

TROUBLE ON TANTALUS

by P. SCHUYLER MILLER

There was a mystery somewhere on that little-known planet, and like it or not, Moran was being carried into the heart of it!

The mutter of the bull drums throbbed through the dripping blackness. Moran pushed his face deeper into the muck of the forest floor and listened.

VUB, vub, vub, vub. VUB, vub, vub, vub.

They were on three sides of him now. To east, and south, and north of him the Blueskin shamans were thumping their mocking challenge, dancing their frenzied dances, promising their young men his skull for the village pyramid and his skin for a drum that would outroar, outbluster and outbrag any drum in all the reeking jungles of Tantalus.

To east and south and north—the road ahead was clear. There lay the great sky-reaching crags of the Mountains of the Night, blanketed in everlasting clouds, cleft by bottomless chasms, drenched by the endless rains that were slishing into the mire in which he lay, rattling on the forest roof above him. There, somewhere, was the mysterious Black Hole that had sucked a score of ether ships into oblivion since men first found this Godforsaken planet. There—

Somewhere ahead of him another drum began to beat. *Tap, tap, tap.* A little drum—a shrill drum—a drum headed with human skin. *Tap, tap, tap.* A drum that jeered and mocked and dared him to come and fight. He knew that drum. He knew the blue-skinned devil who was hammering Pete Davis' stretched pelt with Pete Davis' bleached white shinbone, and by the same token, old Wallagash knew him. The withered ear that was nailed to the wall of his shack back in Talus was mate to the one that was out there in the blackness, listening to the tap, tap, tapping of Pete's shin on Pete's tanned belly. The evil, slanted eye that was peering through the murk was mate to the one his knuckles had found the night Pete Davis died. North and south, east and west. They had him, and knew it. Well, by Heaven they'd see fighting before he went!

Six feet six of him reared out of the stinking muck. Black mud matted his red beard and his red mane. Black ooze trickled down the white barrel of his chest. One huge fist closed on the thorn branch that arched over him and ripped it down. He broke it across his knee and hefted it approvingly. With a shillelagh like that in his hand Paddy Moran could bash heads till they cut the guts out of him, and maybe a bit longer if his legs held.

VUB, vub, vub, vub. VUB, vub, vub, vub.

They'd make no drum of his skin, by the saints! They'd carve no obscene runes on his boiled shins to make magic against white men of Earth. They'd finish him, like enough, but what they got wouldn't be cat meat. He shivered. There was a tale told that the Morans had a banshee to wail them into the place of Death when the time came, but like enough she'd lost her way after the first few million miles of empty space. Sirius was not a far star, as stars went, but it was far enough, and Tantalus was by a long way the least pleasant of its many planets.

He made no attempt to be quiet now. The sooner it was done the better. He plowed his way steadily through the dripping undergrowth toward that mocking tapping in the west. It grew louder as he approached, and he could hear the echo of it rattling against the naked rock of the escarpment beyond.

Then suddenly it stopped.

He stood stock-still, head up like a listening stag. Far to the north a single drum still mumbled; it broke off in mid-beat, and the only sound was the hiss of rain through the branches and the drip of water in liquid mud. His grip on the thorn club tightened until he felt the skin stretch on his knuckles. The short hairs prickled along his spine. What devilry was afoot now?

And then he heard it.

Rather, he felt it. Under his spread feet the ground trembled with a slow, rhythmic shock. One—and two—and three—and four. Like a marching army. Like the slow pacing of a giant cat. Like—

Saints above! *The Stalkers!*

Sweat came out on him in trickling beads. Blueskins he could fight. Blueskins were men. But the Stalkers were legend—horrible legend!

He listened, not breathing. They moved like cats, with a cat's stealth, with a cat's cruel sureness. They were black as the pit of hell, invisible in the night. They were ogres, demons, vampires. They were Death!

Somewhere behind him a Blueskin screamed in terror—the high, mad yammer of a frightened beast. It was too far—there must be more than one. They hunted in pairs, legend said. Up through his legs, from the quaking bog to his prickling brain, thudded the slow rhythm of the approaching footsteps. One—and two—and three—and four—

Off to the right a tree ripped down through the tangle of vines and branches to crash with echoing thunder in the mud. He wheeled, stared vainly into the blackness. Was it there?

There was a trickle of light from above. Silver highlights shone on the sprawling roots of a forest giant. Slowly, settling each foot in the mire with infinite care, he moved into their shadow. Squeezed into a crevice in the trunk he stared at the ghostly column of light that filtered down from above. It must cross that to reach him. He would see it, silhouetted against the gleam from that glistening pool. Magnified by the resonant wood on which he stood, the footsteps shook his whole tensed body. Thud! And thud! And thud!

They stopped. A foul, animal reek stifled him. Then claws thick as a man's body closed on him and lifted him struggling into the treetops.

Moran regained consciousness. The reek of musk was still in his nostrils. The air was saturated with it. It made his head swim. He lay still in the dark, trying to gauge his whereabouts. There was a carpet of thick velvet under his spread fingers. It was dry, and hot, and it swayed under him with a slow rhythm that matched the swing of the thudding footsteps.

He got unsteadily to his feet, stood with spread legs. He put out his hand, and touched naked, wrinkled flesh that shrank away with a shriek. Something went scuttling past him in the darkness. Something whispered behind him. There was a slow, methodical sucking that brought the goose pimples on him. He took one cautious step ahead.

His foot struck something, spun it aside. He stooped and groped for it, found it. It was his club. Then he remembered the pouch at his waist. There was a white light in it. His fingers fumbled with the flap, opened it, found the little metal cylinder with its crystal bulb. As the tiny flame blazed up his jaw sagged in amazement.

He was in a narrow, windowless room lined with black velvet. A great scarlet egg twice his height filled all the far end. And cowering against its base was such an assemblage as only the mad, black jungles of Tantalus could have spawned.

Two little things like naked pink Teddy bears huddled together against the scarlet shell. Their huge, opalescent eyes sparkled with blind terror in the bright light. A creature like a wingless, boat-billed stork, with a bristling bright-blue mustache fringing its horny beak, stood morosely on one leg, regarding him with one oval eye. There was a flat pancake disk of mottled flesh, pegged around the edge with short red legs, that seemed to be trying to burrow under the egg. And almost at his feet a thing like a giant black weasel, with six stubby legs and a tabular snout, was sucking avidly at the throat of a Blueskin woman.

Some sixth sense warned him. He ducked as an eight-inch glass blade snicked past his ear and shattered against the egg. He spun on bent legs, his club raised. Old Wallagash crouched there against the wall, a snarl on his wrinkled face, red hatred in his single slanted eye. In his withered claw was a thing like a barbed steel skewer, three feet long and needle-sharp. With a cackling screech he leaped, just as Moran's club came down with a splintering crash.

The shaman's arm fell limp, broken at the elbow. Moran's fist caught him under his receding chin. The second blow smashed into his naked belly; the third crunched full into his grinning black-lipped mouth. Then Moran had him by the scrawny throat, worrying him like a dog with a bone.

Wallagash went limp. Moran got to his feet and retrieved his light. Ugly old devil! All Blueskins were ugly, with their pointed ears and slant eyes, their grinning, toothy mouths, their bodies made in grotesque imitation of humanity. There was a story that they were the creation of the demented scientist who had first landed on this insane planet that the space hogs call Tantalus. Certainly they resembled nothing in this mud hole so much as man. A filthy tuft of hair hung at the dead sachem's waist. Blond hair. A woman's hair! Moran knew those bleached locks—knew them intimately. So that was why Pete Davis had launched his mad crusade against the Blueskins. Moran shrugged. Much good it had done him. You could get other women, but a man had only one skin.

He turned his back on what was left of Wallagash. There was other danger here. That weasel-thing—he'd heard of them before. Rumour had it that they followed you until you slept, then sucked the life out of you while you dreamed pretty dreams. He'd learned to respect rumour in such matters. He picked up the dead Blueskin's needle-sword.

“O, Man.”

The voice came from above. It was like the croak of a Martian raven. He looked up. Perched on top of the great scarlet egg was the damnedest creature he had ever seen.

It was the size of a bulldog, with a face like a vampire bat and a head of spiky black hair growing between two spreading ears. It was as black as sin, with short, kinky wool growing all over its potbellied body down to the ankles of its double-jointed legs. Its feet were two-toed claws, bare black skin over knuckle bone. And wrapping it like a leather cape were two huge bat's wings whose hooked wrists stuck up above its head like furled flags.

It had eyes like blood-red soup plates with pin-prick pupils. One of them swiveled to stare up into the shadows above them; the other regarded him unwinkingly.

“I am Shag, a Murath,” the thing croaked.

Moran had heard of the Muraths. “Gollywogs,” space hogs called them. They were the true native race of Tantalus, held in slavery by the few semicivilised Blueskins who had their black stone cities on the strip of fen land beyond the Mountains of the Night. Few humans had ever visited them, and fewer had returned, for while the citified Blueskins lacked some of the unpleasant habits of their savage brethren, they were inclined to be touchy and had some unpleasant tendencies toward atavism.

“Do not touch the sheetag,” the clipped voice went on. “It will scream and arouse the Stalker. I can escape. I can bring help.”

Sheetag—that was the weasel thing. But what did this padded cell have to do with the Stalkers? What had happened, anyway?

“Where are we?” Moran demanded. “What’s this all about?”

The little creature rustled its wings impatiently. “Must we talk?” it asked. “Very well, this is the egg of a Stalker. This is its incubation pouch. Perhaps the egg will hatch and the young of the Stalker will eat us. Perhaps it will do something else. I do not know. Nobody knows. I know that I can escape if you help. You will come here please.”

Moran shrugged. Half his life had been spent in space and the planets that rattled around in space. He’d given up balking at screwy situations long ago. He crammed his shoulders into the space behind the big red egg, wedged his knee against its pebbly surface, and began to climb.

Against his back the black plush wall of the room pulsed with a rhythm quite different from the lurch and sway he had felt before. It was like a great artery, throbbing with the incessant pulse of life. What if it *was* an artery? What if this *was* the brooding pouch of a Stalker, as Shag had said? Then what in the name of Heaven must a Stalker be like?

The Murath thrust out a long-toed foot and hauled him up on the rounded top of the egg. It had no hands, only the two great wings. They must have had a spread of twenty feet. No wonder the creature’s chest stuck out like the keel of a yacht.

He had to stoop because of the ceiling. The black fur lining stopped opposite his knees. Leathery black skin covered two bands of muscle that closed the pouch. He put his hand up. They were warm, like flesh. They were flesh. It was true.

The gollywog’s hideous face swiveled toward him. “You can make an opening,” it observed passionlessly. “You are strong. I will crawl out. I am small. I will bring help. I can fly.”

One scrawny claw kicked at the bands of muscle above his head. “The pouch is weak here. You are strong. You will make it open. You will hold it until I escape. I can fly. I will bring help.”

Moran stiffened his legs, and braced both hands where the gollywog had pointed. Sure—he’d open up, if it could be done. As for letting the little rat make his getaway alone, that was something else. He gritted his teeth and heaved. With surprising ease the walls of muscle parted. He thrust his shoulders into the gap, hitched his knees against the opposite side, and shoved.

He was in starlight. Fifty feet below drifted a sea of swirling, heaving clouds. Above, a vast black naked body blotted out the stars. This was a Stalker! This thing that walked on mountains!

The Murath’s bristling head pushed up beside his legs. It climbed out and perched precariously on the lip of the pouch, staring owlishly out over the panorama of mountain crags that rose about them. The Stalker was deep in the heart of the unknown ranges, and every swing stride was bearing them farther. Then below sounded a shrill, piercing scream of rage. The *sheetag*! The stalker stopped.

Two vast bat wings spread before him and Shag dived spinning into space. His tiny body swung like a grape between his great black wings. They flapped slowly, ponderously, lifting him higher and higher above the encircling peaks, carrying him with each beat farther from the colossal body of the Stalker. Then out of the rolling cloud-sea burst a shape from nightmare—the second Stalker!

Two hundred feet—three hundred—how could he measure it in that phantom light? Only the weak gravity of Tantalus could spawn so monstrous a thing. The mists boiled about its shoulders, about its waist, about its plodding legs. Legs like the massive columns of centuries-old trees. A body broad as an ether ship, squat, bent, blotting out the sky. A head peaked and misshapen, with glowing yellow eyes like gibbous moons. And arms like the flails of Death himself, striking like mighty serpents at the tiny winging

shape!

Some updraft from the steeped crags caught the Murath and spun him upward like a leaf. The smiting talons swept harmlessly beneath him; he rocked dizzily in the boiling air currents, then tilted his giant wings and slid like a drifting shadow into the abyss.

Again that vast claw struck—and missed. The winged dot swerved deftly from its path. The black wings folded and Shag fell like a plummet into the seething mists. Only furrows left by raking talons showed where he had been.

A spasm shook the wall of muscle against which Morarn was braced. Spurred like a melon seed from between the closing lips of the pouch, he sprawled over emptiness while the clouds rushed up to meet him. Then out of nowhere came a giant, glistening hand that caught him, crushed him, thrust him kicking into oblivion.

It seemed that he came swimming up out of unfathomable depths. A glassy wall stretched over him, barring him from the light. He beat at it with his fists—burst through and yelled with all the pent-up agony of bursting lungs. His feet were under him, firm on solid stone, and he shouted blind defiance at God and man.

He saw the sprawling city of the Stalkers.

Walls of splintered rock soared upward into the clouds. He stood a thousand feet above the valley floor, on a terrace of cut stone, with the grotesque hovels spread before him like children's blocks rolled on a table top. Slabs of gray granite, toppled together and chinked with blocks of softer stone. Barrows of heaped boulders, covered with baked mud. Walled in crannies of the living rock, black with damp and dirt and decay, And beyond an endless labyrinth of smooth-cut blocks, ruined and desolate, stretching out mile after mile across the valley floor.

A city—and the memory of a city.

Giants had built it when Tantalus was young. Giants dwelt now in the hovels that huddled in the shadow of its colossal walls. Giants vaster and more terrible than anything in men's dreams, dwarfed by a glory that was dead and forever lost.

Steps climbed from the valley, each tread thrice a tall man's height. At their foot the Stalkers stood. There was a score of them—all that remained of the race that had raised the city of the plain. Their bodies were a mockery of man's, their arms dangling, simian things with three-clawed hands, their feet splayed, cloven hoofs. Their heads were like the twisted wedge of an earthly Brazil nut, the flat, curved bases turned ahead, the sloping sides meeting in a bony ridge that ran in a frill of jagged bone down their massive backs. An eye was set in each slant-face, great faceted yellow jewels peering out of pockets in the rubbery black flesh. A beaklike mouth split the forward apex of the wedge, and from its scarlet lips came a humming like the purr of a giant cat.

Behind him sounded an answering trill, shrill, sweet—and terrible!

Moran spun in his tracks. Pylons of cut stone rose on either hand, framing a mighty gateway in the cliffs. Beyond them, cut out of the gorge's floor, was a pit, blocking it from wall to wall. A pit—and in the pit a toad!

Great webbed paws were bowed under its bleached white belly. Its flat, warty head hung level with the terrace where he stood. Its golden eyes blinked sleepily, hypnotically, at the little group that cowered at the pit's edge—the creatures of the pouch.

Fear froze them in their tracks—fear and the fascination of those burning eyes. They swayed on their feet to the murmuring rhythm of the Stalkers, to the shrill piping of the monster toad. But now that

crooning trill stopped short. Instantly one of the little pink things turned and ran. Faster than sight the toad's pale tongue licked out—and it was gone. Again from the valley he heard the exultant mutter of the Stalkers.

Pictures were racing through Moran's brain. Pictures of Earth, and he a boy, sprawled flat in the cool green grass beside a little stream, watching a toad eat ants. Time after time that lightning-swift tongue had struck, and each time an ant vanished. But always an ant that moved!

An ant that moved! Moran's muscles tensed. Billion on billions of miles separated this colossal monster from the little, harmless toads of Earth, but perhaps the force of evolution that had given them life had acted in the same way on this mad, black world. Perhaps this toad too saw only things that moved.

Slowly, slowly his fingers crept across his thigh, behind his back, where his knife should be. It came loose in his fingers and that hand crept slowly back. Eyes on the toad's great jeweled ones, he waited for that moment when its deadly trill would cease. Soon now—

Before it came he flipped the knife. It spun in a shining arc, stood quivering in the furry shoulder of the weasel-thing. With a scream of rage it spun, leaping like a black arrow toward him, but the toad was quicker. Its tongue licked out—was gone—and with it the sheetag. In that instant Moran sprang.

Five great strides took him to the pit's edge. Legs that had not faltered under accelerations of five gravities flung him into space. Feet first he struck between the toad's great, staring eyes. He slipped, fell to his knees, then before the monster's sluggish brain could know what had happened was on his feet and running, leaping, rolling on the gorge's rocky floor. Behind him the purring of the Stalkers rose to an angry buzz. He heard their great hoofs pounding on the stairs, the slap of the toad's webbed paws on the pit's walls as it turned. Scrambling to his feet he began to run.

The ravine twisted upward between sheer walls of solid rock. The floor was worn smooth by the tread of countless naked feet during endless years. Two hundred feet above him he could see the black smears where generations of Stalkers had rubbed their sooty shoulders against the rock. Below, at a man's height, were other smears where other, smaller things had gone. What was it that drew them, here in the desolate heart of the ranges?

As he climbed he began to feel the wind. The valley of the Stalkers was sheltered, but now he was rising above the level of the bounding cliffs, close under the cloud blanket, and as he advanced the force of the wind increased until he was leaning against a howling gale. It was raining again, a slow drizzle, and the fine droplets stung his face and bare body, washing away the mud that had caked on them.

By the time he reached the summit of the pass he was crawling on all fours, digging his fingers into crannies of the rock, hugging the walls of the ravine for what little shelter they afforded. He was in the midst of the clouds now, so that he groped his way through an unpenetrable fog, lit from above by the weird blue light of distant Sirius.

On and on he crawled, driven now by a blind determination that seemed to have been born of the wind and the fog. Whatever happened, he would not turn back. Something there ahead called him as it had called countless other beings of many worlds through untold centuries.

At last the path led down. An icy rivulet ran ankle-deep in the groove that was worn in the soft slate by the plodding of many feet through many years. Soon he was below the clouds again, and the gorge was widening and deepening into a canyon whose fluted walls were a great harp on which the winds played dolefully. How far he had come from the valley of the Stalkers and their monstrous toad-god, he did not know. Nor did he care. There ahead, near now, was—something.

Ahead a natural archway spanned the gorge. It had been shaped into a gateway through which the wind screamed, a window above emptiness through which poured a flood of violet light. Battling his way

foot by foot against the tempest, Moran came to the gateway and looked through.

Another valley lay below him, carved out of many-colored sandstone by the fury of the winds. Weird columns of red and orange rose from its barren floor, and the black slits of dry arroyos channeled its painted walls. Dykes of volcanic rock angled across it in an insane labyrinth, the softer shales and sandstones eaten away from around them, leaving them like the cyclopean tumbled ramparts of a city of the winds.

He did not see the weird beauty of that painted garden. He did not see the black dots that were caves in the gray limestone that underlay the painted rocks. He looked beyond, at the Black Hole of Tantalus—and the thing that gave it birth.

Opposite him the wind-carved minarets drew back from a road of purple quartz that formed a slowly rising ramp across the valley floor. Closing the valley's eastern end rose a cliff of black obsidian, splintered into a myriad of knife-edged facets by the terrific forces that had raised it from the depths of the planet. At its foot gaped the abyss.

Ten miles it must have been, between the obsidian wall and the rock of its nearer lip. Out of it poured a torrent of violet light, striking back with countless scintillant spear-shafts from the broken cliff. Above it the clouds spun back in the mighty whirlpool of the Black Hole, through which streamed the cosmic forces of the abyss that could suck a ship out of space against all the power of a hundred drumming jets. And where the road of amethyst met its edge there rose a shaft of clear crystal, six-sided, blunt-tipped, thirty feet and more from base to tip, through which the light from the planet's heart beat in a shower of fiery radiance. A giant crystal of pure, clear quartz, and at its heart a cavity, a bubble, in which floated a thin black speck that was—something.

The path led down through the maze of steeped rocks. At the first turn the abyss was lost to sight. It was then he saw the dwellers in the caves.

There were perhaps thirty of them, of a dozen races and worlds. There were Blueskins from Tantalus' own reeking jungles, and leather-bellied dwarfs from the red deserts of Mars. There were three-eyed, six-armed drogas from the twin worlds of Alpha Centauri, and octopus-armed lizards who inhabited the last of the six planets that circled Sirius. There was the tiny form of a Murath, one great wing burned away by a ray-blast. And old and young, short and tall, there were men of Earth!

They stood on the slope in front of the caves, gaunt and silent, eyeing him dourly. Moran tugged at his belt where a gun should be and squared his naked shoulders. They didn't seem overjoyed at the sight of him. Food was probably scarce here, and he was another mouth to cut down their rations. Well—they'd take him, and they'd like it!

As he came down from the rocks their line split to let him through. He felt a prickling at his spine as he passed between them, but no one moved to harm him. At the mouth of the largest cave he turned, his arms folded, his back to a great block of fallen stone.

"Now then," he demanded, "let's have it."

One man stepped forward from the rest, a Negro with the fine features and silky hair that meant Venusian blood.

"You're new here," he said tonelessly. "You're big and maybe you feel big. Maybe you'll have ideas about doing things, and about who'll do them. I wouldn't if I was you."

A grin came on Moran's bronzed face. He knew this kind of talk. "I might at that," he admitted. "And what would you gentlemen be thinking you might do about it?"

Three others aligned themselves with the black man. One was a Martian, with the shoulders and

dangling arms of a bull ape. The other two were men his own size, or bigger.

“We’ve laws here,” the Martian hissed. “We have ways of keeping them. There are four of us who see to that. You will eat when we tell you and what we tell you. You will sleep where we say and do what work we say. That is the law here, and you will obey it.”

“Is it now?” Moran’s thumbs were in his belt, and he teetered appraisingly on his toes. “So that’s the way of it—little to eat and a devil of a lot too many to eat it. There’ll be rations, I’m thinking, and the four of you to share them out when the time comes.” He let his gaze wander insolently over the sullen faces of the crowd and back to the four who confronted him. “Now then, have you ever held the thought to make it five?”

The taller of the two white men answered. He had a knife scar on his cheek, and one ear had been mutilated by a ray-blast. “You’re new here, fella,” he sneered. “There’s meat on your bones and blood in your guts. You’ll take new men’s rations till we and the boss say different. You’ll do what we say, when we say it, or we’ll pare you down a size in the collar and a couple more in the head.”

Moran’s grin was insulting. “Oh my, oh my,” he deplored. “Is there no sportsmanship left in the race of man? Four of you against one, and you with your sour-looking, friends to boot. Yah!” He spat contemptuously. “Come on, the four of you! I’ll take any one of you with my hands tied and bend you into knots! I’ll take all four of you—yes, and your friends besides—and show you who’ll make the laws in this place from now on! Show me this skulking boss of yours, and by the saints I’ll—”

“You will what?”

A man stood in the cave mouth, an old man, with white hair and beard, taller than Moran. He wore shorts and a jerkin of leather, and his arms were folded on the hilt of a mighty broadsword.

Moran turned to face him. Here was a man of another sort, a man he could treat as an equal.

“You’ll be the boss, I think,” he sneered. “And you a man past your best years. Faith, it must be no trick at all, to handle this gang of bezabors you have here.”

“Do you think so?” There was a queer light in the old man’s eyes. They were eagle eyes, peering under show-white brows into Moran’s face. The steely ring had gone out of his voice when he answered. “You have a name, I think. What, among friends, might it be?”

“Friends is it?” Moran snorted. “You talk softer than the boys here. It’s maybe different if you’ve a man to buck, in the place of a lot of starved bilge rats with no starch in their knees. There’s no secret to it, though—friend or foe it’s Moran.”

“Danny! My boy!” The great sword fell clanging on the rock. Tears were in the old man’s eyes and his hands were outstretched. “Danny Moran—have you forgot your father?”

Moran gripped the oldster’s two shoulders. The grin was back on his face and twice as broad.

“Paddy Moran is the way of it,” he said, “not Danny. Patrick Terence Aloysius Moran is the whole of it, and a name that’s known from here to Capella and maybe farther. Danny Moran was my father, God rest his soul, before the drink got him and he went off by his lone self after chib-bugs on Pluto. Is there a chance at all that you would be that teetotalin’, horse-stealin’, space-blisterin’ old reprobate of the world, my esteemed old spalpeen of a grandfather?”

He knew it before he asked. The Moran face was there, under the white beard, and the Moran eyes, and the muscles of the Morans rippled under his fingers in shoulders that were eighty years old and more besides. It was thirty years ago that Michael Moran had steered his ship into the black gulf that is between the stars, and vanished like dust into space. Thirty years ago Patrick Moran was but a likely glint in his father’s eyes as he surveyed the pretty girls of Dublin. There had been tales told of the tee-totaling giant with ready fists and a readier tongue who seemed always to have scrip in his wallet and

a chip on each of his broad shoulders, but they ended where they began, in emptiness. Old Michael Moran was a legend among space hogs, and another Moran was fast becoming one in his own right.

A grin stood on the old man's face. His gnarled fist smote Moran's chest with a blow that would fell an ox. His arm went around the younger man's shoulder as he turned to his watching men.

"Ye've a Moran to deal with here, ye blaggards!" he roared. "Blood of my blood, and by the feel of him bone of my bone. He'll whip any five of you with his two hands tied and a quart of liquor in him, but by the Lord Harry if he touches a drop in my presence I'll have the hide off his back for it! Zagar—Moses—come here, the pack of you. Wolves that ye are, you've a better wolf than any of you to fawn on and ye'll feel his fangs too if need be, as ye've felt mine! He's new, but he's a Moran, and we'll stew the fatted calf in his honor, and be damned to tomorrow!"

The Martian's face was dark. "The ration's too short now," he hissed. "There's ten days before we'll get more. By what right do you break the law for a new man?"

Moran felt the old man stiffen beside him. One foot came down on the great sword, so that it clanged faintly on the rock.

"I made the law," the calm voice said. "I'll make new ones if need be. Would you, perhaps, care to make a trial of it?"

Zagar's glance fell. "You have the sword," he mumbled.

"I have indeed." The old man picked it up and stood again with his hands clasped on its massive hilt. It was beaten out of a strange gray steel, tempered blue at the edges, and as broad as a man's thigh. "With my own two hands I made it out of the star that fell, and as ye've cause to know I've used it. Are there, maybe, some of you that think it has grown too heavy for me to swing?"

"The law's for you, not us." It was Moses, the Negro. "You made it to suit yourself and you break it to make a feast for a man who has no need of food. You've kept us to a ration that a dog would starve on. You've kept us weak and sick, so you could lord it over us with your loud mouth and your big sword. We're thirty men, hungry, and you'll swill away our food!"

"And what will you do?" Moran felt the old man's elbow against him, pushing him back.

"We're bare-handed and you have the sword. All right. You asked if we thought you could still swing it. Well—can you?"

Quick as was the Negro's swing, the boss was quicker. The great blade fell in an arc of blue light. Split to the breastbone, Moses dropped at his feet. Then before he could free the sword the Martian was upon him.

The glint of battle shone in the old man's eyes. He caught the squat form in his two hands and swung it above his head, then hurled it, twisting and sprawling, into the mob. At his side Moran was slugging knee to knee with the bigger of Zagar's two companions. He felt the man's ribs come under his fist, saw bright red blood spurt from his lips, and stepped over him to meet the charge of the half-mad pack.

Months of starvation had told on them. In bloody glee Moran smashed at their bony faces, kicked at their crowding bodies, before the tide closed over him. He dug his thumbs into the throat of a snarling Blueskin uglier than old Wallagash. He ducked past the six flailing arms of a Centaurian and pushed back his scaly, three-eyed skull until his bull neck cracked. Then a tentacle as thick as his arm twined round his throat and began to tighten. As he raised his hands to tear it away, a second twisting tendril fastened on his wrists. A bloody haze thickened before his eyes. A pulse of spent air throbbed and hacked at his throat. Then with the clang of steel on iron-hard scales the tentacles loosened and he fell to his knees. He heard a great voice roaring somewhere near him. The mist cleared and he saw the old man, his sword

red to the hilt, standing spread-legged over the cloven body of the lizard-man and shouting his defiance at the mob.

“Come on!” he cried. “Show me the stuff in you! There’s but the two of us here, and me a grandfather to boot.. Can I swing the sword yet, did you ask? Can I prove the law, who made it? Rats is what you are—crawling, squeaking rats! Is it food you’re wanting? There’s carrion for you! Fill your bellies so you can crawl into your holes like the rats ye are and dream of the day when you’ll pull down Michael Moran. Or will you go to *her* and get your fill of what she’ll give you?”

They quailed before him. Six of them were dead and Zagar lay writhing with a broken back. They retreated as the old man strode to where the crippled Martian lay.

“You know the law,” he said quietly. “There’s only death for you, the way you are, and you’ve got the choice. Which is it, the sword—or her?”

Moran saw black venom in Zagar’s eyes. The flat brown face twisted in a leer of hate. “I claim the law!” the Martian hissed. “Take me to her!”

Dead silence followed his reply. Leaning on his sword, the old man stared into the hate-filled eyes. He shook himself like a great, shaggy dog.

“Pick him up, Paddy Moran,” he commanded. “You’ll be with us a long time, and you may as well know the whole of it now as later. Follow behind me now, and remember—kin of mine or not, I’m boss!”

Shouldering his bloody sword like a rifle, the old man strode down the broken slope in front of the caves. Picking up Zagar, Moran followed. An impulse came over him to crush the life out of that hate-filled dwarfish body and fling it away among the rocks, but the Martian’s whisper stopped him:

“I Claim the law!”

Following paths which old Michael seemed to know well, they wound their way through the labyrinth of wind-worn, gaudy stone, forcing their way against the howling gusts of wind that buffeted them from every side. They came to a little stream, a mere trickle of icy water running in a groove in the soft rock, and stopped to wash the blood from their faces and bodies and to clean the great sword. At last, through an avenue in the rock, Moran saw the amethyst dyke rising before them, its top a good fifty feet above the rock of the valley floor. Blocks of broken crystal made a steep way to its top, and up that broken way they climbed until they stood side by side on its bare summit, that ran like a great smoky purple road to the east.

Here in the open they were exposed to the full force of the wind. The dyke was glassy-smooth, and Moran had all he could do to keep his footing as he followed the old man along its top toward the abyss. He tried to speak, but the wind snatched the words from his mouth. He bowed his shoulders over the now unconscious Martian and struggled on.

Straight as a drawn line the purple causeway ran, splitting the valley in two halves. As they struggled on, the giant clear crystal at its end loomed ever higher before them and the dazzling radiance from the abyss beat ever brighter upon them, until they were forced to shield their eyes. A sudden gust spun Moran around and flung him to his knees, and as he rose he saw that the others were close behind them.

The old man walked cradling the sword in his arms like a child, his white head bowed. Moran could feel the fierce light on his skin, burning deep into it. Then it was welling up through the rock under his feet, beating in on all sides, so that it seemed that he walked on a ribbon of purple ice, flung out in a great projecting frost-tongue over the abyss.

The old man stopped. The dyke was narrow here, barely eight feet across, and the mutter of the wind had died until Moran could hear his voice.

“Lay him there at her feet,”

Moran strode forward, one pace, two and three, and laid the body of the Martian at the base of the crystal shaft. He stepped back and looked up.

He saw her floating there.

She was a woman, taller than most, and slim. Her hair streamed in a red glory over her bare white shoulders, covering her body with a veil of silken flame. Her hands were pressed flat against her body, each pink fingernail showing as though lit from within. Her head was bent a little to look down, her red lips parted breathlessly. Her eyes were closed and the long dark lashes lay gently on her cheeks that were soft as white velvet.

She floated in a hollow in the quartz, an oval casket filled with violet radiance that surrounded her like a halo. The light from the abyss seemed somehow collected, curdled, compressed into the intangible medium in which she swam, her little feet pressed close together, her ten pink toes treading on emptiness. She was woman as men have dreamed of her since time began, and in him Moran felt the hot desire flooding up through his veins and bringing all the savage fury of love out of him in a mighty shout.

His grandfather’s hand was on his shoulder and he shook it off. He stepped forward, stiff-legged, like a robot walking. He heard the Martian’s cackle of mad glee.

He saw her green eyes open and look down at him.

Out of the world went everything but the love and the glory of her. Out of the world went everything but the red, red welcome of her parted lips, and the warm pleasure of her burning hair. Into his soul swam the glory of her sea-green eyes, calling him, drawing his life out to mingle with her life in a Nirvana never known to man.

In a world where the grass was springing emerald flame, where the trees drooped with clustered pearls for fruit and the streams were molten sapphire he wandered at her side under seething purple skies, and drank from the silver cup she held for him, feeling a flame of radiant fire surging through his veins as he sank with her into the clinging purple mists from which she drew her immortality—and his.

In a world where soft, perfumed breezes blew over spindrift of apple-jade and slow waves curled along coral sands, he lay dreaming under a moon of argent and shadowy purple, under a sky studded with diamond stars. In shadowed darkness, arched over with the filmy fronds of giant ferns, bedded on tufted mosses, he lay and played at love with maidens who ran from him through the pulsing darkness and danced among the silver moonbeams, mockingly, whose ringing voices called him, lured him, over hill and dale until in the cold gray light of dawn he came upon them bowered among orchids and saw them melt and merge into a shining, yielding One.

Flesh of her flesh he hung in the void above the Universe and saw it spread in a shining cloud beneath his spurning feet, saw it receding to a pin point of misty light as he rushed on and up and out into the utter blackness of space, held in her slim, warm arms, bathed in her fiery hair, drinking the sweetness of her crimson lips—until in all Eternity were only they two, and the hungry, feasting love that made them one, man and woman, until the end of time.

Soul of her soul he swam in a place of fires that burned without warmth, of tiny glowing motes that drifted up out of nowhere and swirled about his head like perfumed smoke. He caught one between finger and thumb and held it up for his mind to probe it and know it for a universe of universes, infinitely small, infinitely remote, where the lifetime of a world was but the ticking of a pulse. Yet in that microcosm he lived as he lived in the place of flame, and she with him, holding her to him with the green promise of her half-closed eyes, weaving a web with the copper glory of her hair, drawing him down, down, down into unfathomable blackness where there was only the green, cold light of her two eyes, staring, staring

out of nothingness.

And then her soft hand was in his, drawing him away into a place where there was only herself and the beauty of her, like a thing alive and breathing, where he was but a starving, longing atom of her being, merging in her, looking out through her eyes upon a world of mad, warped shapes that filled him with fear and loathing, and with a hate that came into him out of her and filled him with blinding rage—rage that eclipsed all save the smile on her soft, warm lips and the half-closed eyes that regarded him under drooping lashes—hate that split him in two parts, a part that fought and slew and a part that watched.

He saw one who wore his shape wrest the great sword from the old man's hand and buffet him to the ground. He saw that one charge berserker upon the huddled crowd of men, hewing at them like a woodsman at a tree, beating at them as with a flail of steel, driving them before him like milling sheep. A silver thread ran from him to that one whom he saw, and over it came surging a great, cold glee, and the slippery stickiness of fresh blood warm on his hands, and the salt taste of blood on his lips, that were her lips, licked by her pointed tongue. He felt the evil joy welling up in her at the odor of death that was in the air, and the sight of death in her eyes, and it seemed that it drove out the self that was in her, and made it one with he who stood and slew.

He was that, one, there on the purple path, with the great sword in his bloody hands and the blood of slaughtered men wet on his face. And behind him, where the witch-woman swam in her crystal sepulcher, he heard the rasping, vengeful cackle of Zagar, the Martian.

All the lusts of his man's body had been sucked up by the witch's gaze—the lust of man for woman, and the lust of man for gold, and the bloody lust of man for war and death. Those lusts were gone from him, and he stood, now, cold and empty, staring at the old man, his grandfather, where he lay senseless at the abyss' edge. He saw the Martian, twisted with pain at the crystal's base. And he saw again the woman floating in her mist, with the dark evil standing naked in her green eyes.

The red sword swung in an arc of steel and smote at the crystal's face. Again—again—and the whole world rang with the clamor of steel on quartz. But the walls of the bubble that held her were thin, and with the third mighty blow they shivered and rained about him like needles of clear ice. Again he raised his dripping sword—and met her clear green eyes.

Slowly his arms fell limp at his sides and the sword fell at his feet unheeded. Her small bare feet stepped daintily down among the broken shards. Her red hair flowed back over her round white shoulders, revealing all the loveliness of her witch's body, and her two slim hands were held out to him in invitation.

It seemed that an icy draft blew on his chest as he took her hands in his. Uncomprehendingly he saw the long white welts that rose where her fingers touched him. Her hands were on his arms now, sapping away their strength, and her red lips were raised to his, her pointed tongue licking out between her sharp white teeth. There was a perfume on her hair and her body, pungent and intoxicating, that filled his brain and drugged his reeling senses. He felt her body against his, and all its promise poured through him in a numbing, chilling wave that left in him a single core of searing fire. Her eyes were closed, but now they opened slowly and he plunged recklessly, hopelessly into their fathomless green depths.

In him a bubble burst. An atom of white fire exploded in his brain, scourging him, cleansing him. He looked into his grandfather's steely eyes, over the sundered, bloodless body of the woman-thing, cleft by a singly blow of the great gray sword. He raised her body up in his two hands, and it was light as a husk of shadow and cold as the touch of Death. He hurled it out into the sea of violet flame, and saw it drift and spin and sink like a feather into the abyss. Then the fury of the winds burst over them and he was flat on his face at the abyss' edge, clinging with bleeding fingers to the jagged quartz.

Inch by inch he dragged himself back from the verge, along the ribbon of amethyst to a place where he

could scramble down into the shelter of the rocks. His grandfather was there, with the others who were still alive. The old man's hand seized his arm in a grip of iron.

"You did it, boy! You did what every man of us has tried to do since we were spilled into this hell's paradise! You went to her freely, and you broke her spell and her power with it. We've only the Stalkers to face now, and with her gone I'm thinking it will be a different tale."

Moran shuddered. If the old man's arm had not been strong and his eye sure, those full red lips would have touched his. What lay beyond he dared not guess. What had she been—she with her woman's shape, a woman's allure, yet dry and bloodless like a husk of cast skin? What manner of unnatural force kept the life in her, there in her crystal tomb and after? What would have been the price of that last kiss—or its reward?

"Tell me about it," he said huskily. "What's it all about?"

"She was the answer," the old man told him. "Once there was a reason for it. They had brains, those old Stalkers that built the city and put her here. They knew what they were doing, but now"—he spat contemptuously—"these things that've come down from them do what they do because it's habit, because their parents did, and theirs before them, because their pint-size brains haven't room for anything but the things they've always done. Maybe she was a goddess, if things like that can have goddesses. Anyway, every time things were fixed so that Sirius' companion star shone through the Black Hole they'd bring food and leave it by the crystal. We lived on that, and men like us have lived on it for Heaven knows how long. She never touched it—not her. *We* were the food she craved!

"I don't know if they found her here, those old Stalkers, or if she was from another star, maybe another universe, and they put her there in the crystal to keep her from getting at them. She'd have taken them, all right. She drew no lines, but she liked her own kind best. She took them when she could. You've been through it—you know, maybe, what it was—but she left them dead and drawn, with something gone out of them—and smiling. It was the choice we gave to them, that broke the law—quick death by the sword, or her. Some of 'em took her—

"That's where the toad came in. She needed strong men, big men, men with brains that could fight her, that she could play like a fish before she took the life out of them. The Stalkers would bring what they could get, and them that got past the toad were fit for her. There's been a lot of us, since I came here. It took a quick brain and a strong body to make it, and she got the best there was."

"Why did you stay here?" Moran demanded. "There must be some way out."

"Hell, we've all tried that!" It was a scarred half-caste from one of Earth's stray colonies. "There's no way, only the way we came, and there you've got the toad to pass and the Stalkers if you make it. With her dead we'll starve here. There was worse things than goin' to her!"

Moran's eyes narrowed. "Are you mad enough to risk the Stalkers if I handle the toad?" They stared at him blankly. "They're big but they're stupid; some of us'll get through. Do you have the guts to try?"

They shuffled forward, one by one, until they were crowding around him. "All right," he told them, "you've got leather—make me two ropes, strong ones, and get together whatever you've got to fight with. Grandpa and me'll do the rest."

It was night when they crossed the summit of the pass and crept down the gorge through the eternal rains—a dozen men, armed with broken stones, knives of chipped flint, or their bare hands. Ahead of them went Moran, his eyes and ears alert for any signs of danger, and at his side marched the old man, fondling his beloved sword.

Shortly after dawn Moran gave the word. They lashed the ropes securely about his body and snubbed them about projections of the cliff. He walked slowly toward the edge of the pit. The toad was waiting.

Slowly its flat head rose, its golden eyes blinked, and that hypnotic trill began to throb from its swollen throat. A chill of horror brought the cold sweat out on Moran's skin. What if the ropes should break?

He was at the limit of his tether now. Fascinated, he stared at the hideous face that hovered at the pit's edge. Gritting his teeth, Moran waved his arms. The trilling stopped; the great toad's muscles tensed. With a shout Moran leaped back.

At once the pallid tongue licked out. He felt its sticky mass envelop him, felt the leather thongs cutting into his flesh as they resisted its pull. He was suffocating, strangling, the breath crushed out of his bursting lungs. Then came the scramble of feet on the stone and old Michael Moran was at his side. He heard the clang of steel on stone, and the severed tongue dropped at his feet. A second blow and the ropes were cut, and the two men sprang forward into the pit. Side by side they stood on the toad's broad skull. Seizing the sword, Moran raised it high above his head and smote with all his strength. Blood and brain pulp spurted from the cleft in the monster's skull, and the last dying kick of the great creature flung them from its back. Then it was still, and they were clambering up over its colossal bulk, out of the pit, with their crew close at their heels.

The Stalkers were aroused. In the half light of dawn Moran could see their ungainly forms scrambling out of their barrows, hear them calling out to each other in their purring voices. He saw their eyes glowing in the darkness like golden moons as they stalked across the valley toward the stairs.

Moran looked at his grandfather. The old man's legs were braced, his white locks whipping in the wind. The others were close behind—ten grim-faced men, armed with chipped stones and bits of wood, waiting to die fighting against inhuman giants thirty times their size. With room to run, to dodge, to hide among the ruined buildings of the deserted city, they might have escaped. Here, penned on this narrow ledge, they had no chance. Even the great sword could do nothing against those giant bodies.

He took the old man gently by the arm. "Give me the blade," he said. "You've had your fun, now. Let it be Paddy Moran that shows the creatures the welcome we have for them."

Cradling the sword in his arms as his grandfather had done, he watched them coming up the steps. Their heads towered far above him; they were almost within reach. He flung a curt order over his shoulder. "Wait—then run for their legs. They'll be a bit busy at the first, and you'll maybe get through."

Grounding the sword's point, he tensed for the first futile blow.

Black hail screamed down across his vision. Great sweeping wings—long, shining lances—ray guns spitting out their needles of white fire. In hundreds and thousands, streaming from the clouds like rain in a headlong dive, the Muraths came.

Bewildered, the Stalkers stood in a huddle, midway of the stairs, their misshapen heads cocked upward, their vast arms hanging limp. Then they were in retreat, stumbling across the plain to the shelter of the ruined city, striking vainly at the buzzing, darting mites that zoomed and banked about their heads striking death with rays and stabbing spears. Five of them lay dead and others were staggering, falling, to lie still on the bare stone.

Out of the winged horde one tiny figure dropped toward the watching men. It braked deftly and landed at Moran's feet. "Greetings, O Man," it croaked. "Shag holds his word. Life for life—that is law."

It was Shag, the Murath, who showed them the road through the Mountains of the Night before he returned to complete the slaughter which his winged legions had begun. From time immemorial Stalkers and Muraths had warred, and many of Shag's kinsfolk had gone to feed the great toad in the Stalkers' pit. Never before had one of them escaped, to lead his race back to the hidden stronghold of the giants and to their vengeance.

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