

THE NEMESIS OF THE ASTROPEDE

By STANTON A. COBLENTZ

Handsome Merimtrophe plans to deluge the world in blood and betray the lovely High Regent Polydora!

HIS voice rang like a bell through the large ornate audience hall. "I ask it in the interest of science! What harm if I do violate the Ancient Seal and pass the Forbidden Portals?"

Polydora, President of the Free Communities of the Earth and High Regent of the United World, sat in the Seat of State in the Hall of All Nations at Plaxa, the world capital.

She was a tall, regal-looking woman, with an imperial sweep of brow and features like a Greek goddess. Her rich golden locks, bound with clasps of lapis lazuli according to the custom of the day, flowed about a face in which the sternness of leadership was tempered at times by a smile of girlish sweetness. For Polydora, although her extraordinary abilities had thrown her into the planet's pivotal position, was not yet thirty. Now, in the good year 99—2193, Old Reckoning—she was not only sought by diplomats but courted by suitors from the four corners of the world.

But thus far, according to rumor, she had inclined most toward Merimtrophe, the young man who now stood before her, beseeching a favor. He was far from unprepossessing, even as the People of the Later Day went. He was tall of limb, broad of frame, powerful of features, with a jutting chin, strong high cheekbones, and a flashy manner of wearing the knee-long color-splashed robes fashionable for men and women alike. Only when you looked into his eyes—those small black eyes that first burned with an intense, shriveling fire, then shifted as if afraid to look you in the face—did you begin to question your first favorable impression. .

"Let me pass the Forbidden Portals, Polydora! What harm can it do? Surely, it will only benefit us to learn the secrets buried there."

The President's face, as she gazed at Merimtrophe across the Purple Railing of State, wore a grave expression. Swiftly her mind reviewed the events of the last century. How, as a result of the War of the Six Continents, which had ended just a hundred years ago, the world had been left prostrate, stripped of half its female population and nine tenths of its male. How representatives of the women, gathering in furious conclave amid the ruins of Plaxa, for the first time had fixed the blame for the devastation of the earth on male aggressiveness. How they had decided that, so long as men had political control, wars would continue. How they had voted for a new world system, in which complete power would be in feminine hands. How, being five times as numerous as the men—of whom all the more vigorous specimens had perished in the conflict—they had been able to enforce their decrees. Since then only women had held office, and men had devoted themselves to science, industry and the like, while their wives and sisters ruled so well that there had been no war in a hundred years.

ALL this Polydora remembered. She also recollected how the old lore, the mechanical lore that had made fighting so terrible, had all been destroyed on the accession of the great Thressinga, the first World President. That is, all except the comparatively few machines and formulae which had been preserved beyond the Forbidden Portals of the Universal Museum of Plaxa. The retention of even these few had been opposed by a large party, and had been the single concession to the males. But this exception was thought to be meaningless, since stern edicts forbade any one to enter the Forbidden Portals without permission from the President, which no President yet had ever granted.

Yet here was Merimtrophe urging Polydora to rescind the century-old prohibition!

"A hundred years have gone by," he pleaded. "The time of peril is past. Who knows that invaluable

scientific secrets may not be buried there? Surely, Polydora, you are too wise, too enlightened to be held back by a superstition."

This appeal was reinforced by a smile which Polydora could not help returning.

"I will think it over—I will think it over," she mused, as she stared indulgently down at Merimtrope. A faint flush, suffusing the queenly features, implied that mere principles of state might not decide.

Not many minutes after Merimtrope had bowed his way out, a slimmer figure had entered. Slight of frame, with the gray withdrawn eyes of a dreamer and a lean scholar's face, Larrow was hardly older than the other man, but gave an impression not of a coldness like Merimtrope's but of incisive intelligence tempered by warmth.

Certainly, there was warmth in his gaze as he stared up at Polydora, but there was also sadness, for how could he, a mere sub-Curator of the Universal Museum, hope to win favor in the sight of the most sought-after woman on earth? How could he compete with that dandy of a Merimtrope, who was always being admitted to an audience with her, and who, moreover, had been placed by her in the high post of City Engineer of Plaxa? But did Larrow not truly love her, for her own superb self, and not for her position or fame? Was it not of her that he continually dreamed?

Yet her voice, as it reached him from the high sapphire-studded chair of state, did not have a lover-like quality. It was crisp, steady, authoritative.

"Larrow, I have summoned you in the absence of your chief Herminand," she said. "As acting curator you have charge, have you not, of the keys to the Ancient Portals?"

Larrow turned pale. A dark intimation had flashed across his mind.

"Yes, Excellency."

"You know our City Engineer, Merimtrope, do you not?"

"Indeed I do, Excellency."

"If he should ask for the keys, let him have them. That is all."

"But, Excellency, this—why, this is unheard of!" gasped Larrow. "The Ancient Secrets—the Ancient Secrets must be guarded. You know they must be—"

"You heard what I said!" interrupted Polydora, crisply. "That is all."

Seeing the angry fires in the President's vivid blue eyes, Larrow knew that he had no choice. Yet as he dragged his way out of the Hall of All Nations, he had a feeling as if the mighty marble columns of that colossal edifice were about to collapse upon his head.

In the Hall of the Black Eras, behind the Forbidden Portals of the Universal Museum, the air was stagnant and musty-smelling. Tempered by the heavy dark curtains, the electric lights let out a dull glow that gave a tomb-like effect to the great vaulted recesses. As he made his way among the glass cases filled with intricate machines, the visitor would have looked like an intruder in a sepulchre, could any observer have seen him.

Merimtrope's black eyes glittered. With a devouring gaze, he paused before each case. The one that held him longest was the central display.

THIS represented a curious fish-shaped car which, pointed upward at an angle of forty-five degrees, was all sheathed in a glistening coppery metal. More than a hundred feet long and fifteen or twenty in width, it was windowless except for a few small eye-slits, but there were several openings or hatches a little like torpedo tubes. In each of these a formidable-looking, bullet-shaped contrivance, two feet across and ten or twelve long, had been placed as if on exhibition.

"Ah," muttered Merimtrope. "The Astropede!"

The Astropede, as every one had heard with shudders of horror, was an instrument of destruction invented at the close of the last war—the most powerful ever conceived, it was said. But since, unhappily, the War of the Six Continents had ended before the device could be tried, no one really knew just how devastating it could be.

"Too bad," reflected Merimtrope. "Too bad!" What manner of men had his fathers been, that they had let so dire an implement go to waste?

The machine itself interested him less than did a little red-marked document preserved at one side

under a glass case. Strain his eyes as he would, Merimtrope could not make out any of the figures beneath the glass barrier. Yet was it not for this, the scientific formulae behind the Astropede, that he had cajoled Polydora into letting him pass the Forbidden Portals?

For only a moment he hesitated. True, the act he contemplated was not only prohibited, it was held to be a crime against the White Eras. If discovered he would be given a pinch of lethal powder and required to swallow it within twenty-four hours. But who would discover him? Polydora had granted permission to him only. Not even a guard would dare pass the Portals, now safely hidden from view behind winding galleries. If any one should come in hereafter and learn what had happened, how prove who was responsible? Might it not seem that some thief had entered unknown to any one?

Besides, by the time the act was detected, he would have accomplished his purpose!

So reflecting, Merimtrope lifted his sandaled heel and brought it crashing down against the glass. A minute later, the red-marked document was concealed in the folds of his robes, while the fragments of glass lay hidden in a corner.

Not long afterwards, the City Engineer was rumored to be engaged in a secret mining project miles to the west of the city. Just what the project involved was not known, for several acres were walled off with barbed wire, but it was reported that valuable minerals had been found and were being developed for Polydora's benefit.

This story had, indeed, a foundation in fact, the fact being that Merimtrope had just made this statement to the President. With her complete faith in him, she had let him dig for the rare metals he claimed to have discovered. Preoccupied as she was with matters of state, and having no knowledge of science, why should she bother to see the great shaft, twenty feet thick and a hundred yards long, which was being dug at a forty-five degree angle? Why should she care if a fish-shaped car, sheathed in a glistening coppery metal, was taking shape within the excavation?

All this Merimtrope took great pains to keep secret. Only those of the inner circle, his trusted friends and advisers, were admitted inside the enclosure. Since most of the work was done by inter-atomic machines, hardly any laborers were needed.

But how astonished Polydora would have been to have overheard the conversation between Merimtrope and his friend Wendaye, the Assistant City Engineer, on the evening after his passage of the Forbidden Portals!

EXCITEDLY Merimtrope paced the floor of his glass-enclosed tower studio, while Wendaye stood regarding him, arms akimbo, in an attitude of deep contemplation.

"This has been a woman's world too accursedly long," the former was exclaiming. "What are we men, anyhow? Mere babes-in-arms that have to mind our mammas? Of course, you can say the old girls have ruled well enough for a hundred years. But is it fair for men like me to be kept from office just because we're men? By my father's ghost, it hurts my self-respect. I long for the stirring old days!"

"I, too!" agreed Wendaye, his hawk eyes gleaming. "Woman's place, if you ask me, is in the nursery. It's high time for us men to reassert ourselves."

"Exactly."

"But how? That's the question. The women—curse them—have the legal and moral power."

"Legal and moral be hanged. What counts is the physical force. And I have that now."

"You have that?"

"Yes, I have it."

In excited whispers, Merimtrope told of his visit past the Forbidden Portals. Then he displayed the red-sealed document.

"You see, it's quite practicable," he explained, his hooked fingers trembling as he and his assistant pored over the papers. "It's easy enough to make an Astropede, now that we have the plans."

"Let's see if I understand," Wendaye cried, a baleful glint shining from his reddish uneasy eyes. "The Astropede is a rocket car that can shoot beyond the stratosphere, is it not? It carries a crew of five. Having passed the limits of the atmosphere, it goes circling around the earth as a satellite. It can keep on its course for months, before its crew send it back to earth."

"Just so," Merimtrope explained enthusiastically. "And each time it passes a certain place—say, Plaxa—it can discharge some of the machine-bombs, which shatter into ten thousand explosive fragments, each as powerful as a six-inch shell. There's no defense against it. No earth-battery, no stratospheric plane could reach that rocket car. Surrender is the only recourse!"

"Then, in no time at all, we could take Plaxa—could make ourselves its rulers," exclaimed Wendaye.

"Yes, and end the reign of women!"

The conspirators did not mention that, incidentally, they would bring back the old ordeal of terror and bloodshed. They did not mention the treason of overthrowing the President whom the whole world loved and admired, and who had treated the plotters themselves with signal favor. Ambition, the ancient autocrat, glittered from their eyes as they silently shook hands and began poring anew over the formulae for the Astropede.

Even as Merimtrope took the keys to the Forbidden Portals, Larrow had noted the avid look in the City Engineer's eyes. He had seen the eagerness with which the latter entered the secret corridors. He had observed the inordinate length of time that passed before Merimtrope's return. Furthermore, he did not miss the expression, half furtive and half gloating, which played about the man's audacious features as he handed back the keys.

Larrow had never liked Merimtrope, but it was not mere dislike that forced upon him the conviction that the City Engineer was up to mischief. A suspicion, so terrible that he blamed himself for even entertaining it, flashed into Larrow's mind. The thought persisted. He could not rid himself of it, until gradually the idea of possible counteraction took hold of him.

Should he not enter the Forbidden Portals, and try to discover what Merimtrope had been doing there? In his official position at the Museum, he could slip in at any time—though this was strictly against the law and he would have to taste the Drug of Annihilation if caught. For a long while he debated the matter. As he did so, his mind formed a vision of the noble, classic face of Polydora, with her rich golden locks and eyes tinted like the sparkling blue sea. For her sake he decided he must take the risk.

AS HE stole into the Hall of the Black Eras he felt as if the ghosts of past centuries were pursuing him in the tomb-like recesses beneath the heavy dark curtains. Only by a supreme effort of the will did he force himself through the musty atmosphere and among the cases of grisly-looking machines. Some sure instinct brought him directly to the central display, where, according to the descriptions which he knew by heart, the model of the Astropede should be, along with a little glass case containing the plans.

There was the Astropede, untouched. But where were the plans? For several minutes Larrow searched in vain. Then his eyes fell upon a small telltale fragment of glass upon the floor. As clearly as if it had been marked in blazing letters, he knew what had happened.

Larrow's heart was heavy as he made his way back past the Forbidden Portals. Now he knew that dire catastrophe threatened, knew that Merimtrope, beneath the whip of ambition, would stop at nothing. But how could Larrow inform Polydora? To tell her what he knew would be to reveal that he had passed the Forbidden Portals himself. This would mean that he must consume the Drug of Annihilation, while Merimtrope remained free to pursue his plans. No, he must find some subtler way.

For days he pondered, without coming to any conclusion. Meanwhile, hearing of Merimtrope's alleged mine, he realized what the City Engineer had in view. Only then did he seek an audience with the President, hoping by means of sly hints to put her on the trail.

As always Polydora's beauty made him forget that he was a mere citizen and she the Head of State. But, as always, she received him with stern dignity, as befits a ruler addressing one of the rank and file. "Well, Larrow, what news today?"

"Not exactly any news, Excellency. Forgive me if I express a thought that has troubled me for many days. It was I, as you know, who gave City Engineer Merimtrope the keys to the Forbidden Portals."

At mention of this name, Polydora bristled slightly, and sat up more alertly in the Seat of State. A faint color overspread the exquisite oval of her face.

"Perhaps I am wrong, Excellency," Larrow went on, "but I feel sure I am not. That which I saw in the eyes of Merimtrope—and I have trained myself to read men's eyes, Excellency—bodes no good for us

all. So, as a loyal citizen, I have come to beg you to keep careful watch over him—to investigate, in particular, his mine west of the city, where, I have ascertained, geologists believe there can be no ore worth recovering."

POLYDORA shot up from her seat, a tall, majestic figure of wrath. Her words were restrained, but her emotion was evident.

"What is that? You have the effrontery, Larrow, to cast aspersions on one far better than you? Fie on you! You should be ashamed of yourself. If there is anything you know, I shall be glad to hear it. But these vague, unproved imputations, these vaporings of jealousy and rage, they may be worthy of a gossiping old granddame. But not of a man, Larrow. Not of a man!"

"But, Excellency," protested Larrow, writhing beneath the rebuke, "it is not jealousy or rage. Will you listen to me?"

"I will not listen! There are more important things before me than your sputterings, Larrow. Some day, when you are reasonable, I may hear you again. Meanwhile, I warn you, do not besmirch the good name of one of our leading citizens."

Retreating like one whom a shower of blows had struck, Larrow was grieved not only because Polydora was unaware of her peril, but because she had unwittingly testified to the depth of her devotion for Merimtrope.

Thenceforth, he perceived, nothing could be done through Polydora directly. But did this not merely prove the need for some more emphatic action?

Yet what action was possible? Before many days rumors told him the work within the so-called mine was nearly complete. These reports he could not verify, but the self-satisfied, jubilant manner in which Merimtrope stalked about nowadays, like one who has the world in his pocket, seemed complete substantiation of the news. Clearly, the time for action was soon or never.

It was then that he resolved upon a desperate expedient. It seemed to have a slight chance though if anything went wrong, it would cost Larrow his life.

First of all, he must find his way into Merimtrope's enclosure west of town. But how? If seen and recognized, he would be blotted out without compunction. Merimtrope's enclosure was not only surrounded with electrically charged barbed wire, but was protected by armed guards.

It was not exactly a new method that Larrow had in mind, although a highly hazardous one. The supposed mine would require large quantities of supplies, and these could only come from the Municipal Warehouse of Plaxa. With this fact in view, Larrow carefully concocted his scheme.

His first step was to absent himself from the museum, on the plea of illness. His second was to disguise himself. He clipped off his moustache, added spectacles, dyed his hair until it appeared grizzled, and dressed himself in unkempt clothes. His third move was to seek employment at the Municipal Warehouse, where, because of the heavy work and the low wages, helpers were constantly sought.

Once established as a clerk in the shipping department, he was not long in learning what goods were destined for Merimtrope. Hence he was able to carry out his scheme one morning when, by deliberate design, he arrived ahead of his fellow workers. In his robes a few small tools were concealed, a knife, a pocket-size saw, a monkey-wrench, a screwdriver, a pair of pliers, a flashlight. In his mind a desperate resolve remained planted.

There was a wooden case, not yet boarded down, which contained a canvas-like cloth ordered by Merimtrope. It was the matter of but a moment for Larrow to remove and hide part of this material, while he placed himself in the two-by-ten space beneath the remaining cloth, and drew it over himself so as to leave the appearance of the whole unchanged. A few inconspicuous holes, hastily drilled in the sides of the box, would provide him with air.

Overheated, wet with perspiration, and half suffocated despite the air-holes, he lay motionless in his casket-like hideout. He heard the lid hammered down above him, felt himself being jerked and carried away, now on one side, now on the other, now upside down. After a seemingly endless interval, while he gasped for breath as in a living grave, there came a jar that left him stunned. Only after some time, when his senses had gradually returned, did he realize that the box had reached its destination.

NOW came the most dangerous test of all, as he used the pliers and saw to break his way out of the box. If any workmen were near at hand, he would not only foil to save Polydora, but would throw his life away all for nothing. But he took hope from the fact that work in the enclosure was done by machinery, whose noise would drown out the sound of the tools.

He had not miscalculated. Before many minutes he found himself stepping out into a dimly lighted enclosure, reminding him of a subway tube, except that it had a slant as of a steep hill. Even in his slightly dazed condition, he recognized this as the inside of the Astropede.

Guided by the whizzing of machines forward, he climbed at a dangerous slant, until he was just outside a little cabin, which was the source of the light. Within it, several men were gathered. Now and then, by pressing one ear to the wall, he could catch fragments of their conversation when the noise of the machinery temporarily died down.

"Well," he heard a jubilant voice, which he recognized as that of Merimtrope, "it's almost done!"

"Almost," came an exultant echo. Then for a minute Larrow could not distinguish anything.

"All that's left now is to fix the interspatial controls," a speaker finally remarked. "Make sure they're set at forty-eight degrees," Merimtrope cautioned. "Anything more than that, and we can kiss good-bye to—"

Larrow did not catch the last word, but had no trouble in guessing it.

It was three or four minutes before he could make out any more of the conversation. But the next words startled him. "This evening, then?"

"This evening at sunset."

"Splendid. Let's get a little rest before we start."

Larrow heard a chuckling laughter, then a shuffling of heavy forms in his direction. Crouching motionless against the wall, he feared detection to be but an instant away as three men filed out of the cabin door. But they brushed past his shadowed shape without appearing to notice it and, with a bellowing of obscene oaths, disappeared forward.

Never had Larrow realized that the time was so short. He must checkmate the conspirators in the remaining few hours before sunset!

There was hardly time for caution, yet Larrow was saved by the complete absence of workers in the hold of the Astropede. Fumbling down through the steep gloom, he did not dare to use his flashlight until several partitions separated him from the cabin. Then, by the sparing use of the rays, he searched for the engine-room.

Only after what seemed eternities of blind groping did he push open a door into a little room equipped with an intricacy of compasses, field telescopes, and other instruments.

"Ah!" he thought. "The navigator's cabin!"

Working at increased tempo, he examined some knobs, dials and rods, among which he discovered a series marked, "Interspatial Controls." The latter were set at forty-eight degrees! Now, for the first time, a thrill as of accomplishment shot through Larrow.

The next problem was to discover the connections of the inter-spatial controls. Any tampering in the navigator's cabin would be instantly discovered, but alterations elsewhere might not be detected so easily.

Another difficult hour had passed before he had worked his way into the compartment behind the navigator's cabin, and, amid a complexity of machinery, found the jointed series of rods connecting with the interspatial controls. These, he saw clearly, were intended to keep the ship at a definite angle in its flight. Any increase above the established forty-eight degrees meant that it might escape from control and fly off into space.

As he made these observations, he was almost thrown to his feet by a violent shuddering of the vessel, a little like an earthquake. Could they be setting out already? But no! the shuddering quickly died down. This was only a preliminary try-out of the engines. But never had Larrow been so aware of the urgency for haste.

IN TERROR of being trapped in the Astropede, he set to work. How fortunate that he had brought his tools! Here and there he loosened a screw, yonder he untightened a bolt or two. That was all. An inspector would have had to look very closely to discover anything amiss, but he knew that the controls would work free, so that they would not obey the navigator's will. While the machine apparently was set at forty-eight degrees, it might actually start out at fifty-eight or sixty-eight. Before the source of the trouble could be discovered and corrected, it would be too late!

Such, at least, was Larrow's hope. But for one brief terrorized instant, he had the impression that it was he who was too late. For the vessel gave yet another shudder, as if on a preliminary warm-up.

Now for the last and almost the most difficult part of his project. How escape unseen? Of course Larrow knew that his only chance was through one of the hatches that lined the vessel's sides, waiting to be filled with their deadly projectiles. His problem therefore was to slip down into one of them, pry loose the fastenings, and squeeze his way into the excavation.

Fortunately, the rumbling of machinery forward still drowned out the noise of Larrow's tools, and he managed, after what seemed hours, to unloosen the hatch lid. There was a space of but a foot or two beneath, between the hatch and the earth of the shaft. After fastening the lid back into place, Larrow had to creep between the Astropede and the earth in complete blackness along a cavity barely wide enough to contain him.

He was still cautiously descending when, with stunning suddenness, he slipped and found himself in a pit six feet deep. Bruised and confused, he was about to pick himself up, when a deafening hiss came to his ears, a great shadow shot above him followed by a blazing crimson light, a reek of half-suffocating fumes came to his nostrils, and a whirlwind seemed to catch him and toss him about.

When, a minute later, he came to himself, he saw that the shaft was empty. From high above, he could make out the red glow of sunset...

Thousands of spectators had been startled by the apparition of the fish-shaped monster, which, followed by jets of fire, had leapt in to the evening skies and disappeared like a meteor. Yet it was long before the world had learned the story behind this flaming vision. The one man who knew the facts did not reveal them until many days had gone by—not until he had had time to be certain of his results.

At last, convinced by Merimtrophe's silence that he and his henchmen had vanished forever in the outer abysses of the Solar System, he sought an audience with Polydora, and made a complete confession.

"Now Excellency," he finished his recital, as she stared down at him with grave attentive eyes, "you may prescribe the Drug of Annihilation. I have broken the law, and am ready to suffer the penalty."

A long silent moment passed. A faint smile fluttered to the President's face.

"No, Larrow, the error was not yours," she said. "I do not reward the people's savior with the Drug of Annihilation. Besides—" here she tugged absently at the lapis-lazuli clasps of her golden locks—"we will be needing a new City Engineer. Would you care to consider it?"

"Oh, Excellency!" Larrow burst forth, overwhelmed.

"Why do you call me `Excellency'?" she rebuked him, with a beaming light in her face. "My name is Polydora."

"I shall be delighted—Polydora!"

Her answering smile assured him that he had accomplished even more than he had intended in ridding the world of Merimtrophe and the Astropede.