

Red Gem of Mercury

by Henry Kuttner

A stone from the stars kept vigil, and a dead man smiled, as Steve Vane bore a

death token from Mercury to the man who had promised him--murder!

CHAPTER ONE

Stone from the Stars

THE noise of pursuit was growing louder. Steve Vane's lungs ached with each

knife-thrust, gasping breath of the icy air. His gray prison garments were no

protection against the wintry breeze, and his thin shoes were already wet with

snow and beginning to freeze.

It was hard to keep going. It would be far easier to give up the mad attempt, to

stop and wait, with his hands in the air, till the guards came and took him back

to the bare gray walls of his cell. But--Vane took a quick glance at the grim-faced man racing along beside him--if tough little Tony Apollo could keep

going, certainly husky, big-shouldered Steve Vane could grit his teeth and stagger along. But where would it end? The break had been hopeless from the

start, doomed to certain failure. Only the iron determination of Tony Apollo,

and the burning sense of injustice rankling within Vane had kept the latter's

will firm.

"Pasqual framed us both," Apollo had said, his dark face sombre with hatred.

"I've been in here longer than you have--but I'm getting out now. If you're smart, you're coming with me. One of us has a chance to get Pasqual before the

cops nail us."

And so the two had planned and fled. Blue and shaking with cold, they plunged

along the bank of the river gorge toward the cabin Apollo had said would serve

as a hideout.

"How--how much further?" Vane managed to gasp, and hated himself for the

weakness his question betrayed. Apollo managed a twisted grin.

"Just over the ridge, kid. Dunno if I can make it. Those damn guards--that bullet went into my lungs. Steve, if I--if I croak, get Pasqual for me. When he

framed me into the big house, I told him I'd come back, and he knows I've never

broke my word. I--"

Apollo grimaced and coughed blood. He lurched; Vane gripped the smaller man's

arm and pulled him along for a few steps. Then the gangster pulled free and

plunged ahead, ploughing up snow as he ran.

TRUE enough, Vane thought, Apollo had never broken his word. The whole set-up

was fantastic. Two years ago Tony Apollo had been the underworld king of Kentonville, and had tried to bribe Vane and failed. For, in those days, Steve

Vane had been a struggling, idealistic lawyer in the slum district.

Then big Mike Pasqual, Apollo's lieutenant, had stepped in. Very cleverly he had

framed his chief. Apollo had gone to prison and Pasqual reigned in his place.

Anybody who got in his way was crushed. As Steve Vane had been

crushed--suspended from the bar and given a long prison term because of certain

papers Pasqual had had forged. Now the two doomed men fled along the snowy brink

of the gorge in a gray, ominous half-light, with a wintry breeze numbing their

bodies. And behind them came men with guns.

Almost at the summit of the ridge it happened. Apollo clutched at his side, lurched, and cried out sharply. Vane whirled; his hand went out in a futile gesture. For already the little gangster was falling. . . .

The treacherous snow banked on the edge of the abyss crumbled beneath him. He

was gone almost before Vane realized it. Sick with horror, the lawyer moved

forward and peered over. He saw the body, far below, bound off a rock and vanish

into the swift, turbulent river.

Tony Apollo was dead, and he had failed to keep his last promise.

A shout sounded eerily from the distance. Vane heard the noise of a shot--the

high whine and the sharp report. He glanced over his shoulder, saw three dark

forms, and caught his breath, hesitating. What now? He had not realized before

just how much he had come to depend on Apollo's grim, iron will. But the gangster was gone--

The hideout! It lay just over the ridge. Perhaps there were guns there. Vane

broke into a stumbling run, topped the rise, and saw below him a broad, shallow

valley. A cabin, its roof pillowed with snow, was not far away. Pines rose thickly from the whiteness of the ground. The key was hidden in the hollow log

Apollo had mentioned. Vane burst into the cabin in a flurry of snow, kicking the

door shut behind him and barring it. His first glance showed him a rack of well-oiled rifles within easy reach. The feel of the smooth stock was comforting

to his fingers.

He went to a window and peered out. The pursuers were just coming over the rise.

It would be easy to pick them off now, one by one. Vane cuddled the rifle against his cheek; his finger tightened on the trigger. But he did not fire. He had never yet killed a man. Even though his ideals had changed, in the slow

torment of months of prison, into a dull, burning hatred and resentment, yet he

realized that this rage was focused on one man only. Pasqual. The squat gangster

chief who had framed him into disgrace. The guards--well, they would not hesitate to shoot him down, given the opportunity. But that was their job. Vane

said "Hell" under his breath and fired over the heads of the three.

They paused very briefly and then dived for cover. After a time Vane could see

them cautiously coming closer, taking advantage of every hiding place. He fired

again.

One of the guards yelled, "Come on out! You can't get away!"

"I've got plenty of ammunition," Vane shouted back. "And I'm staying right here.

"

THEN, without warning, it happened. A shrill keening almost above the threshold

of hearing grew suddenly louder. Vane, startled, glanced up. Beyond the tops of

the pines he saw the gray, cloudy sky--

He screamed, dropping the gun, and flung up his arms to shield his face, falling

back in instant reaction. For rushing toward him from the sky came a dot--a

circle--a huge black thing that grew larger by split-seconds. It was like

standing on a railroad track and watching a locomotive plunge toward you. One

had only the single impression of something--a meteor?--rushing, expanding,

growing--

Earth-shaking and thunderous was the explosion. Vane felt the floor rise up

under his feet; he was hurled through the air, his ear-drums almost broken by

the violence of the sound. Swift movement, and a flash of blinding light, and

then darkness, complete and quiet....

HE could not have been unconscious long. He woke to find himself lying in the

snow, his head throbbing with pain. Dazedly he heard a voice say, "Alive, eh?"

You looked like a goner to me."

Vane sat up and looked around. He realized that there were handcuffs on his

wrists. He was under a pine, and some distance away was what was left of the

cabin. It was like a house of cards that had collapsed. Only a miracle had enabled Vane to survive.

He looked up and saw the blue-jowled, bulldog face of a guard. The man nodded

and jerked his thumb down the slope.

"There," he said. "That's what hit. Airship or something."

Vane looked, and his eyes widened with amazement. An airship--no! No Earthly

vessel, obviously. Shaped like a tear-drop, it had fallen thirty feet from the cabin and had dug a crater out of the snowy ground. Its hull was split and riven

in a dozen places by the shock of the impact. A crystalline green powder carpeted the ground and cloaked the trees for yards around.

The ship itself was perhaps twenty feet long, made of a dully-shining metal,

bluish in hue. The two remaining guards were busy, pulling something through a

yawning gap that split the hull.

The man standing over Vane bent and jerked the prisoner to his feet. "Somebody

was in it," he grunted. "Hurt or probably dead. Come along." Vane let himself be

pulled toward the wreck. Despite the sick hopelessness that filled him at his

capture, he was also conscious of an overwhelming curiosity. Would it be that

for the first time in human history a--spaceship had reached the Earth? And its

passenger--what would he be like?

The two guards were kneeling beside the body, one of them trying to force brandy

between the alien being's lips. Vane's captor halted behind them, his hand tightly gripping the lawyer's arm. A whistle of amazement escaped his lips.

"Jeez!" he muttered. "What a freak!"

A freak, truly, Vane thought, in this world. Fully eight feet tall the being was, man-shaped, with a tremendous barrel chest and thick legs jointed in

several places. The clothing was skin tight, ripped and torn to reveal greenish

skin that gleamed with pale radiance.

The lips, Vane saw, were broad, fleshy, and indigo-blue in color. And there was

but one eye; the other had vanished in a crimson smear that matched in hue the

red jewel that gleamed on the being's forehead.

Vane stared at the strange gem, conscious of an inexplicable fascination that

seemed to radiate from it. Larger than a hen's egg, it seemed to be embedded in

the greenish flesh of the bulging forehead and the bone beneath.

And--it lived!

Chapter 2

The Gift of Power

ONE guard took the bottle from the bluish lips. "It's dead," he said slowly. "I

don't--"

The monster groaned. The massive head turned. The single eye passed over the

faces of the four men. Vane felt an odd sense of shock as the weird gaze focused

briefly upon him.

Simultaneously an icy chill shook Vane's mind. He went sick, giddy, and momentarily blind. Beside him, he heard the guards gasp, and realized that they

felt as he did.

It passed. Vane heard a voice inside his mind.

Inaudible, yes--but clearer than any bell-tone he heard it.

"For Gawd's sake!" a guard said, amazedly. "I--I'm hearing things--"

He paused.

The inaudible voice commanded, "Silence!" And the word's meaning was somehow as

clear to Vane as it would have been if spoken aloud in modern English.

"I am Zaravin," the mental voice said. "I must give you four my message swiftly,

for I have little time left. I am from . . . the planet you call Mercury. The innermost planet."

Vane tried to draw back, but could not. His muscles seemed frozen into paralysis. Sweat was cold on his forehead.

Unreasoning horror of the unknown made his stomach a sick void.

The telepathic voice went on.

"Listen.... Two months out from Mercury I fell ill . . . with the sleeping death. When I awoke, all was lost. The ship needed continual guidance. Since I

could not carry sufficient fuel, I had to manufacture it on the way . . . and I

awoke too late. There was not enough fuel for me to prevent this crash."

The jewel on Zaravin's forehead flamed with red, baleful light. It held Vane's

gaze.

The Mercurian went on:

"It is the Stone from the Stars that you see. It is the bestower of all power.

Ages ago it fell, embedded in a meteorite, brought from some alien Universe,

perhaps . . . it is alive. All knowledge, all strength, is hidden in it. You

doubt me, I see.... Jaeckel, Bester, Hanley....Stephen Vane.... How, then, do I

know the names of you four?"

There was silence. All around the green dust sparkled eerily, and drifted down

from the trees. A chill wind blew up flurries of snow. The distant sound of the

tumbling river seemed very loud in the utter silence.

"The Stone from the Stars gives all power," Zaravin told the Earthmen soundlessly. "It is . . . what you call . . . symbiosis. For it lives, with a strange, silicate life of its own. Perhaps, in the unknown abyss from which it

came, it drew its life-force from rays . . . alien suns.... I do not know. On Mercury, it feeds upon the life-energy of its host. And now I am its host."

The blue, fleshy lips twisted in pain. Shining blood made a pool around the bulbous head.

"It is a parasite and drains the lifeforce. But in return it shares its own wonderful powers with the owner--powers of telepathy and will. These powers must

be used sparingly, for they are exhausting. The owner of the gem at times falls

into a state of suspended animation, during which the jewel rests and revitalizes itself. When I started this first interplanetary voyage, our ruler gave it to me, knowing that only with its aid could I conquer the tremendous

obstacles. And there was only one way for the Stone to be removed. Once it finds

a host, it remains there during the entire life-span of that host. Our ruler was

forced to kill himself in order that I might have the gem...."

The weird, soundless voice grew urgent.

"The power of the jewel must not die! Even though it is lost to Mercury, it will

aid the men of Earth. Take it, one of you--use it! And when your race has conquered space-travel, take the Stone from the Stars back to my people.

Remember--it gives all power to the owner!"

The Mercutian's body twisted convulsively. A torrent of blood gushed from between the thick blue lips. A choking gasp sounded as the huge body jerked. The

bulbous head rolled aside as the single eye glazed in death.

And--the Stone from the Stars leaped from Zaravin's forehead!

VANE realized that the Mercutian was lifeless. His horrified eyes followed the

path of the jewel.

It soared out swiftly, turning over and over, rolled down a little slope of snow, and then lay still and shimmering.

Silence. Time itself had stopped. The murmur of the river was a deafening thunder.

One of the guards gave a curious gasping sound. It broke the spell. Vane drew an

unsteady breath, shivering a little. And then, before any of his captors could

move, he wrenched free from the grasp on his arm and dived forward.

He fell on his knees. His handcuffed wrists hit together painfully. His cupped

fingers found the Stone from the Stars and lifted it.

It lay in his palm, red against the snow he had scooped up with it.

"Vane!" a guard roared. "Drop that--" that--"

The Stone blazed, throwing unearthly reddish reflections on white snow and

cold-pallid skin.

It held fascination for Vane. He lifted it toward his forehead. A heavy hand

gripped his shoulder, flung him back. But too late.

The Stone from the Stars leaped from Vane's palm. He felt an instant of grinding, sickening agony clashing within his brain. It lasted only a moment,

and was gone.

He stood up, throwing off the hand that held his shoulder. The guard--it was

bulldog-faced Hanley--went for his gun.

As he drew it, something made Vane say curtly, "Drop it! Drop the gun, Hanley!

Quick!"

"Like hell I will," the guard snarled. There was a soft little plop at his feet.

The automatic had fallen into the snow. Hanley said, "Whup!" and started to bend

over to recover the weapon.

Vane said, "Don't move!" Hanley froze. The lawyer whirled toward the others.

"Don't move, any of you!"

And the guards stood motionless. Jaeckel was caught off balance, with one leg in

the air. He wavered, toppled, and fell flat on his face.

Vane stood unmoving for a time. Presently he reached up and gingerly touched the

gem. His fingers groped searchingly.

The Stone had attached itself permanently to his forehead. It had sunk in, blazing like a caste mark of some Hindu sect, above and between his brows

. . .

UNREASONING horror shook Vane. He clawed at the jewel, tried to wrench it from

its place. He could not budge the gem. His nails slipped off the smooth, cold

surface. His wrists began to bleed as the handcuffs dug into them.

It was nightmare--the guards living statues, the jewel flaming in his living flesh and bone, the dead silence, broken only by the river's murmur . . .

Vane lowered his hands slowly and stood staring at the cuffs. Apparently Zaravin

had not lied. The Stone from the Stars gave its possessor strange powers.

And that meant--

Suddenly Vane thought of Pasqual. Big Mike Pasqual, ruthless, all-powerful lord

of Kentonville's underworld. Too smart for the law. Too strong for his enemies.

All-powerful--

Like hell!

Vane's smile was not good to see. He was visualizing Pasqual, frozen motionless

as the guards had been, screaming for help, facing the death he had arranged for

so many others.

The lawyer turned to Hanley. His young face, with lines of bitterness months of

prison had engraved upon it, was hard.

"Unlock my handcuffs, one of you," he said quietly.

"Yeah?" Hanley's voice was strained but mocking. "I don't know what you've done

to me, but I'm not going to take those cuffs off. I won't--I won't--"

His voice rose into a scream. Because all the time he was talking, Hanley was

reaching into his pocket, taking out a key-ring, selecting a small key, walking

forward and reaching toward Vane's extended wrists . . .

"Thanks," Vane said as the lock clicked. He shook the cuffs off and gingerly massaged his wrists. "Now--let's see. These prison clothes. They won't do. But a

guard's uniform--" He shook his head, pondering.

"And I can't leave you here. You'd freeze in no time. I don't know why the devil

I care about that, but--I've got it. Listen, the three of you. In ten minutes you'll be perfectly normal again. You'll go directly back to the prison. You

won't remember anything that happened after you came into this valley.
Tony

Apollo and I are dead. You saw us fall into the gorge. We're dead. Do you understand?"

"We understand," the three chorused. Jaeckel's voice was muffled as he lay face

down in the snow.

Vane grinned suddenly. "Okay, boys," he said, turning. "Good luck!" And he hurried up the slope toward the ridge and freedom....

HIS mind was furiously active. What now? First of all, he had to get rid of these betraying clothes and find more suitable garments.

What about the guards? For a second Vane felt an unreasoning premonition, but

dismissed it casually. After all, he owned the magic gem that gave its owner

incredible powers. And--so far--it seemed to work.

It worked on a tourist Vane stopped, too. The man was about his build, he noticed, and was driving a sedan slowly along the highway that twisted through

the mountains near by. Vane simply stood beside the road and

commanded--inaudibly--"Slow down and stop. Be careful." He did not wish to see

the man kill himself by plunging over the precipice that gaped across the highway.

The sedan stopped. The man got out. He stared at Vane and gasped, "You're the

escaped con! Don't shoot--"

"Take off your clothes," Vane said.

"I will not!" the man said in a shocked voice, shucking his overcoat. He removed

his necktie. "Undress in the open-air? I've never done such a thing in my life!"

He pulled off his pants. "I won't undress and that's flat!"

"Keep your underwear," Vane smiled, as the man continued to strip. "Swell.

Now

get in back and cover yourself up with that afghan I saw there."

"I won't," the man said, crawling into the back seat and pulling the afghan over

him. "I won't."

"Now keep quiet."

There was no answer. Vane donned the garments and got in the front seat. He

found a comb in an inner pocket and adjusted his hair till a lock of it fell over the jewel that flamed on his forehead. Still he was not satisfied. He picked up the black Homburg that lay on the seat beside him, turned down the

brim, and pulled it over his eyes. Peering into the rear-view mirror, he nodded,

satisfied. It would do. The gem was hidden from casual scrutiny.

Vane was whistling softly as he slid the car into gear and began the long journey into Kentonville....

Chapter 3

The Man Who Was Dead

SIX hours later, at five-thirty, Vane reached his destination. He paused on the

outskirts and bought a paper from an excited newsboy.

"Big mystery, mister," the kid was yelping. "Men from Mars--escaped convict--jeez!"

"Sure," Vane said, and gave the boy a dollar he found in his pocket. Later he

parked under a street light and examined the headlines. A worried frown puckered

his brows.

There was trouble he had not anticipated. His plan had not been successful. The

three guards had awakened ten minutes after he left them and started plodding

back to the prison. But before they topped the rise they were halted by

reinforcements the warden had sent out, The newcomers saw the spaceship, and,

worse, they had followed the tracks in the snow.

They read the signs correctly. One of the escaped convicts had fallen into the

gorge. The other had escaped; his tracks ended at the highway, where he had

obviously boarded an automobile. The dragnet was still out. The mystery of the

surviving convict's identify wasn't solved by Hanley, Jaeckel, or Bester. In the

face of plain evidence and sane logic, they continued to contend firmly that both Apollo and Vane had fallen into the gorge.

The spaceship made headlines. Wild guesses were made as to its origin.

Naturally, the three guards added little light to the problem. They had never

seen the ship before. Obvious they were lying, since their tracks in the snow

told a different story. Jaeckel, Hanley, and Bester were now protesting against

their confinement in the observation ward.

Vane grinned

There was a watch in his vest pocket, he found. Five-thirty-five. And, as the

newspaper showed, this was Thursday. The lawyer shoved the car into gear.

"Unless Pasqual has changed his methods since I was sent up," he murmured, "his

boys are making the rounds on East Third Street right now. Wonder if Uncle

Tobe's still in business?"

He had decided on a definite plan. Swiftly he treaded the familiar streets of

Kentonville, feeling an odd sense of pleasure at seeing well-known sights again.

The City Hall--the old Mattingly mansion--Curlew Park--and the slums.

The tenement district, where Vane had been born and where he had fought

his way

up from the gutter. The slums were part of Vane. Beneath the squalor and the

filth he saw something else, a high, unwavering courage that kept on where all

else failed. Kids playing naked under the hydrants, bent old shopkeepers saving

their pennies to send their children to school, shapeless, tired-eyed mothers

slaving over oven-hot stoves in the blazing summers....

VANE parked the car and turned his head. He said to the man lying under the

afghan, "In two minutes you'll wake up and drive to your home. You won't remember anything that's happened since I met you."

There was no answer. Vane emerged from the car and crossed the street, looking

up at the twilight sky. Ramshackle tenements loomed all around. Tiny, grimy little

shops were visible everywhere. Pushcarts were visible here and there.

Vane entered a small grocery whose window bore the legend: Elite Grocery.

A bell tinkled as he stepped across the threshold, looking around the gloomy

interior. A glass showcase, filled with cheap candy, was at his left. The place

looked just the same--like any other grocery in slumtown.

A boy came from the back--a sallow, taffy-haired kid whose thin face was splashed with freckles. He stared at Vane.

"Steve! Jez--" He whirled. "Pop! Hey! Steve's here!"

"Eh? Who? What--" Uncle Tobe came into view. He looked like a gnome, except for

his lack of beard. His face was brown and wrinkled as a walnut, and the faded

blue eyes blinked at the intruder.

Then, suddenly, he was running forward unsteadily, gripping Vane's arm with

skeletal fingers, drawing him back into the store.

"Steve! Come in here, quick! They're all looking for you. Did anyone see you

come in?"

Vane smiled, but let himself be pulled back through faded curtains into the back

room, where Uncle Tobe lived with his adopted grandson. He sank down on a

rickety couch and pulled his hat lower over his eyes. No use frightening his hosts.

"Hold on," he said. "I'm in no danger, Uncle Tobe. Really. I--the police can't

touch me."

"You're cleared? They know you were framed?"

"Not--yet," Vane said slowly, and hurried on. "Listen, I want some information.

Does Pasqual still collect his protection dough from you?"

"Yeah," the boy broke in. "He sure does. Raised the ante, too. That dirty gorilla of his--he busted Uncle Tobe smack across the face when we was half a

buck short. We cleaned out the till, too, but we couldn't make it."

The old man's eyes searched Vane's face. "Something's happened to you, Steve,"

he said, frowning. "What is it?" "Never mind that. When is the collector due

again?"

"Today," the youngster burst out. "I'm going to stick a knife in--"

"Mickey!" Uncle Tobe's voice was sharp. "You want to grow up to be a gangster?

You shut up!"

Vane said, "Okay. I'm going to wait right here. I want some information from

Pasqual's thug, but when he comes I want you to pay him off as usual."

Uncle Tobe bit his lips nervously. "I haven't the money this week, Steve. I'm

five dollars short. I've been trying to borrow it, but everybody else is hard up too."

"Swell. Don't worry about that." Vane paused as he heard the sound of a motor

starting across the street. He smiled a little. His weird power was still with him. He stood up and put his hand on the old man's stooped shoulder.

"Don't worry about it, Uncle Tobe," he said quietly. "Remember when I was a

little kid, you used to slip me candy whenever I came in the store? Remember why

you did that?"

The other nodded. "Sure, Steve. You swiped a peppermint stick out of the case

once, and I caught you at it. You never did it again."

"No. I remember what you told me--that there was always a right way and a wrong

way of getting things, and the wrong way wasn't ever necessary. You said if I

wanted candy, you'd give it to me. Well--I owe you plenty, Uncle Tobe. I've

thought of what you said a lot of times. And--"

The bell tinkled. Mickey went to the curtain and turned back a white face. "It's

Stohm. Uncle Tobe--don't go. I'll go--"

THE old man shook his head, smiling, and went past the boy into the shop. Mickey

followed. Vane stepped to the curtains, parted them a trifle, and peered through

the aperture.

Uncle Tobe was talking to a hulking, unshaved man who looked like a prizefighter. His cauliflower ear seemed to verify that conclusion. His neck made a beefy roll of red fat over a dirty collar. Small black eyes, embedded in

little pits of gristle, watched the old grocer.

Stohm's hand lay palm up on the counter. He turned it over and smacked it against the wood.

"I can't help that," he grunted. "I want the dough. And now."

"I'd give you all I have," Uncle Tobe said. "I'll make up the rest next week."

Stohm said nothing, but waited. Mickey stood against the counter and glared, his

freckles standing out against rage-pallid skin.

Slowly the old man counted out greasy bills, silver, and pennies into the fat

palm. Stohm thrust the money carelessly into his pocket.

He said, "Just to make sure you don't forget to make up the difference next

week." His heavy foot pushed against a showcase, and it fell over with a shattering crash. Candy showered the floor.

Uncle Tobe sprang forward as Stain turned to another case. The blue-veined old

hand clutched a brawny arm. With a contemptuous grin the gangster swung his fist

and knocked the grocer down.

From his hiding-place behind the curtain, Vane watched, feeling a hot tide of

rage surge through him at the sight. Before he could move, however, Mickey had

leaped forward and drove his small, hard fist into Stohm's somach[sic].

The thug grinned. He picked up Mickey by the shirt, holding him helpless in midair.

Stohm said, "Don't get smart with me, sprout. I'm gonna twist your ears off--"

Vane's hand lifted. He brushed the hat off his head. The Stone from the Stars

flamed with unearthly crimson light.

The lawyer's lips moved silently. And Stohm stood helpless, frozen, still gripping Mickey . . .

"Don't move, Stohm," Vane whispered softly. "Don't move a muscle. Just

stay like

that . . ."

The gangster's eyes were wide. His face was twisted into a grimace. He glared at

Mickey as the boy twisted and struck out with his small, fury-driven fists.

They drove into Stohm's face. They flattened his nose and split his lips. They

blackened his eyes and raised red welts on his cheeks.

"Leggo o' me!" Mickey shrilled. "Lemme go!"

But Stohm didn't relax his grip, He couldn't. He couldn't even yell for help.

Only his eyes spoke of stark horror as he continued to hold the boy before him.

Blood spurted from the gangster's nose, dripped down his chin. Uncle Tobe staggered forward and seized Mickey about the waist. He tore the boy's shirt

free from the iron fingers that held it.

"Mickey! Stop it! Stop!" He thrust the lad behind him. "Don't touch him, Stohm.

If you do--"

Uncle Tobe stopped, staring at the other.

Vane readjusted the hat on his head and stepped through the curtains. He patted

the grocer's shoulder.

"It's okay, Uncle Tobe. I told you it'd be. You're a good scrapper, Mickey. Now

be quiet for a bit."

He turned to Stohm.

"Where's Pasqual?"

THE gangster's face remained expressionless, but his voice said thickly, "I dunno."

"When were you to see him again?"

"Tonight. At eight. He's throwing a party tonight at his house. He's celebrating

because Tony Apollo's dead."

"Yeah," Vane said thoughtfully. "That's right. Pasqual was always afraid of Apollo. Well, listen to me, Stohm. You're coming along to headquarters, and

you're going to confess--answer truthfully every question that's put to you. Hear me?"

"Yes," Stohm said dully.

"My God!" Uncle Tobe's thin frame was shaking. "What'd you do to him, Steve?

Hypnotize him?"

"Call it that," Vane nodded. "See you later." He turned to the door.

"You can't go out in the street. You'll be recognized."

The lawyer pulled the Homburg lower over his forehead. "Oh, I dunno. Even if I

am--I don't think I'll be arrested." He grinned at the old grocer. "You've helped me a lot, Uncle Tobe. And you, too, Mickey. Fists are better than knives, aren't they?"

"Me," the boy said, eyeing his hands with awe, "they sure are, Steve."

"Come on," Vane commanded Stohm, and the gangster followed him out of the shop.

Realizing that the latter's bruised face would attract attention, Vane soon managed to find a taxi. The driver was suspicious, but a brief command from the

lawyer had instantaneous effects.

"Police station," Vane directed, and settled back on the cushions beside the

dazed Stohm.

Newsboys were yelling extras as they rode on. "Spaceship from Mars! Read all

about it! Convict still at large!"

"Wonder why people figure Mars is the only planet that has life?" Vane mused.

"Well--" His thoughts turned to Pasqual. Eight o'clock. He had a rendezvous

with

the underworld king at eight . . . He was conscious of an overwhelming hunger.

What had the Mercurian said? Vane tried to remember. The Stone from the Stars

feeds on life-energy--that would speed up his own basal metabolism, of course.

And there was something else--some warning Zaravin had given. What--well, it

didn't matter. Nothing could harm Vane as long as the red jewel glowed on his

forehead.

He was soon to learn how wrong he was in thinking this.

CHIEF OF POLICE LANKERSHIM looked up casually as his office door opened. Then he

caught his breath and rose half upright, staring at the man on the threshold.

Lankershim's hard-bitten, tired face was suddenly ludicrous with amazement.

"Vuh--" he said, and tried again. "Vane!"

"Hello," the intruder smiled. "How are you, Chief?"

Lankershim's eyes flickered to Vane's hands, empty at his sides. Then he looked

again at the other's face.

"Give a dog a bad name," Vane observed. "I'm not armed."

"How the devil did you get in here? I--" The chief of police abruptly shot out

his arm toward the call-buzzer on his desk.

"Stop," Vane said.

Lankershim's forefinger touched the little button, but did not press it. The chief stood there, his left hand flat on the desk, his right arm extended.

Slowly his gaze swiveled toward Vane.

His mouth gaped for a shout to summon aid, but no sound emerged.

"That's it," the lawyer nodded. "Remain perfectly quiet and don't say a word."

Just listen. I've got a prisoner for you. I left him outside--Stohm, one of Pasqual's men. He'll talk. All you have to do is ask him questions."

Vane glanced at his watch. "I've an appointment soon. See you later. You're an

honest cop, Lankershim, and I remember when you used to pound the pavements on

the East Side. So I'm turning Stohm over to you. You won't need to third-degree

him. For myself--" He hesitated "--I'm not going back to prison. It'll do you no

good to throw out a dragnet for me."

Vane turned to the door. "You'll be all right in three minutes. Adios, Chief."

He went out, leaving Lankershim an apoplectic statue. The hall wasn't empty.

Vane pulled the Homburg lower over his eyes and walked swiftly toward the door.

Uniformed men eyed him and turned away.

But one man didn't turn. Vane saw his face light with recognition. He opened his

mouth and thrust out a finger in a swift gesture.

He stayed that way, briefly. He was paralyzed, immobile, with one foot in the

air and his arm extended. Then, off balance, he flopped to the floor, while a

nearby officer stared and came hurriedly forward to administer first-aid.

No one else recognized Vane, and he left. Nobody expected to see him in police

headquarters, so he had no difficulty in walking out and hailing a taxi. He was

driven to Pasqual's home.

It was an old-fashioned mansion set alone amid wide grounds. Vane noticed a

number of cars parked near by. He remembered that Big Mike was throwing a party

that night.

He was again conscious of an overwhelming hunger, and a strange,

inexplicable

lassitude that weakened him. He fought it down, staring at the frog-faced man

who opened the door.

"Yeah?"

"Tell Pasqual Steve Vane's here," the lawyer said.

The other stepped back a pace. His hand dived into his pocket.

Vane extended his arms slightly from his sides.

Frog-face said, "Come in," and closed the door as the lawyer entered. Then he

deftly frisked his guest. After that he nodded to a chair set against the wall

and vanished hurriedly.

VANE sat and looked around. This had once been a palatial Georgian mansion, but

Pasqual had redecorated it to suit himself. The bright hall was furnished in the

height of garishly bad taste. Vane blinked sleepily. He felt very tired . . .

Frog-face returned. "Come along, he grunted, and led the way upstairs. He paused

before a door, thrust it open, and gestured. Vane stepped over the threshold.

He heard the door shut behind him--and lock. He was in a bare room, empty save

for curtains that covered one wall. There were no windows. Two men stepped out

from behind the drapes. They held guns aimed unwaveringly at Vane.

"Pasqual's busy," one of them said jeeringly. "He sent us to--"

Briefly the odd lassitude left Vane as he realized the death that menaced him.

He snapped, "Drop those guns! Quick!"

"Like hell !"

The automatics clanked on the bare floor. The killers stared down at them, at

Vane, and simultaneously lunged forward. They halted in mid-course,

paralyzed.

Vane said, "Go tell Pasqual I want to see him."

The two turned Stimy and vanished behind the curtains. A door shut metallically.

The lawyer rubbed his forehead with a shaking hand, wincing as he felt the chill

surface of the jewel. He felt weak and sick. And tired. His thoughts spun chaotically. What--

The room was moving. No, it was his dizziness. There was a choking, unfamiliar

odor in Vane's nostrils. Reeling a little, he went to the drapes and drew them

aside.

There was a metal door in the wall. It was locked.

Vane felt icy cold. His head was bursting.

It was extremely difficult to move. He turned, staggered, and fell full length

on the bare floor.

His body was like ice. He could not move a muscle. He was paralyzed. . .

Gas! Pasqual had pumped anaesthetic gas into the room. Vane recognized the

strange odor now. But what manner of gas could have this effect? His brain was

perfectly clear, yet he was immobile as a statue. He lay, waiting.

TIME passed. A burly man in a gas mask pulled through the drapes, a gun in one

hand. He paused to eye the figure on the floor. Then he pocketed the gun, bent,

picked up Vane, and carried him into the next room, shutting the door carefully

behind him.

Vane's vision was restricted. He could only stare up at the ceiling. Then a new

face appeared, swart, thick-lipped, and brutal. It was Pasqual.

The stocky gangster stood looking down at Vane. His hoarse voice asked,

"Dead?"

"Yeah." The other man was removing his gas mask.

Pasqual put his palm flat on Vane's breast. He took a small mirror from his pocket and held it to the lawyer's lips.

"He's stiff, all right," the gangster nodded, rising. "Didn't take much gas to knock him out, either. I dunno what he did to Jim and Oscar, but they said he

hexed 'em. Well--" Pasqual's gold teeth flashed in a grin. "That settles one thing. It was Tony Apollo who fell into the gorge up in the mountains. This calls for a celebration, all right."

He pulled at his thick lip, pinching it between thumb and forefinger. "I don't

want Vane's body found here. Get the boys to dump him in the river."

The Homburg was still jammed over Vane's forehead. Pasqual bent, tugged at it,

and changed his mind. He stood up again.

"Okay," he grunted. "Snap it up. When the boys get back, they can help celebrate. I spent a cool thousand on champagne."

He went out. Vane tried desperately to move, to speak. It was useless. Yet he

wasn't dead. He could hear and see. But he wasn't breathing. His heart had

stopped beating. Poison gas--that didn't explain it.

Quite suddenly Vane remembered a sentence Zaravin, the Mercutian, had emphasized.

"The owner of the gem at times falls into a state of suspended animation, during

which the jewel rests and revitalizes itself."

Suspended animation! Good God! How long would it last? Vane thought frantically,

Will I come back to life at the bottom of the river, with rocks tied to my ankles? How long--

Rough hands lifted him. He was wrapped in sacking and carried.

Downstairs, by

the feel of the jolting motion. Then he lay motionless, till he heard the sound

of a car's motor starting.

"Head for the river," a low voice commanded.

Traffic sounds came to him. Someone muttered, "Hurry up. There's a police car

next to us--"

And a siren began to scream ominously.

What was happening? Vane cursed silently, furiously. If he could only move! But

no, he could merely lie helpless as the roar of the motor mounted louder and

louder and the car jolted more uncomfortably.

"They're catching up. . ."

"Throw the stiff out," somebody suggested. "Under their wheels. That'll stop

'em. If we don't--"

A door-latch clicked. Vane felt himself moving. He fell heavily, rolled over and

over, and lay still.

Brakes screeched. Footsteps pounded on the pavement. The gunny-sacking was

stripped from Vane's face.

Staring up glassily, he saw a uniformed officer bending over him, dim against a

star-sprinkled night sky.

"It's Vane!" the man gasped. "The escaped con!"

He turned, shouting. "Keep on after those mugs. Radio headquarters to send a car

out. Tell 'em I got Vane--and he's dead!"

Chapter 4

The Road to Life

VANE lay on an operating table, a sheet over his naked body, and stared

blankly

at a bare white ceiling. He could not move. He could not tell the coroner or the

medical examiner that he was alive, that an autopsy would be murder, that he had

agonizingly felt the cut of a scalpel into his arm, though no blood flowed from

the pale-lipped wound.

The coroner, his face partly hidden under a gauze mask, came forward, holding a

probe. He bent over Vane and delicately felt around the edges of the jewel on

the lawyer's forehead.

"Funny," he said over his shoulder. "I've never seen anything like it. By rights

it ought to have killed the man--it goes right through the bone. Maybe it did

kill him. I can't find any surface wounds on the body."

A deeper voice growled, "Too damn bad the murderers got away. I know Pasqual did

this, but I can't pin a thing on him."

Vane realized that Chief of Police Lankershim was speaking.

"And there's something funny about this whole thing, Doc," the official went on.

"When Vane walked into my office an hour or two ago--well, I told you what

happened, didn't I?"

The coroner's gray eyebrows drew together. Level dark eyes scrutinized the jewel

on Vane's forehead as the medico nodded.

"About Stohm? Yes. He confessed, didn't he?"

Lankershim expelled his breath with an angry sound. "He started to--answered

every question I asked him. But he was so bruised up I sent him to the hospital

for first aid. And--now he's dead."

"Dead ?"

"Poisoned. I don't know how. I'm checking up on the trustees and the internes.

One of 'em tied up with Pasqual, I know, and he managed to kill Stohm before the

man could sign a confession. And now Vane--"

Lankershim came into the lawyer's range of vision. The hard, seamed face was

very tired.

"I feel sorry for the kid. Maybe he was framed, maybe he wasn't. The cards were

stacked against him, anyhow. And now he's cooling on a slab--" The chief's lips

tightened. "Go ahead and find out what killed him, Doc. If I can pin this on Pasqual, so help me, I'll send him to the chair."

A scalpel gleamed in the bright white glare. Vane felt a wave of hopeless sickness. His body tingled with expectation of the searing pain of sharp steel.

His body . . . tingled . . .

Yes. It felt like--like pins-and-needles, the prickling sensation in a limb when

circulation is restored to it after a long time. A pulsating, faint stir, too brief to be called a movement, came . . .

HIS heart! It was beginning to beat again! But already the coroner was placing

the point of his scalpel below Vane's sternum, preparing for the incision.

Vane tried desperately to move. He managed to make one eyelid quiver. Neither

the medico nor Lankershim noticed. The lawyer threw all his will into a silent,

frantic command.

The coroner hesitated, bent again to his task.

Suddenly he threw his arm out in a convulsive gesture. The scalpel flew from his

hand and rebounded off the wall, to clatter upon the floor.

Lankershim said, "What the hell--"

"I--funny! I couldn't help it! Some reflex--"

It was no reflex. As life returned to Vane, the power of the Stone from the Stars waxed strong. His heartbeat was distinctly detectable now.

The coroner recovered the scalpel, stared at it, and thrust it into a sterilizer. He donned another pair of rubber gloves, and, with a different scalpel, advanced again upon the corpse.

Then he stopped. His eyes and mouth expanded to their ultimate limits of flexibility. He gurgled inarticulately.

Behind him, Lankershim gasped, "My God! Look at that!"

The corpse sat up.

Vane winced, stretched out his arms, and yawned. He swung his feet from the

table and sat eying [sic] the two astounded men.

The coroner whispered, "You're dead! You're dead!"

Lankershim came out of his trance. He sprang forward.

Vane frowned and said, "Don't move, either of you." His voice was harsh, husky.

His throat felt tight and dry.

Water. He needed that, first. Clutching the sheet about him, he went to a cooler

in the corner and drank nearly a quart of icy liquid. After that he felt better.

He turned to stare at the two men, who were immobile statues.

A warm stickiness on his arm drew his gaze. The incision the coroner had made was

beginning to bleed as blood flowed again through Vane's arteries. Luckily, the

wound was not deep, and there was adhesive tape in a glass cabinet nearby.

Gingerly he fingered the jewel on his forehead. It was still there, chill, glassy, alien.

He thought swiftly. Pasqual was a shrewd, ruthless antagonist, and he

himself

was not as powerful as he had imagined. These trances might overtake him at any

time. Again he felt the tug of painful hunger. Food was the immediate necessity.

He was weak as a cat.

Food--and clothing. Neither the coroner nor Lankershim wore garments large

enough to fit Vane's big-boned frame. The lawyer hesitated and finally said,

"You'll both wake up in half an hour. Lankershim, I'm going to have a show-down

with Pasqual tomorrow morning. At six A. M. I'm going to his office on the East

Side. I want you to be there, and I want you to see that Pasqual's there, too. I

don't care how you do it, but that's an order. Understand?"

"I understand," Lankershim said dully.

"Swell. Now--I'll need some decent clothes. . ."

GRAY dawn broke over the East Side. Smoke rose greasily from the chimneys.

People rose early in the slums; they had to. Garbage trucks, milk wagons rattled

past. Pushcarts were loaded for the day's trade.

In the back of Uncle Tobe's grocery, Steve Vane stood up from the table. Mickey

was watching him with awed eyes. The lawyer smiled at the boy.

"Gosh, you can sure stow it away! I never seen a guy eat so much."

Vane pulled the hat lower over his eyes. "I was hungry. Don't wake Uncle Tobe.

I'll be seeing you."

He pushed through the curtains, went through the shop, unlocked the front door.

He stepped out in the street, and, with a quick glance around, began to walk

swiftly southward. It was nearly six A.M. Time for the rendezvous.

Pasqual's office was a dingy, mean little place squeezed in between tenements.

Through the glass window Vane could see the squat gangster seated uncomfortably

at his desk, shooting occasional glances behind him, where, no doubt, Lankershim

was hidden. Vane wondered what means of coercion the chief had used on Pasqual

to induce the gangster to keep this appointment. Well, that didn't matter. The

lawyer's lips tightened grimly.

He walked into the store. Pasqual shot up from his chair. His hand was hidden in

his coat. Vane smiled.

"I'm unarmed," he said.

The gangster's thick lips twisted. He called, "Lankershim! Quick!"

From the back of the office came the sound of hurrying feet. The chief, flanked

by four uniformed patrolmen, stepped into view. He walked toward Vane.

"I don't know why I did this," he said. "But I had to, somehow. Vane, you're

under arrest. Put up your hands."

Vane said, "All right," and obeyed. He was thinking fast. At a word from him he

could force Pasqual to commit suicide. Certainly the gangster deserved death.. .

No. There was another way. But--

Lankershim was walking forward, handcuffs clinking as he held them. "Come on,

Vane. "

"Wait a minute."

The chief stopped.

Vane looked at Pasqual. The squat gangster still kept his right hand out of sight under his flashy sport coat. His little eyes were fixed on the lawyer. He

snarled. "For God's sake, put those cuffs on him!"

"I just wanted to tell you something, Pasqual," Vane said, very softly.

"Remember Tony Apollo? Remember how he used to lick the tar out of you when we

were kids? Remember how much you hated and feared him? Tony swore to get you,

Pasqual, and he never broke his word."

"Apollo's dead," the gang chief lashed out.

"He told me nothing could kill him till he'd kept his last promise."

Pasqual started to reply, but no sound came from the thick lips. The tiny eyes

turned toward the door. It was opening, very slowly.

Tony Apollo stood on the threshold.

PASQUAL sucked in his breath sharply. A sound came from his throat. It wasn't

intelligible.

Lankershim whispered, "Apollo!" He reached for his gun.

Vane said, "Don't move, Chief." His glance took in the four patrolmen. "Or you

either. This is between Pasqual and Tony Apollo."

Pasqual glanced around frantically. His face was a sickly butter-color.

Tony Apollo walked forward.

Pasqual screamed and clawed out his gun. He fired point-blank at the other.

Blood gushed from Apollo's chest. He didn't stop. He ignored the wounds. He kept

on walking toward Big Mike Pasqual.

And Big Mike Pasqual wasn't big any more. He was just a terrified little rat, yelling and picking up the telephone from the desk and hurling it at Apollo. The

latter's nose was crushed by the impact. The fixed, unchanging smile did not

fade.

Tony Apollo kept on walking forward.

Pasqual seized a chair, lifted it, and smashed it down on Apollo's head.

"Keep away from me!" he mouthed. "Damn you, leave me alone! I never framed you!"

For God's sake, Tony--"

Pasqual picked up a heavy lamp from the desk and used it like a club. He kept

hitting again and again at his opponent's face. Apollo didn't try to resist or protect himself. He just stood there, while his features slowly vanished in a

mangle of red, pulped flesh.

Tony Apollo came walking on

Horrified gasps went up from the crowd outside. Pasqual whirled suddenly and

made for the door. He forced his way through the mob, and men and women alike

shrank from the hysterical lord of the underworld--now a shaking, shrieking wreck. Pasqual looked over his shoulder.

Tony Apollo was following.

Vane said to Lankershim, "Come on, all of you." He nodded at the officers, and

they trailed him out on the sidewalk. Amid the seething crowd, they stared after

Pasqual.

The gangster was climbing a fire-escape, in a frantic attempt to escape from his

pursuer. Up and up he went, five stories above the ground to the roof. White

faces watched him from the tenement's windows. On the summit Pasqual vanished

for an instant, and then reappeared, holding in his hands a brick he had wrenched from a crumbling chimney.

Tony Apollo was climbing the fire-escape.

And Tony Apollo wasn't a man any longer. He was a red butchered Thing from which

blood dripped in a steady stream to the pavement below. The street was

filled

now with a huge mob; hundreds of eyes were turned up to the roof.

"KEEP away from me! I didn't frame you! Stay back!"

The brick shot down with the force of a bullet. It smashed against Apollo's shoulder. The man's body was torn from its grip. It plummeted down through the

air.

Silence, after that a dull, heavy thud. Then, suddenly, Pasqual screamed like a

damned soul. For Tony Apollo was getting up, slowly, carefully, and starting to

climb the fire-escape again.

Pasqual found more bricks and hurled them down. Some found their mark; some

missed. But Apollo did not lose his grip again. He reached the third story--the

fourth--the fifth. White faces watched him with horror from the windows. Apollo

ignored them.

He had no face. Blood was literally pouring from his body. And he kept on smiling, silently, horribly, as he climbed.

Pasqual suddenly began to scream, "Stop, Tony! I framed you! I framed you! But

I'll give everything back--everything! Only don't come any closer--"

Tony Apollo pulled himself over the edge of the roof. He stood up. Pasqual staggered back, clawing at the air, sobbing hysterically.

Then he fell, and was hidden beyond the parapet of the roof. Tony Apollo fell,

too.

Vane turned to Lankershim. "Better send your men up to the roof. I think our

friend Pasqual will talk now. If he's still sane . . ."

The chief harked a command. Two officers raced forward, clambered up the fire-escape. After a moment one returned, while the other, carrying

Pasqual's

limp body, followed more slowly.

The first officer halted before Lankershim. His voice was puzzled.

"Apollo wasn't up there."

"He got away?"

The patrolman swallowed convulsively. "I--I guess so. There wasn't any blood on

the roof--"

Lankershim expelled his breath in disbelief. "No blood! Why, the pavement's

covered with it. Look!" He pointed--and then his jaw dropped.

There wasn't any blood visible. It had vanished . . .

A MONTH had passed. Vane sat in the back of Uncle Tobe's shop, eating

Hasenpfeffer with gusto. The old man was smoking a battered corncob and nodding

thoughtfully.

"Business is better for everyone now that Pasqual's gang is broken up. He confessed everything, didn't he--how he framed you--everything?"

"That's right."

Uncle Tobe suddenly leaned over the table. "I've been thinking, Steve--they

never found Tony Apollo after he disappeared from that roof."

"Probably dead," Vane grunted. "A wonder he kept alive as long as he did."

The grocer smiled. "I have been thinking of various things," he said, apparently

at random. "The way you hypnotized Stohm when he knocked over my showcase--and

that red stone you used to have on your forehead."

Vane looked up sharply. His face was immobile for an instant. Then, abruptly, he

grinned.

"All right," he said. "You saw the jewel, eh?"

"I got a glimpse of it, yes. And now there is a little scar in the center of

your forehead--"

"Operation. I'd figured that I'd have to wear that stone till I died, like the original owner. But he wasn't--exactly human." Vane hesitated. "Maybe his race

didn't know much about surgery. Maybe their nervous structure was more sensitive. I dunno. An operation removed the jewel, and I'm still alive."

"I see. And what really happened to Tony Apollo?"

"He died the first day after we broke out of prison. Before that, he asked me to

get Pasqual for him if he failed. Tony Apollo was a crook and a gangster, but he

played square, in his own way. And he never broke a promise."

"But it wasn't Apollo who followed Pasqual up that fire-escape."

Vane smiled grimly. "Pasqual saw him. The Chief saw him. The whole crowd saw

him--so did you."

"Yes, I saw him," Uncle Tobe nodded. "But--did you?"

There was a brief silence. Then Vane shook his head.

"No, I didn't see him. He wasn't there, except in the minds of Pasqual and the

chief and all the rest. I--well, let's say I used hypnotism." Involuntarily the lawyer's hand went up to the scar on his forehead.

Uncle Tobe tugged at his lower lip, "The red jewel? You still have it? What did

you do with it?"

"It's safe," Vane said. "Some day--perhaps I may be forced to use it again.

Anyway--" He picked up his fork "--this Hasenpfeffer is swell. How about another

helping?"