ask?” said Kilhide with an arrogant smile. And he was that egotistical that he meant it.

“Send me back to the earth,” said the girl weakly.

Kilhide snorted. “Earth! That’s a helluva thing to ask! You told me you ran away from home. Well, you’re away. Stay here. It’s healthy. You can live for hundreds of years. The food gives you what you need to keep young. I’ve got everything you need”—he made an elegant gesture toward the luxurious furnishings of the room—“to keep you happy. And I mean, happy.”

He came close to June and tried to gather her fingers into his hands. She drew back. He laughed.

“You’re afraid, child. You needn’t be. Those rock-sleepers, the Dazzalox, won’t know you’re here, for they rarely come back to this end of the caverns. And the human slaves won’t dare bother you.”

Kilhide broke off his rhapsody to cast a glance at Allison, whom he had considered to be out of hearing.

He growled, “What are *you* gawking at?”

He flung a mesh-covered sofa pillow at Allison’s head, then strode down the room and painstakingly packed it against the other’s face with a disdainful foot.

“I’m doing you a favor, June,” Kilhide resumed in his confidential voice when he had walked back to her. “Of all the women the robot ship has brought here, not a one has been allowed to live more than a few minutes after arriving. In fact, the Dazzalox have never even seen an Earth woman.”

A ragged *tap-tap-tap* sounded dimly from a corridor.

“Strange you didn’t sell women for slaves,” June O’Neil said a little sharply.

“Not at all,” said Kilhide, too conceited to note the sarcasm. “Men have made perfect slaves. No use upsetting an established system. The Dazzalox like their traditions let alone.”

“Moreover,” the speaker again stroked his trick mustache, “since none of the women who came were both beautiful and intelligent, I’ve saved myself any annoyance by quickly disposing of them—

painlessly.”

The girl winced. The *tap-tap-tapping* grew closer. Kilhide was too intent upon his purpose to notice it.

“You think me cruel, I suppose, but you’re wrong. I’m just being practical... More coffee?”

“Please. It so strengthens one, you know,” June almost hissed.

Kilhide started toward an adjoining room for more of his prided beverage.

“By the time I return, I expect you to say that you are ready to marry me.”

“The answer will still be ‘no’,” said June O’Neil. “But definitely.”

Kilhide flushed. “May I politely remind you of the striped door we passed a short time ago?”

June fought the surge of anger within her.

“You may,” she said shortly. “But first—the coffee, please?”

By this time Allison had shaken out from under the metallic pillow sufficiently to see the red flush that leaped to Kilhide’s face. That haughty individual hesitated uncertainly in the doorway, then stomped into the adjoining room.

On the instant June was at Allison’s side, tugging at the tough cords that bit into his wrists. She wrenched her fingers, but the cords were stubborn and time was too short.

“Don’t cross him,” Allison whispered tensely. “He murders as easy as he lies—*Get away!*”

JUNE sprang away and appeared to be innocently examining a picture when the white-suited figure came back into the room. At the same moment a grizzled old Dazzalox with ragged, copper-colored hair hobbled in from the corridor.

“Jo-jo-kak!” Kilhide exclaimed in a disturbed voice.

Allison held his breath. Though he knew that the human slaves feared the savage Dazzalox as one might fear a cruel or stupid employer, it took that startled tone of the big shot himself to convey the full value of the Dazzalox prestige.

“This is an unexpected pleasure!” Kilhide’s enthusiasm rang falsely. He quickly changed his mood to one of gentle reprimand.

“You shouldn’t be here. Today is your funeral—your farewell. Did you forget?”

“Ak-ak-ak!” the old Dazzalox chuckled hoarsely. Then in broken English he announced that he had come to tell Kilhide farewell personally. He hadn’t learned the language for nothing, he said.

Kilhide met him with a handshake and started to lead him back toward the corridor, but the wizened old Jo-jo-kak stood in his tracks and continued to shake hands—continued unconsciously until Kilhide pulled away. For Jo-jo-kak’s beady little yellow eyes were now upon June O’Neil.

His eyes glittered and his double eyebrows blinked.

The rest of the world could roll into the boiling seas, but Jo-jo-kak’s eyes would not unfasten from what they were seeing.

“Who be this?” he grunted.

“You’ll have to hurry to get back for your farewell,” said Kilhide nervously.

“*Who be this?*” Jo-jo-kak growled, shaking his copper locks.

“I—I’ll have some slaves take you back to the Grand March,” Kilhide evaded. “You’re due now, and it’s a long walk for you.”

“WHO BE THIS?” The quaking old voice attained a genuine roar. The wrinkled old creature swaggered closer to the girl. He patted her black hair and her full graceful arms with his unsteady sword.

“Female slave?” he yelped.

Kilhide reached for a bell and rang for assistance.

“So! Female slave,” Jo-jo-kak crackled. “Ak-ak-ak!”

He dragged the sword down along the side of her dress, down to her shapely ankle. June walked back a step. He followed, and with his crude hand he caught her hair. She cried out. He jumped back with a ridiculous laugh.

“Ak-ak-ak! I want her!”

“Don’t be silly,” Kilhide snarled. “Go on back.”

“I buy her. How much?”

The sweat broke out on Kilhide. “Buy” was a magic word between him and the Dazzalox. It was the magic that fixed things for him, and saved him from the Dazzalox’ savage moods.

“You can’t buy her, Jo-jo-kak. You’re leaving. This is your day to die.”

“No! I want her!”

With that the old Dazzalox potentate broke into a violent jabber that neither June O’Neil nor Lester Allison could understand, but from Kilhide’s growing perspiration they knew that Jo-jo-kak held the high cards.

Some one-striped slaves arrived. The old Dazzalox turned to them and restated his case with renewed vigor, waving his copper-colored sword. Then he hobbled back to Kilhide and shouted in an accusing tone:

“Maybe *you* want her, so? Yes? She yours?”

“Yes,” Kilhide hissed desperately.

“No!” cried June desperately. “Not in a million years!”

“Ak-ak-ak!” the old Dazzalox exulted. “She say she *not* yours! Ak-ak-ak! *I want her!*”

THE sting of the girl’s open rejection blasted Kilhide’s composure. He bit his words hatefully.

“Jo-jo-kak, she is your slave. No, I’m not selling her. I’m making you a gift. She’s yours. See?”

Jo-jo-kak went into a weird spasm of laughing and dancing and shouting. Then suddenly he stopped and

turned to a slave.

“Go,” he shouted. “Tell them there is no farewell. I do not die today.”

CHAPTER V

Underground Penthouse

THE slaves chased away with the strange command Jo-jo-kak had uttered, and the wizened old Dazzalox strutted out to the corridor, the proudest creature in the chasms of Mercury. He accosted another slave and ordered him to go find his wife and bring her here at once. For June O’Neil had forcibly stated that Jo-jo-kak’s wife* would have to accompany them, or she would refuse to go—a bit of swift thinking and stout bluffing on her part.

* On Mercury the Dazzalox permitted themselves wives, a privilege denied the slaves.—Ed.

By this time Allison, who had tried in vain to break his bonds, gave way to a burst of temper. He shouted stinging words at the suave, handsome scientist, which under the conditions was all he was able to do. Kilhide was in no mood to take it. He responded with sharp kicks at Allison’s prone body.

“Go ahead and kick hell out of me!” Allison snarled defiantly. “That ought to make you very happy. You’re just a rat—selling your fellow humans!”

“My customers seem satisfied,” Kilhide sneered.

“And that’s all you care about! Giving those savage Dazzalox anything they want, just so you can have more power and wealth. You haven’t an ounce of feeling for anybody but yourself!”

“And why should I have?” Kilhide snapped. “I am a master scientist. To me, all the difference between you average humans and these underground savages is less than the difference between two heads of cabbage. And I hate cabbage.”

“Why, you damned, cynical—”

Another stout kick. “I’d kick your face to pulp if it wasn’t for losing money on you. Get up, now!”

Kilhide hoisted his prisoner into a chair, and as he did so he gauged the well-developed muscles of the young farmer’s arms and shoulders.

“You damn fool, you could be a first-class slave if you knew on which side your bread was buttered.”

An excited one-stripe slave broke in upon the scene to report the pandemonium of the funeral crowd. Evidently five thousand Dazzalox at the Grand Parade had received the greatest shock of many a century.

A few minutes later, many smartly and colorfully dressed Dazzalox, men and women, crowded into the room, chattering and wailing at Jo-jo-kak. Allison couldn’t make much out of the dreadful chaos, but he was sure they were upbraiding the old potentate because he had walked out on his funeral. Jo-jo-kak laughed at them, and brandished his sword, and strutted around defiantly.

All the while, June O’Neil had been out of sight, having retired to an adjoining chamber to retouch her hair and make ready for the strange adventure. Now she entered the room.

At the sight of her, the group of blustering Dazzalox fell silent and edged back into a circle all around her. They gazed as if they were looking upon something unreal, something they couldn’t quite believe.

But when Jo-jo-kak's wife finally arrived, and she and her centuries-old husband actually led this creature out to the corridor to take her home with them, the Dazzalox were convinced that this thing of beauty was a fact. Some of them, indeed, could even begin to understand why old Jo-jo-kak had neglected his funeral.

CHATTER and cheering and the tapping of Jo-jo-kak's sword melted into the hum of machines. Kilhide called a one-striper.

"Have the mechanics service the robot ship for another trip," he ordered. Then he turned to Allison. "Oh, yes, *you!* I was about to kick you in the face, I believe. Well, I haven't time now. But perhaps by this time you realize that the smart thing for you is to get into your slave clothes."

"What," said Allison deliberately, "would you do if you were in my shoes?"

Kilhide flushed, but there really was no answer he could make.

"Take him outside and cut his bonds," he snapped at the one-striper. "See that he and the others get ready for the market. Though heaven knows," he added as the slave dragged Allison out of hearing, "that the market is headed for a slump—the male market, anyway."

* * *

MANY hours after Allison, dressed in his red one-stripe outfit, had been stationed on the sales floor of the slave cavern, he looked up to find his old two-stripe friend, Smitt, grinning at him.

"So you haven't been sold yet!" Smitt exclaimed.

"None of us have been sold," said Allison. "Scores of potentates have examined us from head to foot, and made us prance and climb rocks and repeat Dazzalox words, but they didn't buy. Kilhide marked us up, marked us down, and down some more; but still no sales."

"That girl," said Smitt with a sweeping gesture, as if that were enough to account for everything. "You never saw such a stir. These sleepy old Dazzalox are all in a dither. Most of them haven't seen her yet, but they know she must be something terrific to make old Jo-jo-kak miss his funeral.

"Now they can hardly wait for the Challenge Parade that Jo-jo-kak has promised. Did I ever tell you about the Challenge Parades they have here?"

"You told me they put on big shows to impress each other with their wealth."

"That's what it amounts to," said Smitt. "Although to them, it has a lot more meaning, because it has carried down from the centuries when they had wars, and each potentate would parade his army and challenge the world. Now they don't have armies, so they parade their families and slaves and jewels and their famous weapons. Such an orgy of display you never saw!"

"Tell me something," said Allison in a voice of quiet confidence.

Then their conversation was interrupted by the attendant in charge of sales, who dismissed the one-strippers from the salesroom, for the business day was over. Allison jogged back to his temporary quarters at the Red Suburb and Smitt, being off duty, accompanied him.

Allison stripped and got into the natural shower bath that gushed out of the rock wall, for he was hot and dusty.

“Tell me,” he resumed, while Smitt prepared some food for him, “is Jo-jo-kak interested in this Earth girl simply as an ornament for his display, or—Hell, man, you know what I mean.”

Smitt shrugged his shoulders sympathetically. “I wouldn’t want to say.”

Allison frowned worriedly. “Of course, she’s beautiful,” he said. “There’s no denying that. And if these Dazzalox have an eye for beauty—”

“The point is,” said Smitt, “that no Dazzalox ever saw an Earth girl before. She’s a novelty. Any Dazzalox who can have her for his Challenge Parade has gained a big edge on all his fellows. That’s what Jo-jo-kak is after. Still—”

“You should have seen the look in his eye when he saw her,” said Allison. “I don’t trust him. She was clever enough to call for his wife before she would go with him. If it hadn’t been for that—”

SMITT shrugged. “They’re Dazzalox. We’re humans. We slaves have never had any attraction for the Dazzalox women.”

“Dazzalox women aren’t attractive,” said Allison.

“Through our eyes, no, of course not.”

“It would be a pretty pickle if the Dazzalox potentates saw through *our* eyes.” Allison dried himself on a towel of matting and got into his one-stripe uniform.

Smitt munched at a ripe fruit thoughtfully. He began to see what Allison was driving at.

“Say, this thing might turn into some kind of avalanche. Already the potentates have found out from us slaves that there are *more* of these Earth women where this one came from. And when they take a notion they want something—”

Allison caught on instantly. “They know that Kilhide, with all his scientific magic, will get it for them somehow.”

“Exactly.”

“Kilhide is having the robot ship serviced,” said Allison dryly.

“The hell! Damned louse!”

“I thought you approved of Kilhide and all his thievery and ‘gentle’ murders and—”

“Kilhide’s a devil!” Smitt muttered under his breath, glancing about to make sure no other slaves were within hearing. One never knew what fellow slaves might be tale bearers.

“We lick his boots because he’s got us. It’s futile to fight—so we don’t care whether we live or die. But if he starts shipping women here for slaves—”

“There’d be something worth fighting about!” snapped Allison. “Which way to Jo-jo-kak’s? I’ve got to see June O’Neil.”

* * *

LESTER ALLISON skipped up the long circling staircase as nimbly as a squirrel. The red flame of his torch fluttered over his bare arm. It was a torch of porous stone. Smitt had shown him how such torches

could be made by soaking a strip of gray stone in liquid fuel and touching it to a blaze.

Another round of steps and he found himself on the uppermost level beneath the cavern roof. Before him a semicircle of dim flares outlined the railing that enclosed the open shelf of rock: the combination balcony and front porch of Jo-jo-kak's built-in mansion.

A momentary impression of carved arches and ornamental furniture, then Allison's eyes lighted upon the figure of the girl standing before a natural mirror of polished black rock.

"June," he called softly.

The girl turned and her face brightened.

"Lester!"

She ran to him and he caught her hands. Then, rather in awe, he stepped back to gaze at her.

"You're—you're beautiful!"

Allison couldn't remember ever having said those words to a girl before. Certainly no words could have been any more appropriate, even if he did explode them quite unintentionally. June O'Neil was dressed in all the splendor of an Oriental queen.

"It's part of my costume for the Challenge Parade," she said. "There'll be a headdress too, and some ornamental hangings from each wrist. All the Dazzalox in this neighborhood have been working on it for hours, but just now they are all away, making more plans."

"Then you're—alone?"

THE girl nodded. "It's wonderful of you to come, Lester. I've been so worried about you."

"Nothing to worry about," Allison laughed, involuntarily rubbing the bruises on his face that had come from Kilhide's boot.

At once they fell to talking of all that had happened. The head of the long circling stairs seemed an ideal place to sit. They were close together, and their very closeness made them realize that they were two adventurers in a land of hidden perils—adventurers who couldn't lose hope as long as they were looking in each other's eyes.

"It's good to be with you," said Allison. All the longing and desire to be alone with this girl that had kept his heart pounding in the interminable hours on the space ship, and the torchlit hours since, flooded over him. His arm held her tightly.

"Are you afraid here?" he asked.

"Not as much as when Kilhide talked to me. I shudder for fear of Jo-jo-kak's finding me alone; but his wife takes care of me, and I feel safe with her. She's much younger—only three hundred Mercury years. I think she must have been badly upset because he didn't go ahead with his farewell, though she pretends everything is just fine."

"Has anyone been to see you, June?"

"Who would there be—but you?"

"I thought perhaps Ted Tyndall—"

“He still despises me for bringing him here. He’ll blame me to his dying day.”

Allison was silent for awhile. Together they watched the lights of the streets below, the Dazzalox coming and going, the ribbons of water chasing through the ravines.

“Wouldn’t it be beautiful up here,” said June, “if we could only forget all the fears and troubles that are closing in on us?”

“It’s easy to forget everything else when I can look at you,” said Allison, conscious that his face was very close to hers.

“This place is like I’ve always imagined a penthouse would be,” she breathed. “Only here the sky is a rock roof right above our heads. Could you pin some little lights up, Lester, for stars?”

Lester Allison wasn’t sure why he chose that moment to kiss her. He only knew that his lips came close to hers and at once he was lost to everything except June O’Neil. Then swiftly the dangers surged back into his mind, and their lips parted reluctantly.

“That’s just to remind you,” he said softly, “that I’m with you in whatever happens.”

The girl looked into his eyes intently and nodded without smiling.

“If my plan works,” said Allison, “I may get you back to Earth soon. Kilhide is preparing his boat for another trip.” June looked at him questioningly. He added, “I’ll keep you posted.”

“You’d better go now,” she breathed. “They’ll be coming back soon. The way Jo-jo-kak has been blustering around with his sword, I wouldn’t put anything past him. I hope I don’t have to be near him in the Challenge Parade.” She laughed lightly.

“Is it something you dread? I never know what to expect of these Dazzalox.”

“I’ll be all right,” said the girl bravely. “It’s probably foolish for me to worry.”

Her mind flashed back to Kilhide—Kilhide, giving her to this erratic old potentate; Kilhide, waiting to see her humiliated as an ornament in a Dazzalox display; Kilhide, who held all the power over every human being in these chasms.

“I’ll be with you,” Lester Allison repeated as he said good night.

CHAPTER VI

The Living Ornament

THE holiday brought the full five thousand natives to the gayly decorated Grand March stadium. They came early, in a more than ordinary festive spirit. Challenge Parades of past centuries had often been hundreds of times as long in the preparation, but none had ever evoked so much excitement or suspense as this one.

“Girl! Girl!” was the cry everywhere.

From the hour that the famous Jo-jo-kak had walked out on his funeral, that magic English word had taken the Dazzalox civilization by storm. It was on every Dazzalox’s lips this hour. Whatever else old Jo-jo-kak might have in his parade, the important thing was that he would exhibit the most novel—and according to rumor, the most beautiful—living ornament ever seen.

Lester Allison watched from a front seat. He was with Smitt, who had chosen seats within hearing distance of Naf, his owner. While the excited talk and cheering gathered momentum, Smitt quietly described to Allison the highlights of a few previous Challenge Parades that had made indelible impressions.

Allison was most impressed to learn that slaves were sometimes killed at these affairs.

“Not for any reason, you understand,” said Smitt, “except that the Dazzalox become intoxicated with the spirit of the spectacular. I’ve seen them place *two* slaves on the top of a float and make them maul each other with battle axes, just in order to keep the audience applauding.”

A huge door unfolded from one wall and a single magnificent float came into view. It actually floated in; for the Grand March was built over a river, and for this occasion the floor through the center of the stadium had been removed, section by section. The waters rippled brightly with the colored lights of a thousand flares.

“That artificial river bed is as old as their civilization,” Smitt remarked.

“You wouldn’t guess it, but there is a funnel-shaped depression right out there in the center, that is used for some of their ceremonies—the Ancient Rite of the Floating Chop, for example.”

“Tell me later,” said Allison. He was intent upon the approaching float. It was a huge floating pyramid, bearing many a handsomely arrayed Dazzalox. But where was June O’Neil?

Uniformed slaves towed the pyramid slowly, like a canal boat, from one end of the Grand March to the other. Brilliant lights flooded the tower of steps, which were resplendent with knives, swords, jewels, battle axes—all arranged in patterns that would have made an artist gasp for breath. The action of the figures was dazzling. Gaudy Dazzalox, both male and female, kept up a continuous procession of running up and down the sides of the pyramid.

The only quiet figure was the wizened old Jo-jo-kak himself, who sat on the top of the pyramid. And his time was coming.

But among all the startlingly grotesque creatures, Allison still failed to find a single human being.

The crowds also grew impatient for what they knew must be coming—the mysterious living ornament that had been promised.

“Girl! Girl! Kap-ja-zaz-o-jo-jo-kak-uf-ta-ju-*girl!*”

The cries were an intoxicant to Jo-jo-kak. At last he leaped to his feet at the top of the pyramid and brandished his sword. The other Dazzalox sat down on the lower tiers and turned so they could watch him.

EVEN with five thousand creatures clamoring for the surprise, the old potentate held them off long enough to make a speech. The pyramid floated the length of the Grand March and back again, with Jo-jo-kak shouting at the top of his withered voice, and with the crowds bawling at him so loudly that no one could hear a word he said.

At last he stepped down on the second step from the top level. With his unsteady sword he struck at the top step. A lid opened.

The five thousand silenced. It was suddenly so quiet that Allison could hear the excited old potentate puffing.

The girl rose up out of the top of the pyramid. She stepped down to the second level. The lid closed. She ascended to the pinnacle, stood there motionless, her arms outspread.

The silence was perfect. Even Jo-jo-kak's breathing must have stopped in that moment.

The ornamental draperies that hung from the girl's wrists trembled slightly, and with every tremble Lester Allison's heart fluttered. To him, her radiant beauty was overpowering. To the Dazzalox—He could only wonder.

Jo-jo-kak swung his glittering sword in a broad gesture of triumph and shouted in a loud croaking voice:

“*Girl!*”

“*Girl! Girl! Girl!*” the crowds echoed, and wave after wave of cheering followed while the pyramid passed between the sides of the stadium.

Then someone started a new cry and the crowds picked it up. Old Jo-jo-kak pranced around the fourth level below his living ornament, listening to first this section of the crowd and then that, then tossing his head back and laughing and slapping his sword against his side.

“What are they shouting?” Allison demanded of Smitt.

“They say there are too many ornaments. They want to see the girl.”

Just then Jo-jo-kak pranced up three steps and flashed his sword through the air toward the girl's head. Her ornamental headdress shattered and fell. Her black hair cascaded down over her shoulders. The crowd roared.

Jo-jo-kak jogged down to the fourth step and hobbled around the pyramid a few times and then went up again. Another shaky stroke with his sword. The flowing ornaments from the girl's left wrist slipped down onto the steps.

“What are they yelling now?” Allison asked excitedly.

“More!” Smitt answered.

Allison gasped. “He wouldn't dare—”

“He'd dare anything.”

June O'Neil's left wrist was bleeding. Jo-jo-kak again did a limping grotesque dance around the fourth level. Then up the steps again. More clumsy, treacherous sword work. The girl winced.

“The damned fool!” Allison muttered loudly. “The filthy old—”

Smitt clamped a hand over his mouth. “Quiet! There's nothing you can do about it.”

“Nothing,” Allison spluttered. “Oh, if I only had a gun!”

“If *any* of us had a gun!” Smitt mocked bitterly under his breath. “*If!*”

Involuntarily Allison's hand plunged into the pocket of his slave uniform. Only useless things: scraps of gray porous rock from a torch, a pocketbook, and his handkerchief wrapped tightly around something—what was it? Oh, yes, the old bean shooter he had used to win over all the others on the boat.

PERHAPS—but what was that bulge in his pocketbook? Why, it was tiny bottle of deadly poison, poison that had once effected a quick suicide. Poison—Porous stone—A bean shooter—

The girl's bleeding left hand fell to her side. She lifted it up again. Both arms were bare now. She held them out as best she could.

Up the steps came the wrinkled old creature with his ugly crackling laugh. His yellow eyes glittered as he danced around the girl, prodding her body with the point of his sword. Avidly the other Dazzalox cried for more.

Again the sword jabbed perilously at June O'Neil's garments. The blue ornamental band that covered the girl's breasts severed. For a moment her side below her extended right arm was whitely naked; then a long dark line of blood appeared.

Jo-jo-kak hobbled back down to the fourth step and tossed back his ragged coppery head of hair and

laughed like a demon. The crowd went wild with cheering.

Then something mysterious happened. Jo-jo-kak straightened up with a jerk. His skinny arms shot out, his gnarled fingers extended. His sword clattered down the steps and swished into the water. The breathless crowd heard the clatter and the splash.

Jo-jo-kak grabbed his mouth. A trickle of blood dripped over his lower lip. He spat and choked and with both hands fought at his mouth, all the while reeling about on the fourth step like a man who has been stabbed.

His wrinkled yellow face grew dark. His arms drooped. His eyes tightened. He fell.

He slid only a few steps, for his crusty yellow hands and feet caught him. He hung on the side of the pyramid, head and face downward, and his ragged coppery hair showered down toward the water. He was dead.

* * *

ALLISON and his fellow one-strippers lay about on the floor of the slave sales cavern. The men complained of the endless hours of waiting.

“Hell, if we’ve got to be slaves,” one of them grumbled, “I wish someone would buy us. I’d rather work for a Dazzalox than have to answer to that swine of a Kilhide all the time.”

“Me, too,” said another. “But who wants men slaves now? All the potentates are putting in their orders for women slaves. I hear several of the old boys have put off their death dates.”

“And some of their women are up in arms about their breaking traditions,” said a third. “But if the potentates want Earth women, they’ll get them. That’s Kilhide for you. Ain’t that so, Allison?”

Allison didn’t answer.

“He hasn’t said a word for hours,” someone grunted.

“More like weeks. Brooding about the girl, probably. It’s a good thing he got away long enough to fix up her scratches, though. Even if he did get lashed for it.”

A silence. A Dazzalox potentate came past, stopped to inquire for Kilhide, and went on. The conversation resumed.

“Funny about that thousand-year-old codger falling dead right when he did... But if he hadn’t, he might easily have killed the girl, the way he was going.”

“He didn’t just fall dead, however,” said another man carelessly, “according to something I heard.”

LESTER ALLISON looked up sharply. “What did you hear?”

“I heard that he was killed somehow—by some slave—though Tyndall wouldn’t tell who it was or how he did it.”

“Tyndall?”

“He’s the one that saw it happen—at least, he claims he did.”

“Where is Tyndall?” Allison snapped savagely.

“The big shot and some potentates took him over for a conference. It won’t take them long to find out what he knows.”

The group waited for Allison to say something more, but he didn’t. His manner was puzzling.

Someone finally asked, “Whatever happened to that rebellion you started when you first got here, Allison? Thought you were going to get us a ride back to the earth.”

“Come close and listen to me,” Allison said coldly. Then his voice lowered to a whispered undertone. “The robot ship will soon take off. I’ve found out when it goes and who goes with it. A few trusted slaves. They’re being sent to America to gather up a load—all girls. When they take off, Kilhide will be at his lab, working the automatic controls.”

One of the men asked, “But how will these slaves get people to come aboard? After all, the people on Earth—particularly in our country—will be mobilized, wary of the return of this kidnaping space ship, and when it does reappear—well—”

Allison’s face twisted. “Kilhide has an answer for that, too. No matter how many trips this damned shuttling space vessel makes, it’ll be landed each time at night, disguised, camouflaged, on the outskirts of a town or the edge of a woods. I don’t even want to think about how Kilhide’s slaves will kidnap folks.”

There was a swelling chorus of angry mutters.

“Can’t we get to Kilhide?” one of the group bit out through clenched teeth.

“Not a chance,” said Allison. “He’s got more protection than a dictator. *But*—by careful timing, there might be a chance for one or two—possibly three—of us to slip aboard—during the crucial five or ten seconds just before the take-off.”

“Let the girl go, for one,” said the sideshow barker.

The other men voiced their agreement. She should have first chance.

“I suggest we draw straws for second, third and fourth chances,” said Allison, “and we’ll follow through as long as our luck lasts.”

The straws were prepared. But just as the draw was to begin, the sound of footsteps outside made Allison hold up a warning hand.

“Psst!” he whispered. “Make out we’re playing a game.”

A moment later Ted Tyndall walked in, and behind him came three Dazzalox carrying ornamented battle axes, followed by Kilhide. It was Kilhide who spoke.

“Allison, the Dazzalox want you for the murder of Jo-jo-kak.”

Allison’s eyes met Kilhide’s and read the evil delight that lurked there in the handsome scientist’s saturnine, gloating face. Kilhide, however, could not meet the other’s accusing stare. His own eyes lowered, came to rest on the straws the slave men held in their hands.

“What is going on here?” Kilhide demanded, all suspicion. “Not drawing lots for some little trick, are you?”

“You don’t think,” Allison fairly purred, “that any of us are that clever—do you, Kilhide? If you have made us slaves, at least you cannot deny us the right to play an occasional game.”

Kilhide flushed darkly, made as if to say something, and then retired from the room in momentary confusion, gesturing to the three Dazzalox to take Allison along. Allison rose leisurely, glanced back at the men who had been about to draw straws, and surveyed Ted Tyndall with amused, contemptuous eyes. Tyndall's face turned away.

"Let my good friend Tyndall have my straw," Allison said as he left in the center of the three Dazzalox. "Perhaps—perhaps he likes to play games, too.

Perhaps there will even come a time when he will be 'it'!"

* * *

At snail pace the robot ship moved along the cavern runway, its gleaming black metal nose pointed toward the unlighted tunnel that would let it escape, somewhere miles beyond these buried chasms, into the void. The rocket motors thundered.

Several men in slave uniforms waited, concealed in a deep shadowy crevice. The drawing of straws had gone through according to Allison's original plan. Ted Tyndall, in fact, had taken Allison's place with an almost sweating eagerness.

Silently the men counted off the seconds. Another one-striper came running to them a moment later from the other end of the crevice and whispered his news breathlessly.

"Allison couldn't get her to come!" he gasped. "She's determined to stay."

"Hell!" the carnival barker muttered. "We should have guessed that she wouldn't go unless Allison did. Wish to God I'd given Allison *my* chance. If there was only time—"

"Not a chance," said the news bearer. "They've just convicted him of murder. He's sunk."

The ship was about to stop to take on Kilhide's trusted slave. It was time to act. Since the girl hadn't come, the barker's turn was automatically raised to first. Ted Tyndall's chance moved up from fifth to fourth.

"Why can't I have her place?" Tyndall begged. "After all—"

"You're fourth!" the barker snapped. "Heads up—All ready? Remember what Allison said. We jump out of here at our own risk. Either we make it or we don't. Ready, number two?"

Number two stood directly behind the barker, number three next, Ted Tyndall and the rest followed in line.

The ship eased to a stop. On the opposite side of it Kilhide's minion would enter. There was a click; the airlocks on this side automatically pushed open.

The carnival barker dashed out.

Number two failed to get started, for Ted Tyndall gave him a violent push and crowded out ahead of him.

Then above the sound of the idling rocket motors an automatic gun rattled. The barker and Ted Tyndall fell. The other men fled back through the crevice as hard as they could go. The robot ship roared away exactly on schedule.

CHAPTER VII

War of the Sexes

LESTER ALLISON lay on his stomach a fortnight later, his chin resting in his hands, his eyes watching the Dazzalox traffic come and go.

The heavy metal bars of his prison door afforded a comprehensive view of Dazzalox life, and in the many hours he had been here—an estimated twenty-five days, Earth time—he had gained much insight on the rising conflicts within this subterranean race.

A sharp, bitter conflict between the sexes!

At first, when he had been hailed into the absurd courts of native justice, he had been mildly surprised at the pronounced difference of opinion between the males and the females regarding his degree of guilt. To his astonishment, even old Jo-jo-kak's widow had made a stout appeal in his behalf.

"This slave not kill," the unbereaved spouse had declared in her prided English words. "Jo-jo-kak, his time to die. He try to escape death. He die."

The other women had carried their superstitions even farther. It was the official duty of the Dazzalox women to uphold and defend the great traditions. When they discovered that their males were yielding to a strange urge to break traditions, they were sure that Jo-jo-kak's death should be interpreted as a warning. Nothing less.

To Allison's grim amusement, many of the old men had cancelled their death dates, as if life had suddenly taken on a new interest; and this, the women complained, was upsetting to their careful plans for the distribution of food and properties. But back of it all, Allison knew, was a deep-rooted female distrust of the ill-suppressed desires of their males for "girl"!

If this Allison slave be guilty of a murder, the women whispered among themselves, then he should still be dealt with leniently; for he had put a timely end to the most undignified and ungracious exhibition of any Challenge Parade in their memory.

But although the Dazzalox women considered that the murder had been well timed, if murder it was, the male Dazzalox were exceedingly angered that the act had occurred just when it did.

They had been crying "More!" to old Jo-jo-kak, and he had been complying.

Indeed, the Challenge Parade had been on the point of making memorable history when Jo-jo-kak's death brought the excitement to an end. The murderer deserved death. No, he deserved the worst kind of death!

Between Ted Tyndall's eyewitness account and the telltale bottle of poison which Allison had dropped and broken in his haste, there had been no difficulty proving guilt. The only question which Kilhide had left open to the potentates was: what was the most appropriate sentence?

Allison closed his eyes as these thoughts flooded through his mind for the thousandth time. The perspiration trickled over his half-naked body. He knew that before the manner of his death had been decided upon, other things had happened to make his case a spectacular issue.

The most important thing was that the robot ship had returned on schedule seven days ago after its week's trip to Earth to dump twenty-five nice-looking girls—stolen from a factory in eastern United States—into Kilhide's lap.

“There are now over a hundred male slaves; there are twenty-six female slaves in our society,” Naf, Smitt’s owner, had reminded his fellow potentates, speaking in their native tongue during the last session of Allison’s hearings.

“Unless we deal firmly with the murderer of Jo-jo-kak, we may expect more trouble from the male slaves.”

The potentates had applauded vigorously.

“If the females are to be our slaves, we must have complete freedom in our management of them.” Naf’s words had led to enthusiastic cheering. A severe execution seemed in order.

ANOTHER potentate had hit upon another need for such an execution, saying, in effect,

“If these female slaves are treated to the bravest and most daring of our Dazzalox performances, in which we put to shame the poor fighting skills of their males, they will be convinced that male slaves are insignificant compared to us. The most daring and spectacular way for us to execute this murderer is by the Ancient Rite of the Floating Chop.”

So, in spite of demands for leniency from the female upholders of tradition, Allison had been condemned to die by the Floating Chop.

And what had happened to the anger of the women aroused by these masculine strategies? At this very moment Allison could look out into the streets and see groups of female Dazzalox talking in ominously low tones. The conflict was gathering fury. It had been gathering all the past weeks. There were subtle signs here and there that the lid would soon blow off.

Allison felt a poignant wish that he could live to see what form the conflict would take, and whether the women would dare do violence. But he doubted whether he would live to find out; for he was to die by the Floating Chop.

When? he wondered.

Perhaps not until this orgy of buying and selling the new females had subsided. Not until the arrogant old potentates had had their turns at staging ostentatious Challenge Parades to impress these lovely female slaves with their grandeur and power. Not until the speculation on the slave market had passed its first frenzied wave.

Perhaps not until the boiling seas had swept periodically through these streets and river beds, to wash away the filth and grime and half a Mercury year’s accumulation of bodies from the death tunnels. The blue dust from the stone streets was constantly in the air, so thick and fast came the traffic of hard, crusty yellow feet, and so long had it been since the sea had swept through.

“How’s the boy, Les?”

Lester Allison looked up into the grinning face of Smitt. A flicker of disappointment came into his own visage.

“You couldn’t get her?”

“Not yet, Romeo. But I’ll try again soon. It’s devilishly risky, you know. As long as she’s with Jo-jo-kak’s wife, she’s safe. But with these potentates practically fighting over girl slaves—”

“I know,” Allison grunted. “I see plenty of it from this angle, with the slave mart right across the street

from me. Those poor girls are scared to death. They fell into a pretty mess of hell when they came here. Did June send any message?"

"Her love, and this." Smitt passed a package of food through the bars. Allison took the package with eager begrimed fingers. Smitt grinned broadly and knowingly.

He mumbled, "I've begun to figure out your side of things finally. That is—" He shuffled his feet like a bashful boy with something embarrassing that had to be said.

"What are you driving at?"

"Well, at first I thought you were a fool to try to fight Kilhide's racket. It was too much like batting your brains against a stone wall. But since that load of females arrived, I've sort of picked up the feeling that life is worth fighting for."

"You mean—"

"Her name's Mary," said Smitt, as if that explained everything. He added, chuckling, "I know of three other fellows who have got it as bad as I have. They've been plumb dead to themselves for years down here, but the minute some girls came along and began to look at them as heroes, darned if the fellows aren't pawing the earth for a chance to put the hammerlock on Kilhide and take a shot for the void!"

"If you were just on the other side of these bars, Les, that rebellion you've been propagating—Listen! What's that?"

"Another load of girls," Allison muttered. "Two trips in two weeks!"

THE subterranean canyon filled with the percussion of the robot ship. Before the sounds stopped and the echoes died, hundreds of Dazzalox bounded down their steps and through the streets toward the Red Suburb.

Soon another twenty-five attractive working girls were lined up in the slave market across the dusty plaza from Allison's prison, and at once the bewildered creatures were surrounded by a chaos of buying and selling and trading—a chaos of shrill birdlike voices screaming and quarreling in an inhuman tongue. Potentates hurried to the market with many of the first crop of girls—and with groups of two-strippers to make exchanges.

Smitt was still sitting outside Allison's bars when Kilhide breezed past, then turned back to say,

"I'm looking for June O'Neil. Have you seen her?"

Allison's fighting temperature jumped. His words clogged. Smitt answered with a blank stare. So far as Smitt knew, she was with Jo-jo-kak's widow.

"Find her for me, Smitt!" Kilhide snapped. "With prices skyrocketing, she ought to be back in circulation."

Smitt saluted and he and Kilhide went their separate ways. Allison glanced dully at the package of food.

Half an hour later Smitt returned to the barred opening, and worry showed on his face.

"She's gone, Les. What do you suppose—"

"What did Jo-jo-kak's widow say?"

“*She’s gone, too.*”

“Where?”

“I couldn’t find out.”

“Didn’t any of the Dazzalox women see her go?”

“Les, you’ll think I’m blind and deaf and cockeyed. But by George, I couldn’t find *any* Dazzalox women—*not a one!*”

Allison’s eyes shot across to the crowd of Dazzalox men. Apparently most of the male population had turned out to swarm about the slave mart. He glanced up and down the main thoroughfares, toward the rock-walled vestibules and shadowy side streets where a few hours earlier groups of women had been conferring in hushed tones.

“Something’s cracked, Smitt,” Allison said with a snap of his fingers. “I’ll swear I haven’t seen a female Dazzalox since these new girls came in.”

The package of food caught Allison’s eye. He shuffled its contents and there he found the answer—a penciled note from June.

Dear Lester,

This is to tell you that the Dazzalox women are going to migrate. Jo-jo-kak’s widow has confided this to me. You can guess how desperate they are about their broken traditions when I tell you that they debated whether they should run away or commit wholesale murder upon all the males. They seem to feel that the sooner their race comes to an end, the better. It is the only answer, they say, to their outraged traditions.

“They’re the damnedest lot!” Smitt hissed. “I never could understand them and their traditions.”

ALLISON read on.

They talked of escaping these caverns through some ascending passages. I do not know whether they can.

“They run the risk of death from the sea,” Smitt muttered. “And if they find their way to the top, they’ll be scorched to cinders, from what Kilhide says.”

Allison read feverishly now. *For appearances’ sake I must go with Jo-jo-kak’s widow. But I can’t give up believing that you may yet escape, Lester. You must. I shall try to break away from the women before they leave the caverns, and wait for you. But if you do not come—I will tell myself to the last that somehow you must have escaped them and flown back to the earth. I shall always love you. June.*

Lester Allison leaped to his feet and shook the bars like a wild man.

“Get me out of here, Smitt! I’ve got to get out!”

Smitt’s hand shot through the bars and flattened over Allison’s mouth.

“Quiet! You’ll have Kilhide on your neck!”

“But *June*—”

“I’ll go after her,” Smitt said, and for once he wasn’t grinning. “If Naf comes looking for me, tell him—nothing.”

ALLISON stalked the prison cave hungrily. All the food June had sent him that day had been devoured, and the closely eaten rinds of the fruits had washed away with the gushing rivulet that pounded incessantly down a jagged wall of his cave and chased through a barred opening to deeper ravines beyond.

He was scarcely conscious of his hunger. He was keenly conscious, however, that it had been hours and hours since Smitt set out to bring June back. And during those hours—what a terrific hullabaloo! The Dazzalox men had discovered what had happened, and they had forthwith exploded into an enraged brand of pursuers.

A thousand or so pairs of hard yellow feet had thudded through the dusty caverns, leaving only the echoes of angry shouting and clouds of purple dust in their wake. What had followed when they finally overtook their rebellious runaways several miles up the canyons, Allison could only imagine.

But evidently the males had administered some sort of persuasive argument, either by force or threats, for the women had at last begun to dribble back.

“That ends that,” thought Allison, as he watched group after group straggle homeward. “Or is it only the beginning?”

The more closely he observed, the more he wondered. The thing he particularly noticed was that the groups of females who trudged past within his hearing were not speaking to the males who followed them. The husbands might growl and shout threats and dictate demands, but the women only huddled closer together and said nothing. Were they refusing to squander their energies on a *verbal* quarrel, Allison wondered.

“Violence ahead!” he muttered to himself.

Whenever the women passed near the large violet flare, he could catch a certain glint of desperation in their yellow eyes. And suddenly he discerned in that blazing desperation a glint of hope for himself!

If—if—if—if—

IF only these mad Dazzalox women would unleash their fury *soon enough*, he might escape the Floating Chop!

And if Smitt was right about some of the slaves; *if* they were ripe to risk Kilhide’s guns; and if they could storm the upper secret chambers of Kilhide’s lab, where the controls to the robot ship were thought to be hidden—

If—But these were runaway dreams, with less chance to succeed than the runaway Dazzalox women. Allison’s dizzy thoughts boiled down to one single, immediate, vital *if*. If Smitt didn’t come back soon with the news that June O’Neil was safe, Allison would go crazy.

* * *

JUNE came to him hours later, tired and dirty but still beautiful. Allison kissed her passionately through the bars of his prison, and she smiled while he brushed the rock dust from her cheek and her shoulder.

“Thanks—thanks more than I can tell,” said Allison to Smitt, who stood by, grinning. Then Smitt was off on business of his own, and Allison and the girl were sitting side by side with only the black vertical bars between them.

Food and drink passed through the bars. June made believe they were dining in luxury; and as her dark eyes flashed smiles at him and her hair fell against his shoulder, the luxury became genuine for Allison.

“You must go get some rest,” she said, after he had listened to her story of the women’s ill-fated venture. “I’ll be safe for a time, surely. The Dazzalox will probably turn in for one of their three-day sleeps after all this turmoil.”

The girl’s smile quickly vanished. “No, there are other plans.” She spoke with tense restraint. “Desperate plans. I—I can’t—I mustn’t talk of them.”

She was pale, and Allison felt the blood leave his own face.

“Tell me.”

June shook her head. “All the way back I heard them talking. The men boasted, and the women whispered.” She hesitated. “I didn’t hear all the details. I didn’t want to. I couldn’t.” She choked. “Then men were talking about—”

“A circus in the big arena?”

The girl nodded. Allison felt the cold surge through his spine. So at last the Floating Chop was at hand!

“They’ve got to have an orgy of cruelty at once,” said June. “It’s their savage way of forgetting the slap the women have just given them. As soon as they had turned the migration back, they began to clamor for a celebration—and the first thing they thought of was Jo-jo-kak—and you.”

“And the Dazzalox women?” Allison asked. “What do they have up their sleeves?”

“Wholesale murder,” June answered.

“How soon?” Those eager *ifs* were jumping through Allison’s mind again. “*How soon?*”

June gave him a quick frightened look. “Almost too soon,” she said. “Perhaps as soon as they can pick up enough knives—as soon as the signal comes. Then they’ll all strike at once.”

“Don’t tremble so,” said Allison softly. “There’s still a chance for us. I’ve got a scheme—”

A shrill brassy gong sounded from somewhere down the torch-lit street. It clanged out three inharmonious notes in rapid succession. Then it came again, and again. Ominous triple clangs.

At once Dazzalox men and women hurried down the distant stairways. Dazzalox potentates led their elaborately adorned female slaves down the streets. Two-stripers and Mercurian natives paraded together in hastily arranged formations—toward the Grand March.

Friendly slaves slipped past Allison’s prison to give him a sign of farewell or a word of tasteless hope. Hope that snatched at straws.

“Your strategy?” June asked for the third time. She too, was snatching for straws in these last minutes. She knew that no condemned creature had ever lived through the Floating Chop.

A slender Dazzalox in a gaudy green athletic suit bounded past, swinging a gleaming black ax. A crowd chased after him, cheering him. Some of them stopped to hoot at Allison for a moment. They raced on toward the stadium.

“Your strategy?” June repeated in a tight voice. Her lips trembled.

“I’m going to fight for time,” Allison answered. “If the women are on the verge of a slaughter that nothing can stop—well, I may as well take advantage of it. Probably they plan to spring their knives as soon as the men are intent upon my execution ceremony.”

“Yes.” June was staring off into the gloomy distance.

“Then if I can only stave off death until the women strike,” there was a maniacal hope in Allison’s eyes, “then *my* party will be forgotten—at least, there’s a speck of a chance. If I can work that break, I’ll bolt for the narrow stairway at the lower end of the stadium. You know—to the left of the striped door.”

“Stairway,” the girl echoed dazedly.

“So that’s my strategy—to hold on to dear life till the women give their signal and hell breaks loose.”

A group of armed Dazzalox officers rounded a corner and came toward the prison.

“If I only knew what signal the women will wait for,” came Allison’s final whisper. And then he kissed the girl. The officers opened the barred door and led him away.

“*Signal!*” June moaned and she sank to the floor in a paroxysm of sobbing. She had not had the heart to tell him that the signal the Dazzalox women had agreed upon was the death blow at the Ancient Rite of the Floating Chop.

CHAPTER VIII

The Floating Chop

THE chains on Lester Allison’s wrists led him back and forth before the stadium crowd. He was royally hooted. All the Dazzalox words for “killer” and “criminal” and “monster” were hurled at him. He had learned the Dazzalox tongue only to be mocked by it.

The four uniformed Dazzalox who marched him around kept the two long chains stretched tight so that they themselves were never close to him. They were not only playing safe, keeping out of his reach; they were shunning him.

“Let them delay all they want with their damned preliminaries,” Allison thought to himself. He clung to his one false hope tenaciously.

Such a sinking feeling assailed him as he had never known before. As if death were already leading him by the hand. As if he had already departed from everyone in the world.

Even the one-strippers and two-strippers he glimpsed here and there among the assemblage of glittering Dazzalox were completely apart from him now. Their bondage was nothing compared to his. But their fates would come in time—and what would they be? Allison wondered. The chain whipped and jerked at his left wrist, a signal to turn back.

His blood chilled each time they led him past the pool in the center of the arena. A circular section of the flooring had been removed from over the hidden river. That circular pool was to be the scene of his execution.

Allison’s eyes followed the three floating discs, each ten or twelve feet across and apparently made of tightly compressed faggots from some subterranean timber or root, that circulated within the pool. They were like three huge doughnuts in a kettle of grease, except that the grease was green water and the doughnuts were like round meat-cutters’ tables, hacked and scarred from ceremonies immemorial. The

chains led Allison on.

Glancing upward, he saw that there were a number of female slaves here and there in the crowd. Some of them were in gold and blue slave costumes, others still wore their American clothes; but all were richly adorned with bold Dazzalox jewelry and medals and trinkets. They sat near wealthy potentates. Probably they were too baffled, Allison thought, to know what was going on.

And yet it was their innocent presence that was figuratively to bring the universe crashing down upon the Dazzalox race. At this very moment, how silently the Dazzalox women sat at the sides of their unsuspecting males, like charges of electric death awaiting the flip of a switch.

Back toward the pool the chains pulled Allison.

Now his eyes widened in horror as he counted off three Dazzalox, lithe and well muscled. Each of them wielded a black metal double-edged ax, and all three were now enthusiastically engaged in warming up.

They pranced around the open arena in their athletic uniforms, glittering with polished medallions. Attendants tossed fruits in the air for them, which they deftly sliced with their flying axes. Up in one piece, down in eight—and the crowds hailed the feat with lusty cheers.

At last Allison was released into the circular pen—a fence of vertical iron bars that enclosed the pool. His wrists were free again, his mantle was removed. He wore only his slave trunks. Bars clanged after him.

So this was the arena for his execution! Without hesitation, Allison plunged into the pool.

A dozen easy strokes took him across and he climbed up on the narrow walk that bordered the pool. The walk, like the ten-inch discs in the water, was chipped and hacked. Allison sat with his back against the bars of the fence and let his feet rest in the cool water. His arms involuntarily jerked and trembled.

“Stall for time,” he kept saying to himself in a voiceless whisper. “Just keep stalling for time.”

ONE of the floating discs brushed past his feet. He kicked at it, then leaped onto it. It was as buoyant as cork. He crossed to the other two discs—the flow of the river through the pool kept them in constant circulation—and jumped back to the narrow walk.

Now, amid a loud ovation, the three muscular choppers entered the pen and the gate was fastened behind them. They stood together ceremoniously, with their long-handled axes uplifted, while an official on the outside made a presentation speech.

The crowd listened breathlessly. Between the announcer’s sentences Allison could hear the bubbling of the river as it seeped along under the stadium floor, into the eddying pool, and out again through its underfloor passage. Perhaps—

No, the very words of the announcer extinguished a sporadic hope that flashed through Allison’s mind—the hope of an underfloor escape. In substance the announcer said:

“... and he has been condemned to die by the Floating Chop. There is no escape from the Floating Chop. The surrounding fence is made of strong bars with spears at the top. Beneath the water there are walls of metal bars and of stone which narrow to a point. The culprit must either meet his death by the ax—or drown.

“The choppers have a sporting chance to kill him. If they succeed before drowning overtakes him, they shall win the Ancient Award of the Floating Chop. If they fail, all three will lose their titles of Floating Choppers. A salute to their success!”

The choppers, standing in a line across the pool from Allison, swung their axes in circles and called out some unintelligible response in unison. They came to attention again while the announcer finished.

“Remember that the rules cannot be violated,” he said, in effect. “The culprit’s members must be severed in a precise order: first, the two feet, then the two hands, finally the head. You are now ready. Begin!”

The subterranean canyons rocked with yelping cheers of the male Dazzalox.

Eagerly the three choppers tightened their grips on their axes. The one dressed in green started around the circular walk in one direction, the orange axman took the other. The yellow one stood where he was. Allison dived for the center of the pool.

He came up to see a yellow-clad form floating toward him on a disc. He caught his breath and looked for an open corner. There wasn’t any such thing. Not as long as the two choppers were running around on the narrow circular walk.

Allison swam for a disc, climbed up onto it. The advantage of Mercury’s slightly lighter gravity kept surprising him as he accustomed himself to the water. But other less pleasant surprises soon flooded in upon him too swiftly for him to collect his thoughts—surprises in the form of leaping choppers and spinning axes.

He sprang backward from the disc barely in time to escape the black streak that whizzed past his feet. He plunged for the center of the pool and stayed there, treading water, studying the vicious yellow eyes, trying to gauge where the next attack would come from.

The yellow chopper floated near him on a disc. The axman’s double eyebrows were squinted menacingly toward the water, his wicked blade was poised. He was trying to sight Allison’s submerged feet. He floated past without doing any damage, and the crowd clamored for action.

THE green chopper was dancing about on the next disc, swinging the flat of his ax against the waves to slap water into Allison’s face in order both to enrage and confuse him.

Suddenly the orange man plunged from the side, ax and all. He swam underwater, but the waves showed where he was coming. Allison surface-dived and cut well under him.

Another dive sounded, and Allison looked up from a depth of several feet to see a chopper coming straight down toward him. With a swift twist Allison plunged deeper. He realized by now that the advantage of vision was with whoever was underneath, for all the light came from above the pool.

But suddenly it dawned on him, as he scraped against a narrowing wall, that the cone itself was a treacherous trap. The deeper he went, the easier it would be for three axmen to close in on him. He switched back, barely passing a third diver as he shot upward. A hard hand clutched at his ankle. He kicked out of it and bobbed up to the surface like a jumping fish. An instant later he was up on the ragged walk, panting furiously.

Three ugly Dazzalox heads came up. Three axes caught on the edge of the walk and the choppers pulled themselves up with practiced skill.

There was a moment’s hesitation while the green axman gibbered a word of instruction. Then two of them came racing around the perimeter, one from each direction. The third leaped out to a floating disc and waited.

Allison dived again. There was nothing else to do.

He made as if to dive deeply; then with distended eyes searching the green waves for forms above him, he switched back to retrace his course. It was an old trick he had used when he was a boy playing tag at the lake. Five seconds after the three choppers dived for him, he was upon the surface again.

But he was well aware that all the tricks he could muster would not last long against their teamwork...

To the utter amazement of the roaring, bellowing crowds, Allison's wily tactics lasted for most of half an hour. By that time he was nearly exhausted, both physically and mentally. Had it not been for the rules, his hands and head would never have survived the ceaseless attacks. As it was, nine times the ax blades had bit into his legs.

Three of the cuts stung him constantly. The sharp pains soaked upward through his legs, and blood and strength seeped away from him. But there was nothing to be done about that. The crowd yelled for action and the three choppers closed in on him again.

Allison dived deeply. For the first time he allowed himself to go down—down—down.

The walls of the cone narrowed around him. If the choppers should follow—But an upward glance told him they were still floundering several feet above, trying to locate him. If the fates would only give him the one break he craved!

He groped at the bottom of the cone. His search was futile. He had hoped his hands might fall upon an ax lost in some previous tournament, fallen to the bottom of the cone, forgotten. Again he explored.

No such luck. All his groping hands found in the point of the cone was slime. Slime and bits of bone.

Slime! He cupped his two hands into it, then up he floated—up to the surface with bursting lungs.

HE caught sight of the three axmen back in their positions. He heard the crowd wail for action. Action! In another moment they would get it, if the gods of luck would give him half a break. Treading water at the edge of the pool, *he smeared his slimy hands over the walk.*

The orange chopper bounded toward him with devilish yellow eyes gleaming. Three swift bounds—and a grand slip! Flying arms and legs, orange body, black ax—all went careening into the fence. The chopper made a swift scramble to recover his ax. Allison was too quick for him.

A tense gasp echoed through the stadium, a long gasp that melted into worried mumbles.

The yellow and green choppers who had started around the ring to their fellow's rescue stopped short, for the orange form plunged into the pool. In his place stood the slave they were to execute—a well-muscled human being *with an ax in his hands.*

They jabbered savagely for a moment. Outside the cage the announcer roared something at the frenzied crowd.

Allison understood. The rules were automatically off. The choppers were to strike anywhere—and strike to kill! No more playing around. This culprit was a dangerous creature!

Another ax was passed through the bars to the orange executioner. Three attendants outside the pen came toward Allison and debated trying to reach in and take the ax away from him, but decided against it when he flashed the weapon deftly toward the bars.

“Stall for time,” Allison thought, but the words had a sickly taste in his mouth. How *much* time—or had the women forgotten their resolve? Pains shot through his feet. He felt weak from loss of blood. He

wanted to lie down and faint away.

Now two of the axmen began to close in on him from each direction, as before, but more cautiously, desperately. A disc floated toward Allison's edge. The yellow chopper was on it. There was no more stalling. It was kill or be killed. One false move would be the end.

Which way to strike? His right-handedness determined. He would throw his stroke in the direction that would give his right arm full play. Automatically he plunged to his left to meet the approaching green chopper.

But fate waited in his path—the slime.

Three steps he bolted, then his footing gave way. He shot outward over the water. But as his foot gave a final kick against the edge of the walk, he flung his ax back with all his strength, squarely at the green body. The force of a madman went into that blow and followed through as the ax shot out of his hands.

His plunge carried him deep into the cooling waters. His hands were free now. He plodded on downward. He didn't want to come up again. His strength was gone. He felt that drowning would be so easy, so simple. He clung to the slanting wall and waited.

No one came after him. Things began to go black. His hands loosened...

Even before Allison's face cut through the surface of the water to gasp air, he was conscious of the terrific screaming that filled the stadium. His lungs inhaled air, barely sight returned to his eyes, blood-chilling cries of terror crowded upon his ears. What a weird terrifying pandemonium!

The tiers of the stadium were a shambles of mass murder. Knives flashed again and again upon the writhing bodies of male Dazzalox. Blood gushed and streamed down the steps. Males and females grappled in death struggles and tumbled down, tier after tier, to roll onto the open pavement of the Grand March.

So the hour had struck at last—the fatal hour that might spell the doom of a race in the ghastly clash of sex against sex!

CHAPTER IX

Destiny

WHAT signal had set the shambles off? Allison's eyes swept the bloody scene and returned at last to the pen of his own intended execution.

Across the pool from him the gate was open. The orange and yellow Dazzalox choppers were outside, now running as if to the rescue of a friend, now halting as if overwhelmed by the scene of terror. They glanced back, and Allison's eyes followed their glance. Their green-suited teammate lay motionless on the walk beside the pool.

The ax, which had sunk deep in his heart, still hung there with its handle pointing almost straight up. Blood flowed in a crooked stream along the water-tracked walk to an ancient ax mark at the pool's edge, and from there the eddying waters carried it away.

Allison dragged himself up out of the water, rolled against the fence and lay there, bleeding, quivering, wondering at the fact that he was still alive. The two departing choppers looked back at him, but their hearts had evidently gone out of their jobs. It was a corps of angry women advancing upon them that absorbed their attention now. The last Allison ever saw of them, they were backing away and defending

themselves wildly with their axes.

Two slaughtered potentates rolled down the stone tiers and thumped into the bars of the cage. One of them was Naf, Smitt's master. His wrinkled old face was a contorted mass of yellow chalk. He had weathered a thousand Earth years only to die from a black knife in his side.

The dead and dying bodies rolled down, and those Dazzalox still alive scrambled across the tiers—to kill or to be killed.

Allison was relieved to see that his fellow humans of both sexes were clambering to the upper reaches of the sloping sides and finding exits. His eyes sought for June. He remembered telling her he would try to escape by the narrow stairs above the striped door at the farther end—

And someone was there! Someone waving at him—a girlish figure with black hair and a blue and gold costume.

“June!” he breathed, half aloud. “June! June!” The very name gave him strength. Allison tottered dizzily to the door of the cage, waving at her.

He paused. Several hundred Dazzalox males and females were battling to death on the open pavement before him. Armed women were charging about in small groups. Getting through that mad milieu wouldn't be easy. He looked about for a weapon. The only thing he saw was the ax buried in the green chopper's riven chest. He turned from the sight and plodded through the battleground unarmed.

“Lester! You were wonderful!” The girl bathed his face with her kisses and tears. “Don't mind me. I'm so happy, I just have to cry.”

But the next moment June dried her tears and became practical. She hastily tore strips from her garments to bandage his bleeding feet and legs. A crevice protected them from the spectacle of the bloody war, and they tried not to hear the thudding of feet and the wailing and cursing of males.

“The women must have got off to a good start,” Allison remarked, lying back on the rock floor and closing his eyes.

“You should have seen the first attack. It went off like clockwork.”

ALLISON asked innocently, “What started them off?”

“The signal you gave them.”

“The signal I gave them!”

“They had agreed that the death blow would be the signal to attack. You finally furnished it when you threw your ax at the chopper. They couldn't have waited much longer, anyway. In fact, you provided them with the ideal moment. It was such a stunner to the males, to see you cut down one of their heroes, it was almost equal to an anesthetic.”

“I'll bet,” Allison said grimly. “But what next, after they finish with their men? Do they start in on us humans?”

“There's only one human they've sworn to get.”

“Not Kilhide?” Allison came bolt upright.

“Yes. They blame him for encouraging the men in this mania for female slaves.”

“We can’t let them get Kilhide!” Allison snapped. As the final bandage was tied he came to his feet. “Kilhide’s the only one that can get us back to Earth!”

Hand in hand they ran down the clay ramp as fast as Allison’s painful legs could travel. They dodged groups of fighters in the streets, they closed their ears to death screams from bodies that had been hurled into ravines.

They glimpsed the fall of an aged potentate from the top of a stairs; heard a moment later the scream from the terrorized American girl who had just fought free of his grasp; saw the stricken Dazzalox crash to death over a torch light. Wincing, they turned their eyes away as the flames puffed up from his yellow hair and eyebrows. They hurried on.

“Where’s Kilhide?” they shouted together at a two-striper who came running from the other direction.

“Layin’ for trouble makers. Watch out! He got a couple at the suburb,” the slave retorted without stopping.

They slackened their pace as they neared the red metal bridge. A severe voice barked at them from the shadows.

“This way, you two.”

They turned to see the gleaming pistol move out into the light. Back of it the sleek white-clad form of Kilhide appeared.

“So you jumped your fate, Allison,” said the evilly handsome scientist with a twitching smile. “You’ll not jump this one. You happen to be superfluous to my purposes, and this hour was made to order for ridding myself of superfluous people. Your friend Smitt will also qualify. Now, Allison, step away from that girl!”

“No!” cried June O’Neil. “Please—you can’t! Not unless you kill us both!”

“Don’t be throwing yourself at the feet of a corpse, Miss O’Neil. It annoys me.” Kilhide twisted his little trick mustache into a cynical scowl. “Besides, it’s bad taste for one of your rank. You’re soon to be queen of these caverns—when the Dazzalox have had their fun, and I—”

Lester Allison and June O’Neil were no longer listening. Their eyes were intent upon the six figures who were cautiously stealing toward the scientist from behind his back. Now Kilhide’s words broke off as he saw shadows creep along the perpendicular wall.

THE man with the gun whirled. He faced a group of Dazzalox women with knives and axes in their bloodstained yellow hands. The group bore down upon him. His pistol blazed, and three of them fell. The others swamped him with their blades. His arms clamped over his chest and his gun fell. In another instant he would have died with a knife in his throat, had Allison not interfered.

But between the efforts of Allison and June, not to mention Jo-jo-kak’s widow, who chanced to be one of the attackers, the assault was brought to a sudden halt. . . . “Ja-ik-lif! Ka-lib-or-taf-ki-damik!” Jo-jo-kak’s widow cried, pulling the other women back from the fallen slave master. “It is enough! We leave him to die!”

* * *

THE spacious corridors of Kilhide’s laboratory were seething with American men and women, who talked in low excited undertones. Though most of them wore the uniforms of Dazzalox slaves, their faces

glowed with hope and enthusiasm. They were on the verge of freedom. They talked of a swift return to the earth.

Whenever their conversation slackened, Allison, sitting near the door, could hear the roar of the rivers outside. The periodic floods of Mercury were scouring the rock dust and filth from the streets. Powerful torrents were sweeping the dead and dying bodies away through unknown subterranean channels, bearing them to the boiling seas on other sides of the planet.

Allison watched through the glass doorway. The winds, generated by the floods, kept the red torches flickering and the shadows of the Red Suburb quivered. Occasionally—but rarely—a rush of water would slap over a flame and extinguish it.

“June asked me to tell you that Kilhide is beginning to stir,” said a voice at Allison’s shoulder.

“Tell her I’ll come soon,” Allison answered.

“Smitt and the others haven’t returned?”

“Not yet.”

Allison’s eyes turned again to the red scene, coming to rest, as always, upon the crumpled striped door beside the gaping death cave. Earlier he had seen the three Dazzalox women crash that door with axes, and then themselves fall victims to the escaping death gas. Now the last of those three women was caught by a wave and borne away, and only the battered fallen door was left as a monument to their mad determination.

Poor insane Dazzalox women, Allison thought. Not satisfied until they had turned the last stone upon their own extinction. They had released the invisible death that would rise to slay every male who escaped the high rocks.

Four hooded figures came bounding along the path.

“The door!” Allison called. “Unseal it!”

Someone obeyed, and Smitt and his three companions entered; the door was sealed again. The four men removed their oxygen masks.

“Well?” Allison asked, facing Smitt.

Smitt shook his head slowly. “Complete slaughter,” he said. “Every striped door is down. I don’t think there’s a living soul left out there, human or Dazzalox. We found a few of both up on the shelves, but they were gone.” He added, turning away, “We didn’t find—Mary.”

ALLISON put a hand on his shoulder.

“Your Mary is here,” he said.

“She came in just after you left—and none too soon. I think she’ll be all right.”

* * *

IN an inner chamber Allison glared into the eyes of Kilhide. The dying scientist had been given every medical attention. He knew he could not live many hours longer, but he fought death as bitterly as he had fought his fellow men.

“You’ve got to live!” Allison said to him fiercely. “You’ve got to live long enough to send these people back to Earth!”

Kilhide muttered profanity. “So that’s why you wouldn’t let them kill me.”

“There couldn’t be any other reason,” snapped Allison. “You’ve got to come through!”

“You can’t threaten me, Allison,” the sick man answered sardonically.

“For God’s sake, man, show us how to operate the robot ship before it’s too late.”

The dying man answered with a sarcastic, taunting laugh.

“You’ve got to do it, Kilhide! You’ve got to send us back!”

“You can go to hell and fry,” Kilhide sneered, and then he closed his eyes.

June and Allison and the others who were at his side during the next two hours were convinced that he never once returned to normal consciousness. All his feverish raving was simply the welling up of repressions and hatreds and loves, dreams and ambitions and scientific secrets that were imprisoned within his warped, complex mind.*

* The human mind is a peculiar organ. In certain types of insanity, which cause a series of repressions, the accumulated emotions sometimes well out unchecked at periods of great physical stress, such as approaching death, severe injury, or great emotional disturbance. During insanity, a censor wall is erected, which very carefully conceals and holds back the desires that really are strongest. When this censor wall breaks, the subconscious gains full control and all repressions are brought out into the light of day. No one who has witnessed such an occurrence can ever forget the extreme violence of this release of pent-up, terror-ridden inner desires and secret ambitions.—Ed.

Two hours they heard of the most eloquent raving that ever passed a scientist’s lips. A dying genius, declaring himself to be the master mind of the world!

Allison listened in awe; Smitt snatched at every word of information; June, with her practical turn of mind, seized pencil and paper and captured the flow of words in shorthand.

For the fever-stricken slave master was at last the glorified figure he had always dreamed of being. He was host to the world’s leading scientists. They were evidently circled around him, and his maniacal eyes glittered upon them as he talked. His delusion was complete.

He commanded them to carry him through his laboratories from top to bottom while he lectured upon their wonders. All through his ravings, he acted as though his delusions were being carried out to the letter. He extracted promises that they would never reveal his magnificent secrets to the rabble from the earth, nor to the world tourists who might come to this place.

He began with the robot ship’s controls, followed through the power plant, started through the shops—and then, in a burst of rage over imagined enemies from the earth, he collapsed. A minute later, the amazingly brilliant, incredible evil Kilhide passed on to the eternity for which his whole life had been a fitting preparation.

WITH the aid of gas masks, Allison, Smitt and three other men had rebuilt the doors across the death caves. They had needed something to do, they said, while they counted off the days of waiting for the robot ship’s final return trip for its last load. Only ten persons remained to go. Today was the day.

June and Allison strolled along the clean streets, surveying the strangely quiet world. All signs of the war were gone. The air was fresh. The waterfalls and rivulets gushed with lively music that seemed more melodious, now that there were no harsh Dazzalox voices.

Strangely, in the many days that had passed since the fighting and the invisible death took their toll, not a single living Dazzalox had been found. In a sense, Allison thought, the women had won a complete victory.

But tears often came to June's eyes as she thought of Jo-jo-kak's widow and the curious friendship that had grown up between them.

"I'm sorry we couldn't have saved her life," said Allison.

"But she wouldn't have been happy living on, after her civilization was gone," June replied. "It is just as well."

Allison smiled at her curiously. Somehow she had reconciled her feelings to the insane violence the women had committed.

"But I understand how they felt," said June, reading his thoughts. "It wouldn't be much fun to live after you've lost all faith in your own civilization."

There was something deep and serious in her dark eyes that Allison appreciated.

"You have some pretty big thoughts for such a young girl," he said. "Were you thinking things like this when you ran away from home? Perhaps you had lost faith in your own civilization, too."

"And if I had," she answered, "what would you suggest?"

"Come," said Allison, taking her hand. "I'll answer that one when we reach the top of this stairs."

They climbed the winding steps to the balcony where, not so many weeks ago, they had first kissed. They looked across to other torch-lighted mansions of the silent, uninhabited city. They saw Smitt and Mary strolling along the street below them.

Elsewhere, they knew, three other couples who had lingered to take the last boat back to earth were also enjoying the quiet romantic atmosphere of this lost world.

"You were going to suggest—" said June.

"That if we don't feel the call of our old civilization too strongly," said Allison, "we might all stay here and build a new civilization of our own."

"Make our homes here?" June crept closer into Allison's arms and there was a bewitching eagerness in her dark eyes—an eagerness for new adventures concerned with life, not death.

Allison kissed her. For a time no word was spoken.

"We five men have been studying the machines," Allison said presently. "Kilhide has left us the foundation for marvelous developments. In time we'll come to appreciate him more—after we've forgotten what kind of person he was."

The girl in Allison's arms shuddered slightly.

"But Kilhide's science isn't civilization," Allison went on. "At least, it isn't everything. There have to be

people that want to live together—honest, genuine people—like you—and Smitt—and Mary—”

“I CAN name the other seven by heart,” said June, smiling up at him as if to help him with his pretty speech.

“I saw to it that only these five couples would be left for the last load,” Allison said. “Right now the other four men are asking their sweethearts, just as I’m asking you, whether they would be willing to marry and stay right here.”

“The other four girls will say ‘yes,’ ” June answered with a faint twinkle in her eyes. “I know, because they’ve talked and dreamed and planned every hour while their men were out rebuilding the doors.”

“Then,” said Allison softly, drawing the girl tighter in his arms, “why not make it unanimous?”

The End.

Notes and proofing history

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