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IN response to a widespread demand from our readers, we asked Don Wilcox to bring back those two sterling characters of his, Lester Allison and June O'Neill, who first appeared in AMAZING STORIES in the June, 1940 issue.

Pleased with the success of his "Slave Raiders from Mercury," Author Wilcox has written this entertaining sequel. The plot is entirely original, but the two principal characters face peril and heroic sacrifice with the same courage that evoked such an enthusiastic response from AMAZING STORIES fans.

In "Slave Raiders from Mercury," Lester Allison, taking a day off at the circus, found himself in a sideshow exhibit—a rocket ship, which had somehow come down to Earth. Also in the ship, whither she had fled to escape the unwelcome attentions of an over-zealous suitor, was June O'Neill.

WHAM!—the rocket ship suddenly took off into the void, and our two young people presently

found themselves exiled on Mercury. There they became enmeshed in the cunning clutches of Jason Kilhide, a confidence man from Earth who had turned all of Mercury into a profitable racket of which he was the guiding genius.

Kilhide's self-returning space ships were used to kidnap young people from Earth to become slaves of the Dazzalox, the ruling class of Mercury.

Lester Allison nearly gave up his life in combatting this evil system, but finally succeeded in destroying the last vestiges of this corrupt regime, Kilhide included. Thereupon he and June O'Neill and four other young Earth couples—the rest had been sent back home—decided to spend their lives on Mercury, a haven now where they would never be molested, and in addition would be able to make use of the marvelous scientific achievements which Kilhide had unwillingly left behind.

Now, in this sequel, we have Lester Allison and June O'Neill confronted with another great crisis, on which solution depends their very lives.—Ed.

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

Battering Rams of Space

by Don Wilcox

“UNTIL these stone walls crumble away,” the beautiful girl in Lester Allison’s arms breathed.

The torchlights glowed upon the red rock walls and shone in June O’Neill’s face. The devotion in her dark eyes was the very heart of Lester Allison’s new-found world.

“We’ll be married this very hour,” said Allison softly.

Together they had braved death in these underground chasms of Mercury. Allison had undergone the fatal ritual of the Floating Chop, outwitted his would-be executors and come out alive. Together he and June O’Neill had survived the devastations of Mercury’s strange war.

Now the Mercurians were all gone. The slate of the former civilization had been wiped clean. A new civilization waited to be born.

They wended their way down the hewn-stone staircase. Their brief neat-fitting garments of red and white metallic mesh swished slightly as they walked. They would find Smitt and Mary and the three other couples at once. It would be a five-couple wedding—a simple declaration of vows, each in the presence of the others.

A dull roar sounded from far up the space ship runway, and Allison and June looked at each other and smiled. It seemed humorous, somehow, for the empty robot ship which had been transporting the freed Earth slaves back home, to roll back into port for its final load. The final load—the five couples—would never go back. They had decided to remain on Mercury.

“We’ve found our own little corner of the universe,” June mused. “We’ll let the rest of the worlds go by.”

Allison’s smile vanished and his strong face showed a flicker of worry. The roar of the approaching ship

had an unfamiliar ring.

Perhaps it needed overhauling. Perhaps—

But in another minute, it would roll into view in the spacious red-walled cavern known as the Red Suburb. Allison and June strolled on.

The robot ship had taken all the other survivors of the Mercury slave raids back to the earth. These five couples had been chosen by Allison for the final load. He had chosen with care. And then, as he had hoped and planned, they had made the momentous decision: they would forsake the earth in favor of these deep rich caverns of Mercury.

Not only had nature favored these caverns. By a curious twist of fortune a genius of science, recently deceased, had established what was perhaps the world's most unique laboratory here. Allison and his little party had inherited it. And the secrets that went with it. And the amazingly facile machines that rolled out and fashioned the marvelous and inexhaustible red and black metals.

Already Allison and the other four men, all of them mechanically minded, had delved into the laboratory mysteries and gone to work on blueprints of their own.

“Listen!” Allison stopped short. “That roar—”

June paled. “That can't be our robot ship!”

The torches along the runway flickered, deep shadows on the high red walls wavered. The low-roaring ship rolled into view.

It was a huge silvery fighting ship with an ominous-looking gun poised over its nose—a *stranger!*

“To the shadows!” Allison gasped, seizing June by the hand.

“THROUGH the shadows they ran. They fled over the dark upper paths toward the red metal door of the laboratory stronghold. The four other couples raced in and the heavy door closed.

“That's no Earth ship!” someone gasped.

It was well known that the earth hadn't got far in its attempts to build space ships. The robot ship, built in this very laboratory, was far superior to any Earth-made product.

But this big silvery newcomer was the grandest thing Allison or any of the others had ever seen. And the most terrible. Its huge spotlight roved over the cavern walls curiously. The ten onlookers shrank back from the laboratory window, even though they were well concealed by a camouflage of filigreed rock and many yards of distance.

“I don't like the look of that gun,” said Smitt.

The silvery space ship came to a stop, then began slowly turning around in its tracks.

“Whether it's friend or foe,” said Allison, his face tensed for decision, “we're ten against the universe now. These caverns are ours to protect. We've no defenses but our wits and a few guns.”

“Four,” said Smitt. “Only four guns.”

“One apiece for each of you men,” Allison directed.

He hastily outlined a plan. The men would take positions along the upper cliff paths near the ceilings and listen closely. If the newcomers were friendly, Allison would give them a cordial welcome. If they were hostile, he would stage a bluff.

“But if worst comes to worst, fire your guns as if there were hundreds of you, not just four.”

June and the other girls had already snapped off the lights through the laboratory corridors, for a glimpse of these immense metal works would be certain temptation to any invader.

“And we’ll lock all the rooms,” June volunteered, “and hide the blueprints—”

“And hide yourselves,” Allison commanded. “If they’re looking for treasures and get a glimpse of *you*—”

He broke off quickly, kissed June intensely—a kiss that would be long remembered—and with a hastily uttered, “Weddings later!” he went forth.

The ship’s airlocks had not yet opened. Oxygen-masked figures looked out curiously from the portholes, doubtlessly wondering whether human life would be found here.

Slipping through the deep shadows, Allison stationed his four men along the cliff paths, then scampered down into a chasm that opened upon the space ship runway. With a purposeful air he walked into view over the red metal footbridge. In his hand he swung a long black metal ax casually.

Halfway across the bridge he stopped.

S-20!

Allison’s eyes narrowed. The ship’s nose was pointed back toward the takeoff channel through which it had descended. This couldn’t be an Earth ship. The earth had built nothing but experimental ships which were little better than death traps. And yet the name that adorned that nose was composed of an English letter and an Arabic numeral!

A man emerged from the airlocks, took a few steps toward Allison, stopped abruptly, removed his oxygen helmet, and spoke—in *English!*

“What’s going on down here?” the stranger drawled.

“So you’re from the earth too,” said Allison in a cordial tone.

“Don’t insult me,” the man answered with a touch of cynicism.

HE opened his oxygen suit down from the throat and fished a cigarette from an inside pocket. The cigarette was slender and orange-colored, and when he tapped it against his hand it lit.

“I assume you’ve been around some,” said Allison, noting the man’s easy adjustment to the light gravity of Mercury. “What’s your purpose here?”

“You might call it a good-will tour,” the stranger answered with a slight twist of his lips.

He didn’t offer Allison a cigarette, but brushed past as if to ignore him. He glanced back as if noticing for the first time that the garments Allison wore were of fine metal mesh. Then he strode over toward the red footbridge, eying the rows of torchlights that trailed along the pathways into distant chasms.

He spent several minutes gazing through field glasses. No other people were to be seen. Again he turned his attention to things near at hand. He studied the well-worn paths and scarred walls. He rubbed his

stubby hand over the silky red metal of the bridge. He looked at the scraps of metal on the ground, the black ax in Allison's hands, noted Allison's calm patient gaze.

"You must be lost," said the man, planting his stubby greenish hands on his hips. "Any more down here like you?"

"A few million," said Allison, allowing himself a healthy exaggeration as a precautionary measure. The stranger's manner hardly inspired trust.

"What are you? Traffic cop or somethin'?"

"If it's a good-will tour, I'm the reception committee," said Allison. "Ever hear of an old Earth custom of shaking hands?"

"Earth customs is *out*" said the man, walking back toward his ship. His speech was thick, reminding Allison of tough-guy talk. The man glanced back.

"*How* many million did you say?"

"Several."

During the next few minutes seventy or eighty uniformed men emerged from the ship. They milled around, unencumbered by space suits or helmets, breathing and stretching. An officer called them to order, and the scout with whom Allison had exchanged words mumbled something to them.

Then a third of the men got back into the ship, the rest followed close on the heels of the six officers who strode toward the footbridge.

"Stop!" Allison shouted. "You can't pass this bridge without a permit!"

They came on. They fell into military step and their thudding black boots set up a rhythmic echo. Their uniforms, now that their brown space suits had been removed, were a flashy silver with orange sashes and turban-shaped orange headdress. Modern pirates, thought Allison. Sashes, hats and pistol holsters bore the letter "S".

"Stop! I'll brain the first man who crosses this bridge!"

Allison shouted his threat at the top of his voice. He drew back to the farther end of the footbridge, swung his ax up for action and waited. The officers drew pistols and came on.

But the first boot that touched the bridge brought a hailstorm. *Zing-zing-zing!* Bullets clanged across the center of the span. Automatic guns chattered from somewhere in the upper shadows. The officers leaped back in surprise, and Allison silently prayed that Smitt and the other three men could keep up the illusion of a barrage, if necessary.

"Hold it!" the tall leader shouted, his hands jerking upward. "What the hell is this?"

THE fifty orange and silver uniforms shrank back into a disorganized swarm. The low rumble of the defenders' unseen guns echoed away.

The officers went into a huddle with the scout and there was some rapid, quarrelsome talk. What about this self-confident fellow—was he really from Earth? What if he weren't crack-brained? Maybe there *were* a few millions of people down here. And maybe black axes weren't their only weapons. They had guns at least. Maybe they had explosives planted under this space ship landing... *S-s-ssh!*

The swarm crowded back toward the ship and the conference went on for several minutes. Allison could hear little of what was said. The name “Sasho” recurred frequently throughout the conversation. Frequently the visitors’ eyes roved speculatively toward Allison and toward the endless shadows that might conceal gunmen.

Gradually their attention shifted to some objects the officers had picked up off the ground. They crowded over the objects, pounded them together, scratched them with knives, scorched them with flame pistols. Allison saw that the objects were scraps of metal—specimens of red and black.

The timely gunfire and the fine metals must have made an impression. The leader of the group, a tall, suave-looking fellow, now came toward Allison with a great show of respect.

“We beg your pardon if we seemed—er—hasty.” His manner was in extreme contrast to that of the first spokesman. “We’re a good-will party from Venus.”

Allison responded cautiously. The change of demeanor made him more suspicious than ever. He held fast to his bluff.

“This bridge is heavily guarded,” said Allison. “I’ve had orders from the dictator to let no one through.”

“Dictator, eh? What is he? An Earthman or something else?”

“He’s like me,” Allison answered noncommittally.

“Whatever he is, he’s the man I want to see. Where can I find him?”

“You can’t. Martial law is on,” Allison declared.

“Hell!” The leader’s polite manners were already wearing thin. “How can I get a message through to him?” he snapped.

“I’m his official spokesman. I’ll handle your business,” Allison purred.

“My business is diplomatic—and *secret*!”

“I’m a diplomatic spokesman,” Allison lied, “authorized to handle secret business. That’s what I’m here for.”

“Have you got any documents to prove that?”

In answer Allison jerked his thumb into the air and a volley of bullets clattered against the nearby wall.

The leader shuffled nervously. “See here, I’ve come to get some promises from your big shot, whoever he is—”

“He makes no promises,” Allison interrupted bluntly.

“Suppose the earth was about to be pounced on by some other planet. Which way would your dictator and his millions take a notion to jump? For or against?” the tall leader demanded.

“Neither,” said Allison staunchly. “We tend to our own business.”

The leader was pleased with the answer. He glanced at his group. Allison had the uncomfortable feeling that those restless uniforms were gradually gathering closer to him.

The leader engaged him with more questions.

“You know all about this place, do you? How many people there are? How many men under arms? What kind of weapons? What the people do for a living? What the birth rate is? How the government operates?”

ALLISON nodded. Naturally he knew the answers.

The leader held up a scrap of metal.

“You know how this stuff is made?”

“It’s rather complicated—”

“But *you know?*”

“What do you think?”

All at once it happened—so swiftly that the guns up in the shadows couldn’t prevent it. The uniformed men flooded in on Allison and swept him across to their space ship. They forced him into the airlocks, and a moment later the big silvery invader went into action.

CHAPTER II

Double Trouble

JUNE O’NEIL couldn’t believe it. Watching from the laboratory window she saw it begin.

Dread filled her heart. Across the open space toward the runway she ran, crying to Allison. She fell. She lay face down, her head half lifted. The torchlights before her were only dull blurs. The reality of the passing scene burned into her horrified mind as if it were being stamped with hot brands.

They had Lester Allison! The guns from the shadows didn’t stop them. They carried him away at all costs. Bullets cut into the edge of the retreating invaders and men fell. But the plan went through. They had him!

Bullets blasted harmlessly against one side of the ship while it maneuvered about to facilitate a safe pick-up of the fallen bodies. The job was done, and slowly the silvery monster crept back toward the runway.

Now a familiar roar sounded. It was the empty robot ship. June came up on her fingers tensely. The robot ship was returning, after having taken the kidnapped slaves back to earth and freedom.

Down the runway it rolled, headed squarely for the big silver-nosed stranger. On it coasted—within thirty yards—

BLAM! Boom-brroommmm!

The big gun on the nose of the fighting ship blazed forth. The shell caught the black robot ship to one side of center. The black hull leaped.

It bounded from its course and rolled like a log into the precipitous ravine beneath the red bridge.

Out of the silvery monster rocket motors flashed fire. The big fighting ship shot up through the runway out of sight. Moments later its roar died away.

Allison's four aids, who had scurried down from the cliff paths, their automatic guns in full action, now trudged back from the mouth of the runway. Futile gesture—to pump bullets at a departing space boat! They were shocked past reason—shocked at their own helplessness. The silvery ship was gone!

They stopped and looked about. Nothing remained of the visit but some bits of bright uniform and a few pools of dark blood. And a few yards beyond—June O'Neil lying face down, her head in her arms. And the other girls back of her, white and trembling.

June hardly knew when the girls picked her up and helped her to a bed. The hours that followed were next to unendurable for everyone.

Nobody spoke of the weddings. There was no talk of the new civilization that had aroused so much enthusiasm a few hours before. Without Lester Allison, the nine of them were spokes of a wheel without a hub—or planets without a sun.

In time the men went to work on the returned robot ship. The heavy hull was wedged fast in the ravine. It was a small job, however, to turn out a power derrick from the metal works to lift it. A gleam of hope came up with the salvaged space vessel.

“Once we get this thing repaired,” said Smitt, “we'll hike out after Allison and bring him back.”

“Some capital city on Venus—that's where they took him,” said Laughlin, one of the best scrappers in the bunch. His sharp ears had caught everything.

The robot ship groaned and came out of its trap, and the men engineered it into the fine laboratory Jason Kilhide had unwillingly left them and converted the big shop into a space ship hospital.

“Tell June not to grieve any more,” Smitt kept saying to Mary, even managing to grin a little. We'll have him back before many days.”

BUT Mary knew that June O'Neil's shock was too deep to be relieved by any spurious hopes.

The robot ship was badly damaged. The hull had suffered little, for Mercury metals were tough. But the instruments had been crippled. Intricate robot controls, governed by keys set in the laboratory, were more than the men could understand. The girls searched through the laboratory files, high and low, for explanatory diagrams, but without success.

The men experimented until they went gray with exhaustion. The sharp-faced, boyish Laughlin penetrated the mysteries farther than anyone. But he saw that it would take months for even him to conquer the problem.

At last they were forced to accept the bitter fact. The robot ship was dead. The four men and five women were here for better or for worse. And their guiding spirit, Lester Allison, was gone—to an unknown destination.

ABOARD THE S-20, Allison shot through the starry blackness toward Venus.

If rocket motors could be stopped by a man's inward rebellion, the S-20 would have gone dead before it budged from the Red Suburb of Mercury. But Allison's anguish was a powerless thing. He was the victim of something hostile and vicious. It was up to him to face reality.

Why had they taken him prisoner? He didn't know.

Not until after the hubbub over the fifteen dead or wounded men had calmed down did the Venusians

pay much attention to him. They had him in their toils, and that seemed to be as much as they cared about for the present.

Left to his own devices, Allison made himself comfortable on a bench in the fore end of the ship. He pretended to be absorbed in the heavens. Actually he kept his eyes on the pilots, studied their dials, memorized their manipulations.

A transparent partition separated Allison from the men at the controls, but once the door was left open, and he could hear them discussing whether they should swing around past the earth. The officers pressed the suggestion upon them. They had plenty of time, since their Mercury job had been dispensed with so swiftly.

So the S-20 swung past the earth.

The very sight of Allison's home planet uncorked a great deal of talk that might be called sentimental. The sentiment was—pure hatred. Hatred of the earth seemed to be bred into these men. And yet Allison couldn't get over the notion that they were Earth men.

Their skin, he noticed, carried a grayish pigment—almost green; but this could have been a peculiarity induced by the climatic conditions of Venus, perhaps. Still, there were other physical oddities: the noses were inclined to be flat, and the hands short and stubby. But the talk was definitely right out of America—in fact, it might have been borrowed wholesale from a den of American gangsters. To hear them cursing the earth in the most colorful of Earth slang was incongruous enough. But when they began recounting some of their experiences *on Earth*, it was more than Allison could fathom for the moment.

HE gathered that each of these men had made a trip to the earth at some time or other, although, the earth had been innocent of the fact that their ships had landed. Each man had gone there to commit murders or other crimes as a part of their initiation into the service of what they described as the "Sasho Empire." They bragged of their crimes.

Allison wasn't sure what it was all about. His chief business was to observe how the pilot steered the ship.

Presently the big pearly white ball that was the earth inflated before them until it filled a fourth of the sky. The men busied themselves with telescopes trying to discern some sort of fresh scar. Allison gathered that they or their brothers under the Sasho banner had something to do with the formation of the scar they were looking for—a line of black on the North American continent.

There was much talk about Sasho's Empire, Sasho's other ships, Sasho's plan of destruction. But no scar was seen. Thick atmosphere and continents of clouds made it impossible to see anything. So the S-20 pulled away straight for Venus.

Now the officers began to stew about what they would report to Sasho.

They argued over what they had seen on Mercury, and when they boiled it down they hadn't seen anything. They had plenty of "evidence," they said, that a population of "several million Earth people"—American offshoots, apparently—lived there!

They began to make excuses to each other for not actually invading the place.

But the tall flat-nosed leader with the gold "S" medallion on his chest said what the hell, there wouldn't have been any point in sacrificing any more life. They had picked up an official spokesman who was A-1. Did Sasho expect them to capture the confounded dictator of the planet himself? They'd lost enough men

as it was.

Allison chuckled to himself at this point. They'd swallowed his "dictator" yarn, hook, line and sinker!

The officers argued some more, and ate, and smoked orange-colored cigarettes—and agreed that they'd better cook up a story that would sound good to Sasho, and do it right now!

Thereupon Yawman, the tall leader, called Lester Allison to the conference table and the other officers gathered around. There were microphones to pick up all the talk, and amplifiers, so that everyone aboard would know what was decided on.

Yawman paced about, slapping his orange sash against his knee, and doped out a story. They had got into the underground world at Mercury, he said, and had had to march two hundred miles hoping to get in touch with the dictator—only to find him away, gone to suppress some "rebellions!" But they *did* communicate with him and he gave them the Honorable Allison as his spokesman!

"That means we're banking on you, Honorable Allie," Yawman said with a slight taunt. "If you like to live, play the game. If you make Sasho any false promises and your dictator don't back you up, it's your neck, not ours—see?"

"I'll make no promises that my government won't back to the limit," Allison answered.

He wondered how far he would have to go with his fabricated "dictator" and the non-existent "millions of people." Certainly he had no intentions of revealing that there were only nine persons standing guard over the world's finest metal mills!

"Then we're all set," Yawman said.

The tall Venusian went over the high points of the story again, to be sure no one would get crossed up. He added that on the way back on their "two hundred mile march," they had bumped into a "thousand rebels" and fought their way through, and *that* accounted for their dead and wounded!

SOMEONE ventured to doubt that they would have stopped to pick up their dead under such fierce gunfire.

Yawman considered and said, "Right! We wouldn't."

Thereupon the officers threw the dead soldiers overboard by way of the disposal chute—not neglecting first to loot them of everything but their uniforms.

One of the wounded men—and Allison recognized him to be the surly scout who had first approached him at the red bridge—got angry at these proceedings. He threatened to spill the whole truth to Sasho.

His threats were somewhat of a mistake. The officers exchanged glances and dragged the luckless scout to the disposal chute, and his pleadings became an hysterical wail, but down he went to join the other corpses. There were no further "disagreements."

VENUS WELLED up out of the velvet heavens, bluish and bright with fluffy atmospheric storms under the sunlight.

Allison followed the dials as if the landing were his own responsibility. Mentally he was fast becoming a pilot. He anticipated several of the pilot's moves. He watched the colored lines come and go through the transparent chart, clicking off the miles of distance. He felt the cushioning effect of the atmosphere.

The counter-motors gave him a sickening sensation of falling in the opposite direction. Allison wanted to faint but he held fast, snatching at the last detail of that most perilous process—landing.

“On your toes, Honorable Allie!” barked Yawman with a touch of scorn. And then the ship set down on the tarmac.

It came to a rolling stop on the broad landing field. Blue domes of a Venusian capital were on the horizon. Yawman clipped a pair of handcuffs to each of Allison’s strong wrists and Allison found himself linked to two husky silver and orange-clad soldiers.

Radio messages had been active during the last few minutes. Now Allison learned what was in the air: an inspection. Sasho had called for a space ship assembly for this very hour. It was already in progress. The crew of the S-20 would just have time to make it.

“He might have given us an hour’s notice,” one of the officers grumbled, hastily donning a fresh orange sash.

“He’s damned full of whims,” griped another.

“Probably getting in a sweat to move ahead with his plan of destruction,” Yawman commented. “Better go light on the crabbing. There’ll be some promotions in the air after we start scorching the earth. Sasho knows what he’s about.”

Allison marched out with the others dazedly. It was breath-taking to step on the soil of Venus. Under more favorable conditions, it might have been a glorious thrill. As it was, the very atmosphere seemed charged with ominous electricity.

The vast wide-open space port was studded with big ships—fighting ships, dozens of them. Some were larger than the S-20, with bulky barrel-like hulls that might have been made to carry gigantic oil tanks.

The sky fighters were lined up in a long row, their noses even and their guns aimed in the same directions. Standing in their shadows were the uniformed crews, lined up in hard-boiled ranks that were almost defiant with stiffness.

YAWMAN barked rapid orders to get his men arranged in time. The soldiers on either side of Allison kept their hands back so that the handcuffs were out of sight.

“Silence!” Yawman snapped, and he fell in at the end of the line. The big military men of the Sasho Empire came along at a brisk pace.

Allison knew the Emperor Sasho at first glance. He was half a step ahead of the others—the big man with the hunched-down head and the huge chin, the heavy shoulders that squared out from above his ears. Bedecked in a distinctive uniform with sashes and medals and jewels, he was a blaze of color.

An ancient pharaoh, thought Allison, might have traded his second best crown for that flashy outfit. A pirate would have certainly cut throats for it.

Strange to say, Sasho carried no weapon but a small yellow quirt. This he wielded with such dexterity of his wrist that his shoulders scarcely moved.

Allison observed several samples of this deft whipping skill as the inspection party came down the line. One soldier had too much twist in his sash, and the Emperor lashed him across the fingers with a sharp reminder.

A member of the S-20 crew tried to make a last-minute adjustment of his own sash. A package of candy fell out. Sasho strode up in time to see it. His wrist flicked and the whip caught the luckless soldier lashingly across the face. The mark filled with blood, and Sasho gave a low cruel laugh. His voice was like the grating of rusty chains.

In front of Allison, Sasho paused, glaring at the odd red and white-mesh uniform. The hulking Emperor's chin jutted upward, his black mustache drew down, his eyes gathered into slits.

"What's this?" Sasho growled in his rusty-chain voice.

Allison's heart pounded. Sasho's guttural breathing was hot on his face.

Yawman spoke up. "Your majesty, that's our ambassador from Mercury."

Sasho gave an approving grunt. "Keep him on tap. I'll get around to him later. Maybe tomorrow, maybe in a couple weeks."

The military party passed on. Allison wondered if they had noticed the handcuffs. Perhaps they were used to receiving their ambassadors in handcuffs.

CHAPTER III

The Cruel Napoleon

EMPEROR SASHO took his place upon his throne. It was high noon, as time on Venus went. He had just finished a hearty breakfast. He tapped an orange-colored cigarette, it lit, he placed it between his teeth.

Yellow teeth, they were, with twisting lips that tightened over them. He glanced at his handsome self in the panel mirrors, gave a self-satisfied grunt. That damned little wench with the stubborn chin and the stingy lips! She'd better keep her promise and come in today or he'd knock her ears down.

Involuntarily his hand fell on the long black bull whip and he lashed it out toward a mirror. He blew cigarette smoke out of his mouth, dropped the whip, pressed a button.

At his touch Sasho's business day officially began. The circular walls that formed his small private throne room *lifted*—panel mirrors and all—and folded into the lofty ceiling. This first daily shift of scenes was accompanied by buzzers and bells throughout the capital building. The Emperor Sasho was on his throne!

The throne, a sumptuous composite of steps, rostrum, desk, seat and Emperor, was now in full view before the oval-shaped room. The people came to their feet and stood at attention until Sasho cracked the long black bull whip. They re-seated themselves at the rows of desks, and the oval room resumed the hum of an immense business office.

The attendants and secretaries went on with their routine business. Here and there among them were new faces—persons who had come to the seat of government with their special problems, or who had been brought here because they had *become* problems!

Sasho sat smoking cynically. He liked this time of day. He liked to sit before the hall full of people, ready to whip out a final decision whenever his subordinates got into a deadlock. This was power!

Moreover, it was luxury. Sasho liked this time of day, because the shafts of sunlight shone down on his jewel-studded fingers and sent blades of colored light playing over his black marble table.

His eyes roved over the room. Those five old green-faced buzzards over there were rebels out of the

Jagged Mountains, he'd bet. The Cutthroat Congress would make short work of them. And there, in the red and white, was that captive from Mercury.

If *he* was as easy as the three from the nations of Mars, there'd be no trouble on that score. One of the Mars ambassadors had committed suicide on the flame-cloud excursion to the earth. And what a juicy excursion that had been! Sasho smiled reminiscently to himself.

But wait till the real business began! Damned if he wouldn't fry the old earth down to a cinder! And to think—if he hadn't pulled out when he did, he'd have spent these last four decades in a cell! Four decades!

"Your majesty—"

"Well?"

"The young rebel I spoke to you about yesterday—"

"Send him up."

The attendant went back to a desk and directed a well set up boy to the throne. The boy failed to bow when he crossed onto the orange and silver rug. Sasho's black bull whip lashed out. The boy emitted a scream of pain. Attendants throughout the room laughed raucously.

THE attendant and the hurt, frightened boy mounted the steps. Sasho touched a button and the circular wall descended. The three of them were alone in the little throne room.

"So you're a rebel," Sasho growled. "You think because your father was a Venusian—a damned anti-Sasho Venusian!—that you won't have to bend to the Sasho Empire."

The boy was too scared to answer.

"You know what happens to boys that won't bend? We bend them!"

Sasho enjoyed the effect of his own words.

"If we can't bend their wills, we bend their bones, see? Listen! I'll let you hear how it feels to have your bones bent."

Sasho snapped a switch and an amplifier brought in a pandemonium of such terrible crying and screeching that the boy shrank back, tripped on the steps and lay trembling in a heap.

"Get up!" Sasho roared.

The attendant helped the boy back to the rostrum.

"How old are you?"

"He's ten," said the attendant when it became evident the boy couldn't answer.

"Ten!" Sasho muttered.

A twinge of something caught him. He cracked the bull whip at the attendant.

"Damn you! What do you mean by bringing ten-year-olds in here? Get the hell out!"

The walls shot up and telescoped into the ceiling. The boy and the attendant fled out into the open oval

room, but the whip caught the attendant with four deep lashes before he scurried out of range.

A secretary of diplomatic affairs bowed onto the rug and mounted the rostrum.

“Your Majesty, the ambassador from Mercury awaits your pleasure.”

“Ten!” Sasho muttered to himself.

He hated to admit it to himself, but kids were the only human beings he had the slightest sympathy for. His eyes pushed into slits. He had been ten when he fought his way out of prison and onto the Death Ship.

Of the seven hundred criminals who had fled the earth, he’d been the youngest—and the toughest! They had told him he was the toughest, and by Jupiter he had made their boast good. And now look where he was!

“Your Majesty, the ambassador from Mercury—”

Sasho didn’t hear, for that hard-boiled, beautiful girl with the stubborn chin was coming over.

“The papers you ordered from the treasury office,” the girl said, mounting the steps saucily.

“Your Majesty, the ambassador from—”

“*Can’t you see I’m busy!*” Sasho barked, and the secretary of diplomatic affairs took his cue and scurried back.

“One moment on those treasury papers,” Sasho growled.

The girl stopped with a faintly mocking smile. Sasho touched a button and the circular wall descended. He and the girl were alone.

“You couldn’t be angry again this morning?” the girl said sarcastically, sitting down at the side of the desk.

“Those damned attendants!” Sasho lit a cigarette and tossed the pack across the desk top. “Bothering me with ten-year-old boys!”

“Absurd,” said the girl, adding cunningly that the most important man on Venus should be occupied with more important things.

“On *Venus*, did you say?”

Privately Sasho thought of himself as the most important man in the entire solar system. His conquests of the past decades had cut a wide swath in interplanetary history. And this was only the beginning.

“You’re the most important, the most powerful, and by far the most picturesque emperor that ever lived.”

THE girl blew smoke into Sasho’s face. He glanced at himself in a panel mirror, drew his chin up, pulled his mustaches down. He caught the girl by the wrist and forced a kiss upon her. She returned to her cigarette with many a twinge of romantic flutterings.

“Of course, ten-year-olds *can* be important,” she said tactfully. “*You* were important at ten, from what I’ve heard.”

Sasho felt a familiar glow in his head and chest.

“I beat the cockeyed earth out of a rap, all right! There was seven hundred of us. We weren’t good enough for the earth!”

Sasho’s voice grew bitter as he fell into a well-worn train of thought. That dirty low-down Earth! Jails for folks that grew up on the wrong side of the tracks! Laws for the rich folks to hide behind!

“We didn’t have any right to live. They didn’t want us in the way, so they locked us up. I was the only kid in the bunch, and I was plenty tough.

“And then this crackpot of a scientist finished up his junk-heap that everybody called the Death Ship, and he needed a crew to ride in it and called for volunteers. Hell, what was a Death Ship to us one way or the other, with some of us up for life, and some for death!

“All the bunk they whipped up about sacrificing our lives for science didn’t fool us one bit. None of the officials thought that Death Ship would get anywhere. All they wanted was to save feeding us. Save the trouble of strapping us to the hot plate and jamming on the juice.

“So off we went, and what a laugh! What a helluva laugh! We set down on this little planet like we was an egg! An egg!”

The comparison pleased Sasho. He paced around his throne room, rattling with boastful chuckles.

“That Death Ship was an egg, all right. But the damned scientist that laid it never got to cackle. The earth never found out. We’ve slipped back there enough times—and they *still* don’t know. But *we’ve* done plenty of cackling, by Jupiter!”

Sasho poured himself a drink and grew expansive with the memory of conquests. He’d fought his full share of every battle, even though he was just a kid. And the way they’d slaughtered Venusian men and converted Venusian women was a lesson in history all by itself.

The hard-boiled girl shuffled restlessly. Sasho raved on.

“It’s amazing how far a neat bit of slaughtering will go.” He laughed coarsely. “A neat bit of well-placed devastation—that’s how we did it.”

The seven hundred criminal exiles had played in luck. The native Venusians had been softened by civilization, and their best men had become tangled in the pudding of soft politics, and their best women had grown bored with the ease of living.

“They had plenty of science too,” Sasho gloated, “but they’d forgot all they ever knew about flame guns and explosives. You can figure for yourself what a darb of a setup that was for us seven hundred professional killers!”

The girl twisted her lips sarcastically.

“Do you always cackle in the same key?”

Sasho shot an angry glance over his thick shoulders.

“Go ahead. Don’t mind me,” said the girl, reaching for another cigarette.

“So you want me to shut up, do you?” The chains in Sasho’s voice clanged harshly.

“I didn’t mean anything. Go on and finish—” she protested.

“So you’re getting tired of me!” Sasho snarled.

“No. No, I didn’t say that!” the girl wailed.

“GET out, you stubborn little devil! I’ve had enough of you! Get out, damn you! Tell those space ship rats you’re fed up on the Venus luxuries. Tell them you want to go back to Earth—where you can walk the streets and starve!”

“No! No, your Majesty! I didn’t mean—”

Sasho caught her at the throat and blasted his words at her face. He’d show her! He’d send her back to the earth and she’d get hers right along with the rest of the Earth scum! He screamed,

“We’ll come down in our gas flamers and scorch your insides out and singe your hair off, and you’ll die with your tongue hanging out, and you’ll be saying to yourself this is fine, this is just dandy! You’ll say old Sasho treated you too decent up on Venus and you couldn’t take it. So you got sassy and got sent back to the earth with the dregs of the universe, where you belonged!”

“Forgive me, Sasho! Forgive me, honest—” the girl cried in utter panic.

“Shut up and get out!” Sasho roared.

The circular wall flew upward. The amazed throngs in the big oval room saw the girl sprawl down the rostrum steps. The irate Emperor caught up his whip and cut a stripe across her naked back as she fled across the silver and orange carpet.

Needless to say, this action was greeted with sadistic laughter throughout the oval room. The attendants and officials had long since learned that the Emperor’s temper tantrums must be interpreted as sportive jokes on whoever happened to be the goat. Laughter proved that they were on the side of the Emperor. And it was the best tonic for his ego.

“Your Majesty, the ambassador from Mercury who arrived yesterday—”

“Give me a rest!” Sasho bawled harshly, still looking after the girl.

“What’s Mercury to me?”

“But you spoke of making arrangements before launching the big plan—”

“Hell, the plan don’t launch till September, Earth time. That’s most of four months off. Keep him on tap. I’ll get around to him.”

CHAPTER IV

“Peace”—Dictator Style

DAY after day Lester Allison was conducted from his lodging place to the capital. Day after day he boiled with inward resentment. He felt like taking a knockout punch at everyone who came near him.

Everyone hated the earth. The hatred was almost a religion with these people. It was the very backbone of the gigantic destructive plan everyone was glowing about.

Lester Allison didn’t hate the earth. He began to realize for the first time what it meant to him. He thought

constantly of June and the other eight comrades he had left in Mercury. They had thrilled to the thought of starting a fresh new civilization. But what a sick bunch they would be if they knew the awful fate that was being planned for the earth.

“Destruction is the Way to Power.” Allison read the words daily on the capital arch. That, indeed, was the core of the Sasho philosophy. Four months of waiting and observing were convincing proof.

Little by little Allison began to grasp what had happened here. From what he had picked up on the S-20, at the lodging house, and from every contact in the capital as he was passed along from one official to another, he began to piece together the story.

It was the story of brutal conquest by a few men—criminals who had arrived here from the earth forty years ago and set about to kill everybody they couldn’t convert to their cause. And their cause was the destruction of anything and everyone that stood between them and the wealth and power they coveted. Ultimately they would take their vengeance out on the entire planet.

Forty years of this had transformed the once-peaceful Venusians into a brutalized, degraded people. Originally this nucleus of American criminals had established themselves as the Cutthroat Colony. But their young leader, who grew up from childhood in their ranks to become the personification of their evil doings, changed the name to the Sasho Empire and gave its seven hundred Cutthroats all the class and swagger of a rich pirate crew.

Allison was not long in learning to tell who were the native Venusians. They were the ones with the greenish-gray pigment, the stubbiest hands, the flattest noses. But there were many half-castes. Most of the capital crowd were these, as were the warriors he had seen aboard the S-20.

Allison was not surprised to learn that the seven hundred Cutthroats had had large families from Venusian wives. This had been an important strategy in the expansion of the colony. Now the conquered cities abounded with children and grandchildren traceable to Cutthroat paternity.

“The rebels against the Sasho Empire have been reduced to a negligible quantity,” the secretary of the diplomatic service explained to Allison as they waited for the interview with Sasho.

Most of the rebellious Venusians had fled to the Jagged Mountains, and were harmless; but Sasho still enjoyed searching them out and torturing them, which of course was good fun for everybody, the secretary said.

Allison nodded. He was beginning to understand. Cruelty and brutality and killing were things to be enjoyed, according to the Sasho way of thinking.

“But what happened to the seven hundred Cutthroats?” Allison asked.

The secretary explained that many had died in the past forty years, but those who were left were busy enjoying the fruits of their conquests.

“They’re all right here in the capital building. Want to see them?”

THE secretary led the way to a large hall in the basement floor. The door was marked:

CUTTHROAT CONGRESS ALWAYS IN SESSION ENTER AT YOUR RISK

It was a foul-smelling place and Allison did not stay long. But he caught a glimpse of the dozens of old men, many of them sumptuously dressed, busy at poker games and bars and shooting contests or other less palatable diversions.

“They’re not the sure shots they used to be,” said the secretary, “but they still have their fun. Sasho sends them all the green-faced rebels that are caught in the Jagged Mountains. They take care of them, gangster-style, and the treasury furnishes them all the ammunition they need.”

At that moment the loudspeaker boomed a call for the ambassador from Mercury to report at the throne. The secretary ushered Allison up to the oval room in a hurry.

“Better give the Emperor what he wants,” were the secretary’s parting words of advice.

Allison marched across the room to the throne. In the excitement of the moment, he forgot to stop and bow. The whip cracked him on the bare arm and blood gathered on his triceps. The mocking laughter died away and he heard Sasho’s grating voice.

“Come up, my friend. Don’t mind my little joke. I like to whip first and explain afterwards.”

Allison mounted the steps slowly, meeting Sasho’s hard narrow eyes. He mounted with fists and teeth clenched. A square slap at that ugly face would be an appropriate little joke of his own.

Allison restrained himself. Those flashes of light from Sasho’s jeweled fingers somehow reminded him that here was *power*—power built out of the glory of murder and robbery—power that could reach out to the earth or to Mercury—

“All right, open up!” Sasho growled, and the chains in his voice were tight. “I’m in no mood to ask questions. Sit down there and cut loose. I want to know what you’ve got down in Mercury. And don’t skip nothing!”

“We’ve got plenty!” Allison retorted.

He took the seat at the side of the black marble desk and began. Disregarding the growing jealousy in Sasho’s eyes, he unleashed his imagination. He built up a dictator who was a man of steel. He constructed a kingdom in the bowels of Mercury that would have turned any military power in the universe green with envy.

Sasho’s breathing became heavy. He glanced around the oval room to the desks, from which important staff members were watching this conference with keen interest. Sasho touched a button and the circular walls descended. He fingered an orange cigarette, without lighting it, crumpled it in his hand.

“Your dictator will be branching out to other planets,” he prodded.

Allison shook his head. “Positively not. He’s a radical on that point. No outside aggressions. An unbreakable defense against invaders.”

Sasho grew easier. “Him and I should team up.”

Allison had no ready reply. His bluff had carried him into deep water and he had a feeling there were shoals ahead.

“Well, what about it?” Sasho snarled. “Are you big enough to fix it?”

“What’s the point in teaming up?” said Allison. “The Sasho Empire seems to be doing all right as it is.”

SASHO got up and walked twice around his desk, picked up a telephone and barked an order. A moment later an attendant entered the throne room, deposited a tray, and went out. On the tray were scraps of red and black metals that had been brought back from Mercury.

“I hear this stuff is cheap where you come from.”

Allison didn't answer.

“We've had our scientists chawing on it since the hour you got here. They say the Sasho Empire ought to have some metal with the stand-up that this has got. We could use it in our business. We could use oodles and gobs and shiploads of it.”

Sweat was breaking out on Allison's face. “The raw ore is pretty heavy stuff to cart around in space ships.”

“That's what I figured,” Sasho agreed. “All right. We could come down to Mercury and set up a little ore mill or two. Just give us an out-of-the-way corner. Your dictator couldn't kick on that. Him and I would be pals.”

Allison was on thin ice. “What does Mercury get out of it?”

“Protection.”

“We don't need it. As I explained, we're well fixed to take care of ourselves,” Allison bluffed.

“*Maybe.*” Sasho's eyes took on a happy murderous gleam. He lit a cigarette. “Did you ever stop to figure out this solar system is getting closer together, with space ships improving right along? The universe is getting closer together, and it's getting more dangerous. *Ain't it?*”

“Perhaps,” Allison admitted.

“And it's gonna get a helluva lot more dangerous.” Sasho sat down to look at Allison squarely. “See here, I want to know something about you and I want it straight. Are you in a position to bind your dictator to an agreement?”

Allison pressed at the back of his chair to keep from squirming. “As I told you,” he said coolly, “my dictator doesn't like making outside agreements.”

“What he likes ain't the point!” Sasho growled. “You're his ambassador. What I want to know is whether you've got the power to bind him to an alliance. Have you or ain't you?”

Allison saw that he was between the devil and the deep sea, with the devil crowding him dangerously. If he should say that he had the authority to make alliances, Sasho would hound him—perhaps torture him—into making one.

But if Allison should say that he didn't have the authority, Sasho would send another expedition straight back to Mercury to get someone who could make commitments. And then the whole bluff would burst and Mercury would be lost. And Allison's comrades and his dream of life and June—

“I have the authority,” said Allison in measured words, “to make—or *refuse to make*—alliances.”

“All right. We'll draw up an alliance,” Sash snapped.

“The hell we will!” Allison exploded, coming to his feet.

Impulsively he seized a chunk of red metal off the tray, swung it in his fist defiantly.

“I was kidnaped and thrown aboard your space ship, I was brought to Venus in handcuffs, I was whipped as I came up to this throne. Do you think I'm in any mood to grant favors?”

ALLISON slammed the metal down on the black marble table savagely and the chips of marble flew.

Sasho's hand fell on his black bull whip. He sized Allison up and down. He sneered and gave a low inarticulate growl. He released the whip and touched a button.

The walls rose, the big oval room again surrounded them. With a toss of his head Sasho signalled to someone among the throng.

A moment later six brightly uniformed, hard-faced officers bowed over the rug, marched up to the throne, stood at stiff attention.

“Our ambassador from Mercury is not in the mood to make agreements today,” said Sasho, oiling the rusty chains of his voice with mockery. “Take him with you on your flame-cloud jaunt—and see that he comes back all cheered up.”

Almost before Allison had time to catch his breath, he found himself aboard the S-37, plunging through the skies straight for the earth.

CHAPTER V

Ironic Doom

THE S-37 was well loaded with Sasho's men—six dashing officers, several venerable old Cutthroats, and a number of bright-eyed young novices at the arts of murder and destruction, being rewarded for their progress by this gala excursion.

The eyes of young and old alike drilled Allison with a hungry, murderous gleam. To them he was a prize cake that they were forbidden to slice.

And how they would have loved to slice him! But he had to be returned whole to Sasho.

At first Allison had only the vaguest conception of what might happen to him before his return. The talk was hazy, ominous. He was in for something juicy, they hinted. He'd be transformed, he'd be purged of his conceit, he'd come back a piece of putty in Sasho's hands. And he'd go back to his Mercurian dictator and the militant millions with a nice little heartrending story that would win them over to Sasho.

Look how the Mars ambassadors had softened up—two of them had come through beautifully. The third one had got a chill in his belly and gone suicide on them. But what the devil, two scared emissaries had been enough to pull the Mars rulers into line. Yes, you're damned right, old Sasho's got technique!

Allison got a clear notion of what was coming only when one of the officers produced some newspaper clippings.

The black headlines were all over the front page. Officers and passengers gathered around while one of their number read the story with ribald glee. The paper had been picked up in America immediately after the first gas-flamer excursion of four months ago.

Through the bombastic uproar of the listeners, Allison caught the gist of the story:

METEOROID BLAZES PATH OF DEATH!... Oct. 10 (Nationwide News).—Horrible death descended almost instantaneously upon hundred of thousands of persons today, when a swift visitor from the skies believed to be a gas-bearing meteoroid shot across three central states, accompanied by an explosion of unparalleled dimensions. Cities and rural districts through a one-hundred-mile strip are tonight a vast mass of flames. Upwards of a million people have been made homeless. Aid is being

rushed to uncounted numbers of injured, said to be in a state of living death as a result of burns and severe shock. The nation's entire Red Cross and Army emergency resources are on their way to relieve the vast suffering. Witnesses to the disaster vary in their accounts of the descent of the meteoroid. Some claim to have glimpsed a dark streak that raced across the sky from horizon to horizon. There is general agreement that a long bluish cloud boiled downward toward the earth's surface during the fifteen or twenty seconds before the terrific explosion burst.* Astronomers are digging through records of centuries past, trying in vain to find a parallel for this rare stellar phenomenon. The fires raging tonight can be seen from seven different states, glowing high into the heavens. Communication lines are practically nonexistent. A survey made by Nationwide News disclosed an unbelievable toll in human misery and farm and property damage, with bridges, state highways and telephone and telegraph lines literally wiped out. * *This explosive gas is undoubtedly a powerfully concentrated refinement of gaseous, volatile compounds such as have reportedly been used in World War II. When the Nazis took the Belgian Fort Eben Emael in May, 1940, it is said that they used a super-powerful flame-throwing device, shooting highly combustible liquids or gases, which disintegrated concrete and melted the heavy siege guns. At any rate, whatever method the Nazis employed, it seems certain that in future wars, gas will be used more to destroy enemy forts, gun emplacements and trenches than to burn out men's lungs, as in World War I. There is little doubt that chemical warfare has far from reached its zenith of destruction. Nowadays, an invading army proceeds so rapidly with mechanized strides that the use of such gases as phosgene or mustard, to blind, cripple and asphyxiate enemy troops, is not only time-destroying but unnecessary. But in the future, newer and far more deadlier gases will be found, which may even take the place of heavy armaments, at best expensive to manufacture and troublesome to service with gasoline and oil.—Ed.*

THE officer who had produced the newspaper clippings pasted them on the wall of the cabin, so that everyone could have the savage satisfaction that the black headlines afforded.

“ ‘Probable Act of God!’ ” the officer grinned, reading further. “What a wallop Sasho got out of that when I showed it to him.”

There was more uproarious laughter, and someone wondered what kind of gag the earth newspapers would think up after *this* visitation. And what would they say when *another* excursion the S-44—came within six hours after this one? And what would they say a few days later when Sasho turned loose his *whole fleet*?

“They’ll think the end of the world has come!” someone roared.

“Which it sure has, for them!” another agreed.

There was one female aboard the S-37, a fluffy-haired girl who once might have been attractive. Allison learned that she had angered the Emperor by a trifling remark. Now she was being sent back to the earth.

The girl went from corner to corner of the cabin in tears of rage, and the officers followed her about, making no end of sport at her expense. They made her believe they’d been ordered to kill her. She fought when anyone came near her, and cried and cursed—

Plop! An officer pasted a handful of tape over her mouth. *Zip!* Another officer roped her, and tied her hands and feet, and they tossed her onto a bench. She struggled helplessly.

There was more talk of how best to murder the girl, and more roughhouse and horseplay. They grabbed her up and tossed her back and forth like a basketball, and bounced her against the wall—and then told her to cool off and take it easy and stop her blubbering.

Suddenly the pilot's voice came through the speakers, reminding them that they were well into the earth's gravitational sphere. The horseplay stopped. The officers unbound the girl, made her get into a space suit and helmet and parachute harness.

"Sasho's orders," said an officer. "Sorry to say, we don't get to kill you."

The officer explained that the girl had plenty of oxygen for a long fall—and she'd have a long fall! When she descended deep enough into the earth's atmosphere, the space parachute would open automatically.

The girl's send-off was a final volley of ridicule. They hoped she landed in mid-ocean or in a desert or in the top of a tall tree. She fought to the last, still deceived into thinking that she would fall to her death. The officers knew better. She would land somewhere in mid-North America, as Sasho had commanded.

She fell through the lock-equipped disposal chute, and that was the last that Allison or any of the others ever saw of her.

The officers turned their talents now to Allison. They removed his handcuffs, asked him what he was sore about, threatened to beat him to death. He knew it was simply a threat; they knew he knew, and it angered them. They felt an urge toward a fist fight. They cleared the center of the room and forced him into a brawl.

The first two officers went sprawling. Allison's arms concealed a surprising wallop. He had grown up on a farm and had developed a lot of hard-hitting energy. But the remaining four officers pounced in on him, and soon he went down under a battery of clubbing.

"We're s'posed to cheer him up, boys!" they taunted, laying on with blows. "Cheer him up for Sasho! Come on, you lads!"

The younger generation of passengers piled in. Now and then one fell back, cooled by a near knockout. But Allison knew the best he could hope to do was to keep his face from being smashed to a pulp. He played defensive. Had he done more, his clubbers would have resorted to their weapons.

AGAIN the pilot's amplified voice interrupted the cruel roughhouse.

"We are approaching the earth. Time to get set for action!"

Order was restored on the spot. The officers straightened their uniforms, donned fresh orange sashes, manned their posts. The passengers crowded the rear windows. The big moment they had come to watch was drawing near. Everyone was tense. Eyes were alight with the glitter of cruelty.

Allison, again in handcuffs, smeared his bleeding face against his shoulder and tried to shake out of his grogginess. Things happened fast now. It was all he could do to catch the drift.

He heard the radio-telephone communication with the S-44, whose excursion would follow close on the heels of the S-37.

"Strike anywhere," the S-37 officials advised the other ship. "The American continent is big. Besides, we're six hours ahead of you. We'll be out of your way."

S-44 inquired where the S-37 would strike.

"We'll lay a strip along the Atlantic seaboard," the S-37 replied.

There was the daylight factor to be considered, and it was now morning along the Eastern coast. The

S-44, following through six hours later, could cut a swath through the interior.

“We’ll be a little slow getting back to Venus,” said the S-37, “because we’ve got the ambassador from Mercury aboard. But we’ll bring him to time, and then Sasho may as well give the whole fleet the go-ahead signal.”

If these trial flights were as successful as expected, there would be nothing to stand in the way of Sasho’s complete devastating revenge upon the earth—unless there should be dangerous planetary neighbors, such as the militant millions of Mercury, who couldn’t be brought into line. “But you know Sasho!” an officer chuckled grimly. “He never leaves anything to chance!”

The eager excited radio-telephone conversation ended abruptly. The time had come for action. A slight cushioning of the ship’s flight forewarned the entrance into the thin edges of the earth’s atmosphere.

Snap! Zmmmmmmmm!

Allison knew that one. It was the motors of the tempo-system that combatted friction heat as the ship plunged from the void into air.

Snap! The usual heavy roar of the rocket motors went silent. Allison wasn’t sure why, but for some reason the ship was to coast through a tangent to the earth’s surface with no rockets firing.

They plunged on purely from momentum. The curve of the earth flattened out into a horizon. Distant cities rolled into view.

Snap! That one had Allison guessing. The pilot’s hand drew back from the blue-knobbed lever, his eyes swinging to the mirror that looked through the rear of the ship. Every face, turned toward the rear of the ship, was tense with excitement.

Then Allison saw. Some unseen exhaust under the tail of the ship shot a stream of thin blue smoke—or was it gas?—down at the earth. Dangerous-looking stuff it was, almost transparent in the sunlight. It thickened as it sifted downward. The sight of it seemed to give everyone a thrill.

On and on it poured, flowing back in an endless stream, a billion times more luminous than the trail of a sky-writing airplane. It strung out into a hundred-mile rope of seething blue cloud, lost over the rear horizon.

NOW the S-37 skimmed close to the ground, coasting against the stubborn forces of gravity and air resistance. Those manufacturing towns passing beneath were scarcely a quarter of a mile down.

The ship’s momentum was almost spent. Allison flinched. At this rate they would crash into the approaching mountain range. Then—

Snap! Brrrowrmmmmmm!

The rocket motors zoomed, the very earth leaped back. Out of its downward trajectory the ship shot. Cities, rivers and mountain range blurred into the distance. But the long cloud of gas—

The blaze of the explosion filled the whole rear vista. The onlookers threw their hands in front of their eyes. The flare pierced Allison’s eyes like white-hot needles. It was as if the sun had splashed fire over the surface of the earth!

“Perfect!” an officer shouted.

Yes, the rocket fire had ignited the tail of the gas cloud! To Allison's horror, the explosion spread in a great fan-shaped inferno. The rocket ship itself was perfectly safe, of course, having leaped out of danger at the initial rocket explosion.

The pilot swerved the ship through a swift arc so that the passengers could look back and catch sight of the vast river of fire. It flooded over the horizon like a flying comet, eating the blue cloud as it went.

"Perfect! Perfect!" everyone shouted, and the ship was in an uproar of jubilation.

"How does the Honorable Allie like *that!*" the officers taunted.

As the ship circled back, the long line of black smoke and yellow blaze expanded into a grim picture. At a safe distance, the S-37 wove to and fro to review the extent of the artificial cataclysm. Sickening realization came upon Allison. Those heavier spots where smoke and blaze were the thickest were cities—homes and factories and automobiles and human beings, going up in flames!

"Another feather in Sasho's hat!" one of the youngsters cried. That was typical of the outlaws' hilarious spirit of achievement. With their inbred love of cruelty, the servants of Sasho boasted in glowing terms of wider applications of this method of attack. They visualized the glorious Sasho revenge that was near at hand. When Sasho loosed his whole fleet upon the earth in attacks like these, no known force could stop them.

Allison, listening to these hideous forecasts, knew that they were no exaggeration. The earth was helpless. Mars, according to what he had learned, had been talked into a defenseless position. And certainly Mercury, with a population of ten Earth folk, could offer no threat.

And yet it was the possibility of resistance from the imagined millions of Mercury that remained a thorn in Sasho's flesh.

The officers on the S-37 grew more confident every minute that they were gaining ground with Allison. The alliance was in the bag, they told each other. And in boastful tones within Allison's hearing, they considered what a simple matter it would be for their ships to spin down to Mercury's underground world, fill the caverns with explosive gas, and touch off a rocket. Very simple! One quick blast and the militant denizens of Mercury would cease to worry anybody!

THE alliance was in the bag, all right. But just to make sure, the Honorable Allie must see more.

Moreover, the servants of Sasho had well-whetted appetites to view their achievements in detail.

The space ship eased down toward a burning city. Thin streams of people who had miraculously escaped death from the initial explosions raced in all directions, frantic to save themselves or others from spreading flames and collapsing walls.

The pilot of the S-37 sought out a perfect landing place, hidden from the turmoil—a long valley-like rock quarry at the city's edge. It was cluttered with stones and hoists and narrow-gauge tracks, but it was satisfactorily secluded. Sasho's crusaders preferred not to be seen.

"Keep your eyes wide open, Honorable Allie!"

Allison didn't need the command. His sharp eyes missed nothing. He steeled himself to the prospect of going forth to view the horrible shambles.

"Leave the airlocks open as long as smoke doesn't blow this way," an officer barked to the three or four men who were to stand guard.

Already the oxygen pumps were at work to bring the supply back to capacity. Unmasked and unencumbered by space suit units, the party marched forth.

The roar and crackle of flames, the stench of burning buildings and bodies leaped out to meet them. The invaders picked their paths warily.

They were undaunted by the screaming and screeching. Rather they were elated over it. This excitement was the emotion they lived for, and they drank it in to the full.

“Look at those dead bodies, Allie!

Nicely blackened, don’t you think?”

Involuntarily Allison jerked back in revulsion. The two guards to whom he was handcuffed allowed him to stop. Here was what they wanted.

In front of Allison was a small boy, sobbing his heart out. He had just crept out from under his overturned tin wagon. Miraculously it had spared him from death.

The boy was crying for his mother. Obviously she was the woman lying in front of him, clutching the handle of the wagon. But he didn’t recognize her. And little wonder, for she was simply a mass of blackened, scorched flesh, her hair and eyebrows and clothes completely burned away.

The boy’s eyes turned to a scrawny dying little animal that had been a kitten. He looked at it in horrified bewilderment. Its fur was gone, it was mewling pitifully. He couldn’t understand what or why—

“Move back!” Allison’s guards jerked at his wrists. The party edged back to safety. A wall was about to give way—

“*But the boy!*” Allison cried, tears of rage in his eyes.

The Sasho party laughed like demons out of hell.

“The boy!” an officer jeered. “He’s an *Earth* boy, ain’t he?”

The burning wall bulged and crashed, the boy and his kitten were buried alive under the fiery heap.

FOR the next five hours and more the party plodded among the fast-growing ruins, feeding emotionally upon this holocaust, its horror forever graven upon Allison’s mind. Allison saw it all, but the picture that sank into his brain most deeply was the satanic gleam of the perpetrators’ greenish faces, lighted by the leaping mountains of red flame. Then the fates blew a mischievous breath that descended upon every member of the party. It happened as the group wended its way back toward the deserted quarry that held their space ship.

Across the sky it came. They did not hear it. Before the sound could reach them, the thing would strike death.

To their eyes, it was simply a slim black streak shooting in a horizontal line a half mile or so above their heads. In its wake was a widening tail of blue cloud that spread and boiled downward.

“The S-44! It was to follow us in six hours. God, we’ve stayed here too long!”

“Run for the ship!”

“We can’t make it!”

The swiftest runner in the world couldn't have escaped.

CHAPTER VI

Lonely Vigil

THE gloom that had descended into the rocky-red caverns of Mercury might have hung on endlessly, had it not been for June O'Neil's resilience. She came back at the tragic facts with almost superhuman courage.

They made her the leader. That was Smitt's and Mary's strategy. The responsibility was a stimulant, and June O'Neil assumed it with such a zeal that her eight followers would have been ashamed to admit their fears.

The first point upon which June insisted was that the postponed weddings must go through at once. No matter if it couldn't be a five-couple wedding. Her loss must not stand in the way of their personal happiness.

Not long after she had administered the marriage vows, June called the four young couples together.

"Our robot ship is dead," she said, her eyes turned toward the space ship runway. "But Lester isn't dead. I can't believe that they have killed him. They could have killed him here if they had wanted to."

All this had been talked over many times before. The conclusion had always been the same; Allison was a captive in some capital on Venus; but for what purpose, no one could say. Many hours equivalent to several Earth days had passed, but no hints of further attacks from the Venusian pirates—if pirates they were—had come.

June looked at her circle of comrades with steady eyes. "Can we build a ship that will get to Venus?"

The eyes turned toward the young boyish-faced Laughlin, who responded by drawing a bundle of diagrams from his pocket. The other men looked on proudly. Reams and reams of paper had been sketched upon during these recent days. June O'Neil's vision had been anticipated.

THEY ALL worked. The automatic Mercurian machines were cunning, the metals were marvelously responsive. Laughlin, in charge of the construction, was kept rushed to supply everyone with jobs they could do.

But Laughlin had a notion up his sleeve: It would be almost as easy to turn out every part in duplicate. Two space boats could be made almost as easily as one. The work went forward.

June stayed with the work almost beyond her strength. When it was time to rest and the others slept, she could not sleep. She would slip away from the laboratory living quarters, carrying her little three-stringed zither that Allison had once made for her, to play simple little tunes that brought her solace.

Always at such times she would watch the space ship runway, hoping—waiting—praying—

Out of the electrically lighted laboratories and into the torchlighted runways, two red metal hulls were rolled one day that looked like massive streamlined bullets.

One of the ships was done! It was ready for a tryout. The other was almost completed. Their makers breathed with pride.

Those reams of designs had done something startling. Not so large as the robot ship, much smaller than the silvery-nosed pirate ship from Venus, these two boats were built for speed and solidity.

Laughlin believed that they were unlike any models ever seen before. The fine metals in their solid noses, together with their high speed, should provide them with a punch and a resistance to bullets that was almost beyond calculation.

AN Earth-made tungsten pile-driver, Laughlin said, would have been cotton in comparison.

Smitt gave the two ships the name of *battering rams*. Turn him loose with one of these boats, he said, was all he'd ask. He'd batter those pirates into pancake batter.

One mishap occurred on the trial flight of the first ship; it happened before the ship got out of the runway. It was gliding along the pathway when Smitt inadvertently snapped on the rocket motor.

Instantly he snapped it off—but in that moment the boat leaped, struck into the rocky wall obliquely, gouged out a thirty-foot cavern of living stone, and came to a stop with its nose buried. Smitt stepped forth with one eye black and the other gleaming with enthusiasm. If that wall had only been pirates!

They excavated carefully, and the powerful hull emerged undented! A battering ram it was, indeed!* Its makers were confident that whatever adventures the rescue of Allison might entail their two boats would prove sky-worthy.

* The Mercurian workshops originally developed by Jason Kilhide, the renegade Earthman whom Lester Allison had vanquished, were a marvel of mechanical ingenuity. Helping not a little was the excellence of Mercurian ores, the most plastic and yet the most durable ever mined. Because of this fine machinery and the excellent ores, the young men whom Allison had left on Mercury were able to construct fighter space ships whose hulls were so durable, any other space vessel could be penetrated like a hot knife cutting butter. While metallurgists have been experimenting for years to make metals lighter and more durable, it is entirely possible that metals on other planets may be entirely different from any ores yet known.—Ed.

The test flights of both battering rams were successful, the tryouts being made within the space of four or five hours. Each of the men tried his hand at piloting. The radio-telephones were found satisfactory for keeping the two ships in touch during flight.

Last-minute preparations were made. As June O'Neil had insisted, all of them should go. They would lock the laboratories and camouflage the entrances, so that if there should be visitors they would find nothing.

June's plan was adopted only after much discussion. It would be a dangerous adventure at best, and the men felt that their brides might be safer to stay. Then they recalled the silvery-nosed S-20 and the arrogant, orange-sashed Venusian crew, and thought otherwise. Whatever the cost, they must hold their remaining group together. Even if they should lose their foothold in Mercury to chance invaders...

But June O'Neil did not decide for herself as easily as for the others. Secretly she planned to stay—*by herself!*

In the final hours of sleep before the momentous take-off, June acted upon her rash decision. She left this note:

Lester might come while you are gone. I believe he would want me to stay here to keep watch over our stronghold. That is what I have decided to do. It is my choice to stay alone, and my wish that the rest of you go as you have planned to do. When you read this note, you may want to find me, hoping to persuade me to change my mind. You mustn't. I shall hide where you can't find me, so please don't delay. I know that you will come back. I pray that you may bring Lester. —June.

June stole forth, carrying with her the little zither Lester Allison had made for her. In the lonely hours to come, music would be a solace. She departed from the well-beaten paths, she left the torchlights and murmuring rivulets and adventured back into the endless depths, where the caverns were dark and silent.

The silence and the darkness were a little terrifying. She suddenly felt the loss of Lester Allison more than ever before. She listened for the distant roar of the space boats taking off. But she could hear nothing—nothing but the little hollow echoes of her own breathing or the slight touch of her arm against the strings of her zither.

Suppose something dreadful befell her companions! Suppose they should never come back!

All at once the awfulness of being left here alone *indefinitely* bore down upon the girl. How many stories she had heard of persons going insane from the unbearable lonesomeness, the horror of being trapped in empty caverns! Suppose Lester should not come back for years. Suppose—

NEVER before had June listened to inner voices or taken stock in hunches. With a strong flare for common sense, she discredited such things as silly superstitions. But now—

“Today I’m riding toward Death, June. I’m riding toward flames of Death...”

Again and again it came—Lester’s words, his voice. No, it was all in her mind! It was Fear. Fear was melting her strong resolve. Fear!

She clambered over the dark rocks swiftly. Dim glints of light were in the distance. She would go back. She would still catch them before they took off. She must hurry. If she had only brought a torch—

Clack! Zinnng! The zither slipped from her hands. An instant’s hesitation—one of those instants which can turn the fates of lives—

She groped to pick it up, lost her footing. Zither and girl fell together into an unseen pitfall that might have been made to order for a medieval dungeon. But June O’Neil had no thought of that. She was unconscious.

CHAPTER VII

Conqueror’s Boast

SMITT and Mary stood at the entrances of one of the battering rams, reading June O’Neil’s note for the third time. If it had been a bomb, it would have shocked no more.

As for the others, Redman and his wife came, bristling with enthusiasm for the take-off; they stopped, read the note, stood speechless. Then from the other ship came the other two couples, Laughlin and his wife, and Bob and Betty Wakefield.

The ships did not start on schedule. Smitt and Mary invented excuses for an hour’s delay. No one needed to comment on June’s rash action. All of them knew that her heartbreak was too much for one person to endure. Still, it seemed dreadful to leave her.

But everyone of them respected June O’Neil. And if this was the way she wanted it, then they would comply. A last lingering look down the avenues of torches was fruitless. Motors had been roaring gently for several minutes. If June O’Neil had thought better of her decision, she surely would have appeared before this.

The two red battering rams crawled up through the long runway and charged out into space.

For a time the foursome in each boat were quiet and thoughtful. Venus seemed far away as it shone through the inky sky. The adventure ahead of them was nothing if not uncertain.

As the hours rolled on, they enlivened their journey by radioing back and forth. Smitt and Mary were at one radio-telephone; Bob and Betty Wakefield at the other. It became a game to switch wavelengths on each other and find each other again—a sort of radio hide-and-seek.

This game was still going strong when a strange voice leaked in.

“This is the S-44 returning. S-44 returning. Do you hear us, headquarters? This is the S-44 returning... S-44... S-44...”

Bob Wakefield’s slight *hiss!* cut the battering ram conversation off abruptly. Smitt and Mary held their tongues. It had been agreed in advance that all official radioing to outsiders was to be done by Smitt. But this seemed a good time for silence.

For most of an hour both ships listened. The S-44, whatever it might be, continued to announce its progress, at intervals, without response from any headquarters.

Reception grew clearer. The bluish white ball that was Venus puffed out like an expanding balloon. Mary kept her eyes on the heavens. Out across the blackness she had watched the other battering ram, flying parallel with them since their departure from Mercury. Less than a mile away, keeping an even speed, it blazed like a tiny red bullet against the ubiquitous black velvet of the void.

Smitt stuck to the radio-telephone. Suddenly business picked up. An answering voice responded to the S-44 calls. Conversation took on a bewildering speed.

“Come in, S-44. What’s the news?”

“Everything’s okay. We cut a hundred-mile strip inland from the East Coast.”

“Good. Hold on. I’ll relay that to Sasho.”

A short silence followed; then the headquarters voice resumed.

“What about the other ship?”

“Haven’t they reported?”

“Not yet.”

“Give them time. They said they’d be late getting back.”

“When did you last communicate?” the headquarters voice asked.

“Six hours before we struck,” said the S-44. “They were ready to lay a flame-cloud *down* the seaboard at the time, and—”

“HOLD on. Another call from Sasho.” Half a minute or so elapsed. Then—“Sasho’s all primed for action. He’s ready to turn the whole fleet loose as soon as the other ship reports. You didn’t happen to see their flames?”

“Hell, no, we cut down through a blanket of heavy weather. Not much chance anyway, the way we had split up the territory. We shot west. They had headed south.”

“Okay, just so you both came through all right. The fleet’s fixed up with a layout that will prevent any cross-ups.”

“They’ll have a fireman’s picnic. Tell them we’ll be down on their tails as soon as we can load up some more gas.”

“They haven’t gone yet. Sasho’s still waiting on that Mercury deal.”

Mercury deal!

Smitt blew a bomb of breath square into the transmitter. Luckily he had thrown the switch several minutes before. The mention of Mercury caught him gasping.

What was this all about? Cutting strips along the East Coast! Flame-clouds! Sasho! Gas! Turning the fleet loose! A fireman’s picnic. And now—*that Mercury deal!*

“Hell, tell him to go ahead,” the S-44 voice resumed. “The other ship’s got that deal cinched by this time.”

“That’s what Sasho’s waiting to hear. He’s in a stew about it. Waiting for another round with that Allison fellow. He’s getting the jitters. Says he smells trouble on that Mercury deal.”

Smitt and his companions held their breaths. What a break! They’d blundered squarely onto a hot trail! Allison was alive! Alive and obviously much in demand!

“What do you want *me* to do about it?” the voice from S-44 drawled. “Head back for Earth and pick Allison up?”

On the instant Smitt took a long chance, snapped on his transmitter, barked,

“Where on Earth is he?”

Neither voice answered. There was something ominous about the silence. Smitt repeated his demand.

“Where is Lester Allison?”

Quick as a flash the headquarters voice snapped,

“Who said that?”

“I don’t know,” said S-44.

“Who called for Allison?”

“I did!” Smitt snapped back. “Where is he?”

“Who are you?” The headquarters voice sharpened to an urgent tone. *“Who’s calling Allison?”*

Smitt snapped his transmitter switch off with a jerk. He had impulsively spoken out of turn and he knew it.

Into his receiver came a persistent clamor to know who he was and where he was calling from, and what business of his it was that Allison was wanted on Venus. The tones were threatening.

“Don’t answer them!” Mary gasped; but instinctively she knew that the damage had been done.

There were minutes of silent panic in both battering rams. They seemed to be driving into something ominous. What was the unseen trouble back of those hostile voices?

Smitt shifted wavelengths and soon Bob Wakefield on the other battering ram found him.

“Bob Wakefield—”

“Okay, Smitt.”

“Did you hear that talk that about Allison?”

“Yes.”

“What did you make of it?”

“He’s on the earth instead of Venus.”

“Right. We’re on the wrong track. Tell Laughlin we’re changing our course this minute.”

MARY saw the heavens swerve gently. The huge bluish-white mass of Venus passed off the nose of the ship and far out to the side.

Simultaneously the other battering ram turned. Had there been a traffic cop out in that realm of space, he would have seen the two sleek red bullets with their tails of fire cut parallel curves around him. Again they were off on straight unwavering lines. The tiny bright dot of the Earth was now their goal.

Smitt hastily returned to the S-44 wavelength. The mysterious talk between the returning ship and its Venusian headquarters, though intermittent and sketchy for the next hour, was tense with gathering excitement.

Headquarters were much disturbed. Emperor Sasho was reported to be on a rampage and the whole Empire was holding its breath. Sasho was scheduled to broadcast an important pronouncement within another hour. It was believed that he would give the go-ahead signal to his fleet. And within a few days the Victory Festival would follow.

But strangely that certain ship hadn’t returned. There was the rub. It was problematical whether Sasho would risk going ahead. After all his intricate plans for the timing and spacing of his attacks, and after all his glorious boasts to his Empire that the moment of luscious revenge was at hand, here was a slip-up. And from the guarded talk, Smitt gathered that a slip-up was a blowtorch to Emperor Sasho’s pride.

But on top of that was the disturbing report that had made the Emperor wild and had set the whole capital in an uproar. Unidentified voices had come in over the radio-telephones—voices that inquired for the ambassador of Mercury! What could this be but approaching ships from the militant millions of Mercury?

Millions? Smitt found this talk wholly bewildering, not knowing of Lester Allison’s original bluff.

The minute for the Emperor’s pronouncement drew close. The S-44 communications had ended, the S-44 having arrived at the capital port. There were frantic last-minute efforts by headquarters to get another word from the mysterious voice that had inquired for Allison. Needless to say, both battering rams kept their transmitters switched off; but at their receivers, the eight occupants were all ears.

The designated minute arrival. Emperor Sasho was presented with a fanfare. His ugly voice grated through the speakers.

“The hour for the ultimate revenge has come! (Loud cheering.) You of the younger generations know what your forefathers suffered. Today the survivors of that gallant band of heroes sit before me. They have lived to see their powers multiply.

“In these coming hours, they shall see their Empire—your Empire and mine—strike back at that scapegrace of the Solar System—*the earth!* (A tumult of cheering.)

“No revenge was ever so sweet as this. The earth called your forefathers criminals. They *were* criminals! They would have been ashamed to be anything less than criminals *on the earth!* (Cheers!) The earth made them outcasts! The earth spewed them forth as if they were filth!

“But the fortunes of the universe have followed them. They applied their talents to the building of a new civilization—a civilization built on those sturdy principles of might and power and seizure—yes, and slaughter! The gods of destruction have served them well.

“Now they sit before me, these survivors of that original band, waiting to see what you and I will do in this, our greatest hour of opportunity. *What will we do? Will we burn the earth to a cinder?*”

A MOB of infuriated voices clamored,

“*Hell-l-l, yes-s-s!*”

“I, the youngest of the founders,” Sasho’s voice went on in a rattling throb, “am proud to be your Emperor! I am proud that you younger generations have taken the great ideals which the smug earth once branded as *criminal* and *cutthroat*—that you have made of them a dignified and honorable philosophy of slaughter. *You are the hope of the universe!*

“You have tested equipment at your command—the most efficient machines of devastation ever made. You are ready to go forth and explode life off the face of the earth. At my command you will *clean up the earth!*

“*Did I say the earth?* Let me quickly add—the earth *and her allies!*

“I refer to none other than the *hordes of Mercury!* Let them come! Let them descend upon us by millions if they are able! We’ll slaughter them on sight!”

There was a tremendous cheer. The clanking voice resumed in a low ominous tone.

“At this minute, the ships of Mercury are plunging through space to meet us. At this minute, we have good reason to believe, they are hearing my words. The Dictator of Mercury himself may be listening.

“For the sake of the record, let me repeat that my offers of a friendly agreement with Mercury have been refused. My efforts to set up trade relations—Mercury metals for Venus protection—have been scorned. The mischief-making ambassador of Mercury, treated to an excursion to the earth, has not returned.

“Mercury ships, are you listening? For the last time, wherever you are, have you any words for us? Answer me this minute—or you shall take the consequences!”

At their receiver Smitt, Mary and the Redmans looked at each other out of white, nervous faces. Smitt’s teeth were set, his lips were tight. The impact of this colossal scheme of destruction beat down upon unsuspecting nerves with a shattering effect.

Fifteen seconds of silence passed. Then Sasho’s voice jumped through the receiver in a high, screaming pitch.

“All right for you, Mercury! *Come on! We’ll blast you to atoms!* I hereby command the flame-cloud fleet to go into action at once! Carry out the destruction plan to the letter! Whatever resistance crops up out of land or skies, *smash it mercilessly! Go! and the gods of slaughter be with you!*”

On toward the earth the two battering rams sped. The occupants were for the most part speechless. They had set forth simply to find Lester Allison. But the scene had widened. Gradually, as they rode the spaceways, their quiet tension changed from the silence of frightened rabbits to the silence of steel determination.

CHAPTER VIII

Nick of Time

AT the controls of the S-37, Lester Allison sped for Mercury as hard as he could go.

All the way he thanked the fates that had spared his life. It had been almost miraculous, so swiftly had it happened. The picture of that crucial moment still hung before his eyes.

Underneath the gray overcast sky, the blue ropelike death cloud had boiled down fiercely. Allison’s party had dropped their cameras, weapons and trophies and bolted for dear life. His two guards had instantly unsnapped the handcuffs to free themselves for the chase.

The dash for the rock quarry where the S-37 had landed had been a futile gesture. The distance had been too great. Death had descended too fast.

But Allison’s sharp observations of a few hours before had furnished him a trick. Something beyond that nearby embankment of pink stones had clung in his memory.

His wrists free, he had leaped for the hidden cut, set into motion the little four-wheeled car at the summit of the narrow-gauge track, shot down the long incline with the speed of a rocket.

The rest had happened almost too fast to be remembered. The four guards left with the ship had been completely befuddled at the sight of their party returning on the dead run. Allison had brushed past two of them, knocked down a third.

The fourth he had *caught*—within the chamber of the airlocks, for the airlocks had automatically closed the instant the flat of his hand had shot out against the throttle, and he had zoomed off into space.

An instant after the shock of takeoff, Allison had looked back to see another hideous, fan-shaped inferno sweep across the landscape, its flare reddening the vast blanket of clouds overhead.

His own rocket fire had missed the descending gas, surely by not more than a few yards; but the S-44 many miles inland had touched off the explosion. It was sickening to think what must have happened to the rest of the S-37’s “excursion,” victims of the medicine they had dealt to others so gleefully.

Allison had at once set his controls for some idle circling on a safe side of the earth, and had taken some minutes for deep breathing. It was hard to realize that he had suddenly been freed of his handcuffs and had fallen into possession of a space ship.

But he knew he was not free in the fuller sense of the word. He was bound to a responsibility. He must warn the earth.

He had thereupon transferred his one passenger, a surly conceited, yellow-eyed guard named Siccola, from the airlocks to a small steel-encased room obviously designed for prison purposes.

Then Allison had gone back to the earth and had spent tense hours warning the governmental leaders of America. That gas-cloud explosion of four months ago, he insisted, and the two recurrences of recent hours, were not astronomical mishaps. They were trial attacks. They were forewarnings of a complete devastation planned by a deadly enemy on Venus.

The governmental leaders had listened open-mouthed. Some had fainted, some had been angered, one had succumbed to a heart attack, many had even laughed. But Allison had driven the message home, and the newspapers, radios, and alert governmental leaders had caught up the alarm to spread it like wildfire over the continents. The civilized world went into a panic.

“We’ve got to do something!” was the inevitable cry of a defenseless people.

THE earth suddenly realized that it was years behind the times in the development of space ships—and no offhand avalanche of blueprints could make up for the wasted years.

Having done all that he could do in a few hours of time, Allison had sped away toward certain other responsibilities—personal ones that were near to his heart. He had a planet of his own to look after. And a people. And a sweetheart.

Had the Sasho Empire invaded Mercury during his four months’ absence? That fear had accumulated in Allison’s spine, and knotted his nerves and fatigued him for many days past...

The S-37 nosed down into the long dark runway, into the deep chasms of Mercury. Allison’s eyes were eager.

There were the torchlights burning as brightly as ever, the red rock walls glowing. There was the red metal bridge, the avenues into the distance. But there were no people.

Allison leaped through the opened airlocks, strode out into the light gravity, called at the top of his voice. No one answered.

He hastened to the laboratories. Keys had been left in the usual hiding place. In a shop he found the robot ship—thoroughly dissected! He found designs—reams of them, waste-baskets full; and on the shop walls was the final supreme design worked out in all its intricate details. One by one the items of that final plan had been checked off; and all around the shop were the evidences of building.

So they had built a ship and gone! But where?

Perhaps to Venus to find him? Perhaps to the earth from fear of more invaders?

Allison was suddenly tired. His prisoner aboard the S-37 had been cared for and was securely locked up. A host of worries flickered out of Allison’s mind and he slept.

He awoke hours later, made hasty preparations to take off. The disappointment of finding no one here at the home base hung like a shadow over his thoughts. He supposed he would go to Venus. Strange, he thought, that June hadn’t even left a message for him.

A moment of sentiment directed his feet toward the red bridge, down the torchlit path, up the circling stone staircase to the balcony where he and June had often sat together. Now this seemed the loneliest spot in the world. He must not linger. Whether June and the others had gone toward Venus or the earth, they would run into untold dangers.

Allison hesitated at the airlocks. He bent to pick up a scrap of paper. It was June’s handwriting. He read it swiftly.

Lester might come while you are gone... I believe he would want to stay here... That is what I have decided to do... I know that you will come back. I pray that you may bring Lester. —June.

Over and over Allison read it.

I shall hide where you can't find me, so please don't delay... I know that you will come back. I pray...

Up over the cavern paths Allison bounded, a flashlight in his hand, a rope over his shoulder. He called until he was hoarse from shouting. He deserted the well-beaten paths for the many-branched caves that were endless. Up near the cavern ceilings he called, only to hear the echoes of his voice mock him from distant underground canyons. Then he would wait in vain for the silence to give something back to him.

PERHAPS they had persuaded her to change her mind. She *must* have gone. These empty caverns held no living thing. No *living* thing—

The words stuck in Allison's throat. An unfamiliar coldness spread through his body. He forced himself back toward the ship, telling himself that he had looked everywhere—everywhere that June could possibly have gone—

But there was another cave he hadn't explored—and there was another ravine—and another...

Hour after hour Allison searched and called. Time after time he started back, only to be stopped by an intangible something. Sometimes he thought he heard faint sounds somewhere out in the blackness beyond the reach of his light. Not the sounds of a voice, not the clatter of a rivulet beating over stones—something fainter, more musical, like the almost inaudible hum of a tiny insect.

Hmmmmmmmm! *Hmmmmmmmm!* The sound melted away into nothing...

There it came again, a perfect tone—and another, slightly higher! Where did it come from? This way and that Allison moved quickly. The subtle tones were closer now—and there were three of them—three delicate harmonious notes of a stringed instrument! The zither!

“June! June!” Allison's voice was no more than a clogged, croaking whisper. “June, where are you?”

His ghastly call echoed away into the blackness. No voice answered. Silence—then it came again, as clearly as if it were resounding through a speaker! *Hmmmmmm—hmmmmmm!—hmmmmmm!*

A few more steps, then Allison's light flashed down over an abrupt break in the rocks. The caprices of nature had formed a trap—a triangular dungeon-like pit as deep and straight-walled as a cistern. The flashlight's beam found a white form lying limp on the stony floor.

Allison looked down upon the most pitiful and at the same time the most beautiful face he ever hoped to see.

June O'Neil's eyes were almost closed. Her dry swollen lips were open. Her clothes were in shreds, her fingers were torn and clotted with blood. One limp hand weakly stroked the battered little zither that lay beside her.

In a moment Allison had her in his arms, was whispering to her.

CHAPTER IX

The Long Chance

“YOU poor child,” Allison breathed. “So you stayed—for me—” A slight movement of her white eyelids

and a barely perceptible smile that touched her lips were all the response she could give.

Lifting her out with the aid of the rope, which he had knotted into a sort of ladder, Allison carried her to the nearest rivulet. She was near to dying from thirst. Many an hour must have passed since her fall. He wondered if she would live. Gently he bathed her face and her limp body.

An hour later, lying on a cot in the great Mercurian laboratory, she lifted her arms up to Allison and spoke to him, smiling through tears. Those tears looked good to Allison. He knew she was feeling better.

Though the memory of the interminable hours of darkness she had spent in the trap haunted her mercilessly, June O'Neil was quick to regain her strength.

Soon she was able to tell Allison everything—the anxiety of the little Earth group to go to Venus after him; the troubles with the robot ship; the swift hours of work through most of four months, which had at last evolved the two battering rams; her own fateful decision not to go; her fall, the blow against her head that had struck her unconscious, the terror of awakening in the blackness—trapped!

And finally, June concluded, the frantic efforts to break stones from the wall and to carve handholds—only to be overcome by sickness and exhaustion and thirst.

Allison smoothed her hair. She must think no more about it; she must rest, sleep, gain back her strength.

“But you haven't told me a word of yourself, Lester.”

As Allison gave her his story, June O'Neil's eyes opened wide.

“And this person Sasho,” she said, “will he actually go ahead with such a plan?”

“By this time he is probably starting his whole fleet into motion.”

June was alarmed, but even so she was in no state to imagine the stupendousness of the thing.

“What will the earth do?”

“I'm afraid it's too late for the earth to do anything.”

The girl drew herself up on one elbow and looked at Allison intently.

“What about Mary and Smitt and the others? What will happen to them?”

“I don't know.”

“What are *we* doing here?” June's voice rang with alarm.

“Waiting for you to regain your strength. I'm not going to leave you again—”

“I'm strong already! And I can gain as well riding through space as here.” Firm purpose glowed in the girl's youthful face. “Carry me aboard, Lester.”

THEY WERE off.

In addition to their one prisoner, Siccolo, whom Allison had already had aboard after his escape from earth in the S-37, they carried a heavy cargo of molded metals—articles which the automatic Mercurian machines had turned out by the thousands while Allison had been searching for June. During the hour that he had entered the laboratories, he had set the machinery to humming. It was only a crude hunch, he had

told himself, but the effort required was so slight that it was worth a try.

“Anyone in the world that makes trouble for Sasho,” Allison told June, by way of explaining his curious cargo of hardware, “is doing mankind a favor.”

ALLISON set the ship for a straight hard course toward Venus. June walked about on unsteady legs. She surveyed the roomfuls of red metal spears, swords, helmets and shields. There were even a few of the black metal axes which had been left over from the original Mercurian civilization. June wondered if Lester had gone out of his head.

Allison grinned and said he didn't know, perhaps he had. But these were weapons that the machines could turn out most easily and they were weapons that anyone could use. It was his theory that the very possession of a weapon can make a frightened creature bold.

“I hope we can find a few thousand men who'll take a fancy to red hats and sharp spears,” he added.

A few hours later, when the S-37 hovered among the silvery clouds high over Venus, June gazed down through the high-powered telescope and saw the few thousand men that Allison had in mind.

Though these people were too far away for their green faces to be seen, June could guess from their primitive-looking mountain camps that they were the hordes of Venusians whom Sasho's cutthroats had robbed and driven off. The Jagged Mountains, their stronghold, was many miles removed from the blue-domed cities that dotted the vast panorama and were now in the hands of Sasho.

“Any activity?” Allison asked. He was busy at the controls, cruising at the lowest possible speed.

“They seem to be holding conferences,” June replied. “Do you think they have radios?”

“In all probability.”

Radio broadcasts from the Venusian military headquarters were going strong. From the moment the S-37 had come into listening range, June and Allison had picked up messages.

The first thing they had heard was some last minute instructions of no particular importance to the departing S-44. The important thing to Allison was that the S-44—the ship whose flame-cloud had unwittingly caught the crew of the S-37—was starting back on a second trip.

Every other ship was gone now, the messages implied. There was a hint of disturbance over the missing S-37, otherwise things were going well. But to make sure they continued to go well, the S-44 was loaded with high-ranking officers who would supervise the fleet's return.

There were numerous other messages, all of them charged with the war spirit and anticipation of the greatest, most complete, military victory in history!

“The Sasho Victory Festival begins today!” boomed a stock announcement every few minutes. “Your attendance is your declaration of allegiance to the Sasho Empire! Your absence brands you as a damned rebel!”

Allison groaned. “No wonder those green-faced Venusians are holding conferences all over the Jagged Mountains. If they venture toward any city to take in the Festival, they'll probably be caught and turned over to the Cutthroats and shot. But if they don't show up, they've branded themselves for life as 'damned rebels'.”

Allison looked at his stacks of spears and swords with a sigh. He wished they could have been automatic

guns. But the green-faces would run at the sight of a gun, no doubt. Getting spears and swords into their hands was going to be difficult enough—and perhaps futile, at that.

“A large group is heading toward that central plateau over there now,” June called down from the observatory through the speaking tube. “You’ve got plenty of time to get there ahead of them.”

It was a difficult task of piloting for Allison, novice that he was, but within a few minutes he achieved it, landing on the central lookout plateau. Then came the strenuous job of unloading. He wished he could have forced Siccolo to help him, but that yellow-eyed prisoner was not to be trusted outside his cell.

The weapons were stacked in gleaming red piles. Allison had almost finished when the approaching column of green-faces came into sight a quarter of a mile down the trail.

They saw the space ship, turned tail and ran!

“No use trying to reason with those boys,” Allison growled disgustedly. “They only understand two English words: ‘*damned rebel*’.”

Allison took off as quietly as possible. He and June looked down from the high cloud level. What they saw through their telescopes was disheartening. The party of Venusians had switched to a different trail. They feared a trap. All those fine metal weapons might lie untouched forever.

“If they only knew we were their friends,” June sighed.

“Too bad. They’ll eventually fall before Cutthroat bullets. They could at least go down fighting if they only knew. It’s a cinch no Sasho bullet would go through one of those red metal shields.”

But Allison’s efforts were apparently lost. Messengers sped through the mountain trails from one green-faced group to another, obviously to warn against trouble from the skies. Allison steered back toward the open skies high above the blue-domed Sasho cities.

“What could have become of our two battering rams?” June asked, continuing to scan the vast landscape.

“Perhaps captured,” Allison answered quietly.

It was a dark moment. June sensed that for once Allison was uncertain which way to turn. The earth was a lost cause! The two battering rams containing the nearest and dearest friends in the world—the four young couples from Mercury—had doubtless gone to their unknown doom!

June, acting upon her womanly instincts, went to the supply cupboards and brought forth food. Nothing was so full of inspiration as calories, she said.

Allison returned her brave smile, kissed her. For a brief moment his thoughts flashed back to the wedding that had been postponed. He did not mention it, for all too obviously he saw that that lost hour would never come back. They were in the Sasho maelstrom now. It was up to them to gamble against the fates to the last—and that course certainly led to death.

Suddenly something came in on the radio-telephones that set Allison’s imagination aflame. It was a message from the Venusian headquarters—an answer to a clamoring public.

Don’t be alarmed about the rumored invasion from Mercury, said the reassuring voice. (So Allison’s story of Mercury’s millions of warriors had taken root!) The rumored voices from Mercury ships had been heard no more, the broadcast continued.

And Allison fairly shouted, “*Voices!* Could that have been Smitt and Laughlin and—”

June nodded eagerly. “Oh, thank God they’re safe!”

The Venusian announcement continued:

“Either the Mercurian report was a false alarm resulting from a confusion of messages, or else the invaders were bluffed out. Nevertheless the spaceship defense guns are keeping a close watch on the skies.”

At these words Allison automatically rocketed high out into the heavens. True, his ship bore a safe name, the Sasho-37, but the Sasho gunners, if they sighted a boat that hadn’t radioed in, might not stop to read names.

“What now?” June asked in a heartening voice.

“Back to our green-faced natives,” said Allison. “We’ll try again. There was inspiration in them that calories you served up,” he added with a tight grin.

HE set the controls to circle safely and turned to an equipment cupboard.

“We’ve got a bunch of space parachutes here. We may as well use them.”

As a matter of ordinary precaution, they had already donned space suits and parachutes and had placed oxygen helmets within easy reach. But there were twenty-five or thirty more parachutes—theirs to throw away. That was Allison’s inspiration.

He coasted down to within a mile of the tops of the Jagged Mountains, applying counter-motors to slow the ship down almost to glider speed.

At his direction, June threw the parachutes away by way of the disposal chute, one after another. Each parachute was attached to a bundle of red metal hardware—a sword, a spear, a shield and a helmet. Luckily Allison had kept a few of each.

The third parachute fell true. It deposited its bundle in the very center of an unsuspecting group of green-faces. Their surprised faces looked up to see the cascade of red bundles on their way down. The line led directly to the central plateau, where Allison had previously unloaded and stacked thousands of weapons.

“There,” said Allison. “We’ve told them we’re friends in language plainer than English. Now if they only had a husky fellow about the size of Sasho to use for target practice, they’d be the happiest rebels in the world.”

“Good work!” June smiled. “What next?”

“Up into the skies before a telescope spots us.”

“Then what?”

Allison took a deep breath. The headquarters radio messages continued to pour in. The Sasho communications staff was stewing for a word from tardy ships.

“Willing to take a long chance? Even though the payoff might be final?”

June nodded.

“We don’t have much to work with,” Allison observed. “But we’ve got a Sasho ship and plenty of fuel. And we’ve got you.

“What can *I* do?” June exclaimed.

“Maybe you can lie,” said Allison. “Lies have been my most useful weapon the last four months. Can you?”

“I—I’ll try,” she stammered breathlessly.

“Okay. We’ve got a ship, *two* willing liars, a radio transmitter, and a yellow-eyed Sasho officer who’s getting tired of his cell. We’ll begin by putting Siccolo and the transmitter together!”

CHAPTER X

Fires of Rebellion

ORANGE and silver banners blazed from every blue dome, every public square, every stadium throughout the Sasho cities of Venus. The stadiums and amphitheatres filled rapidly. Throngs of excited, expectant people streamed in from the hinterlands.

Over and over the announcement boomed through thousands of amplifiers;

“The Sasho Victory Festival begins today. Your attendance is your declaration of allegiance. Your absence brands you as a damned rebel!”

Every Sasho stadium contained a four-sided silver tower in the center of the grounds. From each side of each silver tower the televised face of Sasho looked out upon the crowds. From time to time, the voices of officials blared forth from the orange horns that topped the silver towers.

Soon now a volley of fireworks would spurt from the top of every tower, signifying the return of the first ship of the flamer fleet. Then everyone would rise and salute, and the televised face of Sasho would speak and his incomparable voice would thunder from the orange horns. That was the declaration of victory for which everyone waited.

The biggest crowds, of course, were massed at the Capital Stadium. There they could see the real thing—Sasho himself, his bulky head and hunched shoulders looking strangely small in comparison with his gigantic televised image. He and a few other officers occupied the little open platform near the top of the stadium’s silver tower.

Here at the Capital Stadium, the eyes of the multitude tired themselves out gazing into the skies. The space ships must return soon. One by one they would fly down out of the mysterious nowhere, bearing proof that Sasho’s great plan had been fulfilled.

The flamer ships would return as they had left, twenty minutes apart, as Sasho’s time was reckoned. And—thrill of thrills!—they would coast right into the center of the Capital Stadium, one every twenty minutes, each to receive fitting recognition from the mouth of the Emperor.

At first the waiting was not wearisome. Some cruel sports had been planned to keep the crowds entertained. Silent airplanes sewed back and forth, portraying the flamer fleet’s attacks upon the earth. An explanation of the careful clockwork plans was given.

To the multitude’s delight, a touch of realism was added to prove how effectively the gas-clouds could destroy. A specially built plane spread a tiny cloud through one avenue of the stadium, where a few

captive green-faced rebels had been placed to represent Earth people.

Ignited, the little cloud barked out a vigorous explosion, The flash of fire was accompanied by many a startled, agonized scream from the victims. Then the crowd saw how quickly and efficiently the purpose had been achieved. Every green-faced rebel's clothes was a mass of flames!

Cheering throngs and blaring bands, freakish sadistic demonstrations and parading young warriors all did their best to keep that handsome smile of victory on the Sasho face.

But the Sasho smile was not at top form. It came and went with bewildering rapidity. It came with effort. Then the big chin would shoot upward, the twisted lips would spread to show angry teeth, and the head and body would quickly turn, as if in answer to some pressing business.

BACK of the scenes all was by no means well. The first of the fleet ships should have radioed in by this time. But no report came.

"Keep up your calls," Sasho muttered.

On the headquarters wavelength the agitated demand continued.

"Come in, Fleet Ship Number One. Come in, Number One! Where are you, Fleet Ship Number One? Do you hear? You should be within an hour of port, Fleet Ship Number One..."

Sasho's irritation grew into ill-suppressed rage. Troubles always seared his pride. A slip-up! And this was the supreme event of his life.

The audience began to get restless. It clamored for more demonstrations.

"Call the hinterland guards," Sasho ordered one of his three aides. "Have them pick up some more green-faced rebels and send them in by plane, *pronto!*"

The aide flashed a dubious eyebrow.

"Well?" Sasho roared, inflamed by his assistant's hesitation.

"There's been some border trouble in the last few minutes," said the aide. "Three guard stations have been attacked—"

"Attacked! By Rebels?"

"And the guards have been routed. I've already ordered reinforcements, several motorized reserves—"

"Rebels! Rebels! How the devil—" Sasho was enraged. This was beyond understanding. He squirmed about, wanting to strike someone with his quirt. But the mirror in front of him caught his eye, reminded him to smile. He forced a halfhearted grimace and quickly turned away.

"Why the hell wasn't I informed?" he snarled.

"You've been very busy," said the aide, "referring to the fleet.

The reminder shot pain through Sasho. He turned to another aide. Any messages yet from returning ships? The aide had none. He'd continued to keep in communication with headquarters, which continued to call.

The third aide delicately hinted that the crowd was sensing a delay.

Sasho bestowed a prolonged smile upon his empire, at the same time rasping from the corner of his mouth,

“For God’s sake, think of something!”

“A speech might be in order, your Majesty,” the third aide suggested timidly. “Perhaps a review of the empire’s history—the story of your own spectacular career—”

For an instant Sasho was sorely tempted. If he refused a chance to tell the story of his rise, beginning at the age of ten, it would be the first time. But his disturbance over the delayed fleet was too deep. Something had gone wrong. He was sure of it. He should have gone along and supervised the attack himself. Perhaps that idle rumor about Mercury wasn’t so idle—

“Another report from the hinterlands, your Majesty,” said the second aide.

“Hinterlands, the devil! What now?”

“The rebels have formed a front, your Majesty. They’re advancing from the mountains.”

“Advancing! The rats are mad! They haven’t got anything. I’ll turn the Cutthroats loose on them—”

“Your Majesty, the Cutthroats went with the motorized reserves. They’re already in the thick of it—”

“*Thick* of it!” Sasho blasted. “You talk as if there’s some real fighting.”

“Half the Cutthroats are reported slaughtered—”

“*Hpfff!*” The Emperor blew up like a steam boiler. He swung his quirt and cut a mark across the second aide’s mouth. He drew back for a second blow when he caught sight of himself in the mirror.

“A ship!” the first aide blurted. “A ship’s just radioed in from a half hour out.”

Sasho turned to the mirror and mustered his most gracious smile.

“Go on,” he muttered savagely. “What have the damned tardy louts got to say for themselves?”

“It’s the lost ship,” said the aide, “the S-37.”

“*Gimmie that phone! Headquarters! Put me on that ship! Hello, S-37! S-37! Siccolo! Well, I’ll be a fried corpse! What the hell brings you home?*”

All that the crowds throughout the Sasho Empire could see for the next few minutes was the televised shoulders and back of their Emperor, but every jerk of his sleeves and epaulets seemed to shake the warp and woof of their social structure.

Fresh rumors spread through the crowds. The fleet that had gone to destroy the earth must have met with unforeseen troubles. Perhaps the ferocious millions of Mercury *had* materialized! Perhaps—terrible thought—they would invade Venus!

If so, would they stop at nothing? Or would they only assassinate the higher Sasho officials?

On top of these wildfire speculations, another rumor raced in. The green-faces—the original Venusians—were coming down from the hills in mad hordes. They were advancing like wild men. They were killing and butchering every man who wore a silver-and-orange uniform. They had brand-new, brilliant red weapons—

What was happening to the Sasho Empire?

Many a stony green-faced countenance that had been expressionless for years suddenly lighted with a gleam of hope. If these things went on, that long-dreamed-of time was near at hand—the time to throw off the tyrant’s yoke!

“Speak up, Siccolo!” Sasho roared into the phone. “I want the facts! Mechanical difficulties, huh? Working perfectly now, you say. What about the Mercury ambassador? Still with you! No signs of any Mercury ships?”

Well, by God, there’s a hitch somewhere! The fleet’s hours behind schedule. Ships ought to be pouring in, and not a one’s showed up...”

Siccolo replied that the fleet was doing fine but was behind schedule, owing to circumstances which he would explain in more detail later.

“Doing fine, is it?” Sasho cursed a bit more softly. If the plan was going through, he could breathe easy. All this petty trouble with rebels and restless subjects wouldn’t amount to anything. A victory over the earth would put everything back on an even keel—

“What’s that, Siccolo? You brought me a present? *A girl?*”

Sasho’s eyes roved past his aides, busy at their troublesome telephones, to the swarming multitudes—vermin, hungry for excitement! Waiting for the return of victorious ships—ships that would be hours late...

Humph! A girl, huh? A present from the earth... Mmmm!

Sasho was suddenly bored by his surroundings. He wished the Victory Festival were in the opposite corner of the universe. Why not walk out on it? He was Emperor, wasn’t he? What the hell’s the good of being Emperor if you can’t do as you damned please!

SASHO barked back at Siccolo, “Girl? Put her on!”

A moment of waiting, then, “Hello, Mr. Sasho!”

“Say that again!”

“Hel-l-l-o-o-o, Mr. Sasho!”

Damn, what a voice! *What* a voice!

“Coming to see me, are you?” Sasho wished he’d equipped these ships with television.

“I’ve heard *so* much about you, Mr. Sasho!” the voice cooed.

“Hmmm. Don’t you believe none of those stories. Ha-ha! I can tell you worse ones myself. Ha-ha-ha!”

“I thought maybe you’d like to ride down to the earth. It’s awfully exciting, with all those fires and so much fighting—”

“*Fighting!*” Sasho growled. “What fighting?”

“*You* know—your fleet men, grabbing parts of the earth for themselves, and your officers—”

“WHAAA!” Sasho nearly blew the phone out of his hand. “Put Siccolo back on!”

“Is that ride a date, Mr. Sasho?”

“*Put Siccolo back on!* ... Siccolo! What she said—is it true?... A regular dog fight; The hell you say!... Officers, too?... You *lie*, Siccolo! Why, the low scummy devils!”

Siccolo’s words continued with such precision that he might have been reading them.

“Would you like to see for yourself? Perhaps you could stem the tide—”

“Chase yourself down here the quickest way! Refuel first, if you need to. I’m in the stadium, and I’m ready as quick as you can get here! Rush it!” Sasho snarled.

To the consternation of his three aides and his corps of guards, Sasho slammed down the telephone, bounded for the enclosed stairway, chased himself up and down it for the next several minutes, hissing,

“Revolt! Revolt! Revolt! I’ll hang ‘em! I’ll fry ‘em! The dirty lice—”

A wild cheering rang then through the stadium. The majestic S-37 rolled into the grounds and up to the silver tower.

Without a word to his breathless Empire, Sasho marched straight for the airlocks, entered. His three aides were directly behind him. A corps of guards tried to follow—

The guards didn’t make it. The airlocks swished shut, the S-37 zoomed off. Out into the skies, out of sight!

Clamorous uproar shook the stadium. Pandemonium seized the scores of stadiums throughout the Empire as a report of this unaccountable action came over the air.

“More trouble on Earth!” a frightened official boomed out over the Empire’s system of speakers.

“Sasho’s been called on an emergency. Earth trouble. There’ll be a slight delay—”

Hooting voices drowned the speaker. Earth trouble! Yes, and Venus trouble! The fires of discontent that had cropped out today would not be put out tomorrow—nor the next day—nor the next!

CHAPTER XI

The Final Stroke

SEVERAL hours earlier the earth’s most spectacular sky show had begun with a bang! And *what* a bang! The hard claps of thunder reverberated through city buildings like a minor Earth tremor.

But the bangs were not placed where the Sasho flamer ships meant to place them. Every bang went off prematurely—miles up in the air.

The North American continent watched, held its breath, wondered whether these two marvelous little red battering rams from Mercury could keep it up.

Every twenty minutes another terrific explosion occurred. Gradually the scene shifted, east to west, across the broad continent.

Every twenty-minutes the shortwave radios picked up the routine messages of the approaching attackers.

“Ship Number Seven calling Ship Number Eight.

“Okay. What’s the report, Number Seven?”

“Ship Number Six reported twenty minutes ago. It descended on schedule. Its flame-attack was visible soon afterward over area Number Six.

“Okay, Number Seven.”

“We’re cutting into air over Area Number Seven. Our flame should be visible shortly.”

“Do your worst, Number Seven. We’re twenty minutes behind you, descending on Area Number Eight on schedule.”

IT HAD been terrifying business the first time, especially for Mary Smitt and the Redmans. But Smitt had been thoroughly nerved up to it. He had missed Ship Number One on his first two trials; but the third time he had sped by it, he had caught onto the system.

He had shot ahead, looped back through a full cloverleaf turn, and his electric-eye detector had taken care of the rest. They had smashed squarely through the nose of Ship Number One. It had fallen apart as if it had been so much tissue paper.

A quick glimpse, and the story was all over. They could look back and see the vast gas flames leaping out in all directions like an exploding star, as the disintegrating Sasho ship blew up.

Reports from the earth observers were that a few splinters of metal and bits of uniformed bodies hailed down after every explosion. Mary winced, but her companions reminded her that these were the fleet ships that had been ordered to fry the earth to a cinder, blast any interfering Mercury ships to atoms!

Blast Mercury ships to atoms! What a laugh Smitt had out of that. Ship Number One had bounced three shells off the hull of his fighter and he had hardly felt the jar.

In the other battering ram, Laughlin and his wife and Bob and Betty Wakefield followed the scene of action close to the surface. They kept in touch with Smitt by radio, but their offers to take over the ramming job were refused.

“Not a chance,” Smitt would retort. “I’ve got my system. You might miss one learning. Keep up your search for Allison. He’s got to be on the earth somewhere.”

“But you’ll wear out if these attacks keep coming—”

“Wear out, hell! This is recreation! I haven’t had so much fun since that Fourth of July when my Uncle George forgot to lock, up his dynamite. S’long. It’s time for another ship!”

ONCE during the siege, the two battering rams arranged for a trade, and Smitt took off in the fresh boat. His original fighter had begun to feel the crashes. But after the shift of passengers, Smitt flew back into action. The crashes went on with the very superb clockwork that Sasho had so carefully planned the other way around.

“I’ll bring down everything that comes down out of the sky!” was Smitt’s last communication before his radio went dead.

It was just one of those many jolts of busting through the nose of a Sasho ship that queered the radio. And no one had time to fix it. But that made no difference, for Smitt and his party had learned that they could spot the approaching enemy miles above the stratosphere.

“We’re doing a thousand percent,” Smitt grinned fiercely, “and we’re gonna keep that batting average pure!”

He shot along past a ship emblazoned S-44—the ship bearing Sasho’s principal staff officers! A few seconds later the S-44 was nothing but a memory and flying splinters!

There was a long wait before another ship came, but eventually one did come, and Smitt’s party sighted it speeding down toward the stratosphere.

SASHO’S EYES screwed up, his jaw jutted, he laughed through his yellow teeth. It was the laugh of a demon. He strode forward, brushing past the two aides who had entered the ship with him, and who now held guns on Lester Allison and June O’Neil. The third aide had taken over the controls.

“Out with it, you lousy Earth worms! How were you going to kill me?” Sasho snarled.

Allison pressed his lips tightly. Things hadn’t gone so well the last few minutes. As long as he and June had been locked in the control room, they had been all right. They had kept the ship rocketing for the earth at top speed. Dressed in their space togs, their backs turned to the cabin beyond the transparent partition, their identity had been concealed.

But as soon as Sasho and his aides had pranced through the ship from end to end, finding no one, not even Siccolo—whom Allison had dropped off safely on Venus—the storm had broken.

The transparent partition had not been immune to bullets. Allison and June had come out when they were ordered to do so. That was as they had planned it. They would have to come even if the aides hadn’t crashed two shots through the partition.

They had advanced with their hands up, the aides had relaxed a trifle; then Allison, his hands still reaching, had caught a gun from over the control-room door.

That was as he had planned it. But he had not planned for the gun to jam. At the moment he would have taken the situation over with gunfire, a sterile *click!* let him down!

“Don’t tell me you’d have let me off with shooting!” the irate Sasho roared. He snapped his quirt against his silvered boot.

How Allison would have killed Sasho, had the best of luck been with him, had been the least of Allison’s worries. Probably he would have dispatched him the quickest way. Certainly he would never have turned the man loose upon the world, even as a prisoner, once he had him.

“Don’t tell me you’d have done me up in a hurry!” Sasho taunted. “I’m not gonna do *you* up in a hurry! I’m gonna have a fancy bit of sport with you—both of you.”

The flash of Sasho’s eyes at June was chilling to the blood. Allison breathed hard.

HE remembered suddenly that he had once slid a few black Mercury axes beneath a bench in this middle compartment. He wondered if the aides would get careless with those guns in time, if he played the game right.

June’s arm trembled slightly against his own. Sasho paced the floor. And Allison stood like a statue.

It was far more than two lives that hung in the balance—June’s and his own. It was the fate of three planets. From what Allison had gathered of the Venus situation, he surmised that Sasho’s triumph or failure would make or break the Empire. That realization had given Allison his strategy. If only he could

throw a monkey-wrench squarely into the machinery of Sasho's horrible scheme—

“Come out of it, you skulking rat,” Sasho seethed. “If you've got any last words for your dictator, out with them! I'm gonna go down and pay him a visit before long—him and his metals.”

“Tell him,” said Allison in a cool defiant tone, “that it was my last wish those metals be used for a solar defense machine for peaceful nations—a defense machine that would crush men like you to dust!”

Snap!

Sasho's quirt cut a thin line from the top of Allison's forehead down toward his left eye. It must have struck a burning blow that partially cauterized, for the cut hardly bled.

June's breast rose and fell deeply. She clung as if by her fingertips to a faint wisp of blind unreasoned hope that they might live through this hour. *If* they did—and *if* that line across Lester's forehead should remain a permanent scar, June knew she would always be proud of it.

Again Sasho paced the floor. He had never been in a more dangerous mood than this. Though he was thoroughly jubilant over having exploded the revolt bubble, he was thoroughly enraged over having been taken in by Allison's scheme. But above all, he was hotly disturbed about his fleet.

After all, the only trouble he had scotched was a fake one—that of traitorous ships and officers. But where were those ships? Why couldn't the radio get in touch with them?

A few hours later he came down from the observatory with an easier jog and a surly, secretive smile. He had seen a few explosions, so he thought, through the telescope. One of them he had been certain of. Probably that had been the S-44 delivering the final blow. He regretted that the S-37 had no flame-gas aboard.

An inspiration came to him on the matter of taking care of Allison and June.

“I've missed out on all the big explosions,” he grunted, “but there'll still be fires, plenty of them. And I've got a notion I'd have more personal interest in these fires,” here he stopped and glared at the two prisoners, who sat across the room from their guards, “if I just knew some of the folks that were in on them!”

With that plan of action in mind, Sasho smiled cynically enough to forget his bigger worries. He checked over the space suits and parachutes that June and Allison wore.

He'd let them float down into the thickest blaze he could find!

AS they neared the earth, Sasho became disturbed because he couldn't locate any strips of flame. His aide at the radio tried in vain to tune in some unseen Sasho ship.

“What the devil!” the aide at the radio muttered. “The short waves are screaming all over the place, trying to locate Allison!”

Sasho took the phones and listened. He laughed like a sandblast. He tuned in the transmitter and bellowed taunts back at the earth announcers.

“This *is* rich! Your prize is already taken, numbskulls! I've got him and his girl friend right by the nape of the neck. If you want to see them, you can see them in hell in a very few minutes!... Who am I? I'm—” Sasho stormed with laughter. This was too good. “I'm the Emperor that's just got through fryin' the Earth's pants off. I'm Sasho, by God!”

He roared his laughter into the transmitter. Then with a stroke of irony that was exactly to his taste, he said:

“Maybe you’d like to have a chummy little talk with Allison before his hair burns off and his toenails curl up? Yeah? Come here, you damned rat! Tell your friends about your fancy little tricks.”

Allison and June, with space helmets in hand, put on the earphones. Sasho pranced across the floor, laughing. For the moment the radio was all their own.

“This is Allison. I’m aboard Sasho’s S-37. June’s with me. We’re in a hole.”

“I’ll say you are,” came Bob Wakefield’s low mutter. “Don’t you know the battering rams are smashing every Sasho boat to hell! Smitt’s taking everything that comes down.”

“Let him come!” Allison whispered fiercely, and June nodded her quick approval. “We’re sunk already. Anything to get Sasho!”

“Smitt’ll get you, all right,” Wakefield groaned. “I couldn’t stop him—his radio’s dead. He’ll smack you square through the nose! Can’t you make a jump for it?”

That was all. A pained bellow from Sasho brought Allison and June up sharply. They saw no reason for his pain at first. He stood glaring at a porthole, his paunchy hulk frozen. Red light reflected across his silver headdress.

Then they saw. Swiftly it shot by—Smitt’s sleek red metal battering ram, tapering off into a tail of flame. It was gone.

“*The gun!*” Sasho thundered. He and his two aides stormed up the stairway. The anti-aircraft gun groaned and the ship shuddered.

Allison and June fastened their helmets on securely. The aide at the controls shot a glance at them—his own business was too pressing to do more. Together the two fugitives dashed for the disposal chute.

It was locked.

Allison grabbed an ax from under a bench and shattered a porthole. The glass blew out. He boosted June to the opening.

The sound conductors in his helmet brought them thunder of footsteps down the stairs. He whirled to see Sasho’s arm come up with a gun.

Allison flung the ax. A shot and the crash of metal rang together. Sasho came on, his big frame lunged. Allison doubled his fist and swung as hard as he could. He struck a head that was as solid as stone.

Two things Allison saw in that fleeting moment. One was the glint of red reflected in Sasho’s blazing eyes. The battering ram was coming back!

The other was Sasho’s suffocating gasp for breath. The air was leaving rapidly through the smashed portholes. The aides made a dash for space helmets—

JUNE jumped. Allison followed. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw that the others were coming too.

For the first time it flicked through his consciousness that he and June were the only ones with parachutes!

A few yards apart they fell, Lester Allison and June O'Neil. Looking back they caught a glimpse of one of the world's rarest pictures—a picture they would remember as long as they lived.

A battering ram, streaking brilliant red through space, smashed squarely through the nose of the majestic S-37 as if it were nothing—a climaxing blow that spelled the end of an Empire!

The End.

Notes and proofing history

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