

# THRILLS



INCORPORATED

ADVENTURES IN SPACE AND  
THE WORLD OF TOMORROW

No. 2  
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HORROR NOVELETTE OF  
THE FUTURE

Escaped Essence

Jet-Wheel Jockey

by Wolfe Herscholt

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*Adventures in Space And  
The World of Tomorrow*

**No. 2**

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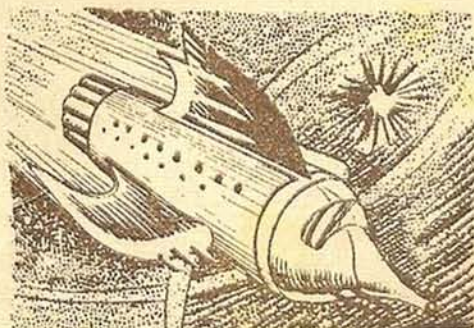
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\* All characters mentioned in stories appearing in this magazine are fictitious and any similarity to persons living or dead is purely coincidental and not intended.



★ *The Dare-devil Prospectors of Asteroid Adventure are back again in this powerful sequel story!!*



# Planet of Fire . . .

THROUGH the glastic window in the floor of the spacecruiser the two young spacepilots saw an eddying mass of red-tinted smoke and steam, and as the vapor shifted they had intermittent glimpses of white-hot lakes and little rivulets which changed to dull red before disappearing back underground through blackened crevices.

"I'll bet old Bridger didn't land here," said Jimmy Briscoe. "The place is an inferno!"

Ken Grayfield, at the controls, looked doubtful. "The last spaceradio message he sent out was from this vicinity," he pointed out. "And this is the only planetoid here. And he described it as 'misty,' and said that he was going to investigate further."

The two young spacemen, thanks to their discovery of an asteroid immensely rich in radioactive minerals, were now sharehold-

ers in Planet Prospectors Limited, and extremely wealthy. No longer was it necessary for them to continue their explorations in Space, prospecting for minerals for the company; but after a few short weeks of idleness on Earth the confines of the mother planet became too limited for the spacewanderers. They bought a luxury spacecruiser with the intention of doing some independent space tripping; but almost immediately they found a job.

Old Henry Bridger, a Director of the company, had taken a trip in his new one-man spacecruiser, and had disappeared. His last message, picked up by Earth Spaceradio on the tape and relayed around the globe, had given his location, and had mentioned a "misty looking planetoid," and then—silence; silence which had lasted for a week and had resulted in Ken Grayfield



*WHEN Bridger was posted missing over a volcanic planetoid it looked like "curtains" . . . but two interplanetary prospectors had a hunch . . .*

and Jimmy Briscoe setting out in search of the missing man.

Ken brought the craft lower over the fiery planetoid, and noted with satisfaction that the grav meter indicated a gravity roughly that of the Earth. At least there would be no tricky complications in landing. The planetoid seemed to consist of a series of horseshoe-shaped valleys, three sides of which were bounded by craggy black rock formations dripping with moisture, while from the valleys themselves rose ruddy-tinted vapor. The higher ground, scored by cracks and crevices was cooled-off lava, but the sloping ground on the open side of the valleys was covered with a dense black vegetation.

"THERE'S vegetable life here, anyway," remarked Jimmy, as the cruiser circled lower. "And that suggests animal life. I wonder what forms exist here."

"We'll soon know," replied Ken. "The atmosphere reads O.K., so we'll land. We won't even have to put on our spacesuits."

"Ken!" Jimmy's voice became a yell, his plump face was alive with excitement as he pointed through the glastic screen. "Swing her round! Back to that valley. There's a small spacecruiser there—old Bridger's!"

Quickly Ken turned the craft, peering through the screen, and saw the spacecruiser, its long blue body unmistakably that of Henry Bridger's craft.

"Cut in the antigrav," he rapped out; and when his co-pilot obeyed the spacecruiser hovered over the valley and then, under the controlling lever which gradually increased the gravity pull, it slowly descended through the eddying mists and came to rest a few yards from the abandoned craft.

Cautiously Jimmy opened the air-lock and sniffed. "Whew! It's hot," was his comment. "Stinks of sulphur, too."

"Atmosphere almost the same as Earth's, according to the meter," said Ken. He led the way out into the open, and for a moment they stood gasping in the intense humidity, sweat rolling down their faces. They moved over the hot ground to the other spacecruiser and opened its airlock.

"MR. BRIDGER!" Ken called loudly into the craft, but the only response was the metallic echo of his own voice. He climbed inside, opened the studded door to the rear compartment, but there was no sign of its owner. A brief examination of the spaceradio transmitter revealed that it was in order. "Nothing doing," he announced, returning to the waiting Jimmy. "Everything is in order in the craft. He's simply walked out and never came back."

He eyed the smoking steaming crevices, and the glow from a great lake of fire which stretched across the sloping entrance to the valley. "If he left the valley on foot he must have somehow got across that lake," he said slowly. He moved warily towards the lake, approaching as closely as the heat would permit, and for some moments the two young adventurers stood eyeing the awesome sight, the white-hot bubbling lava, from which an occasional pillar of flame shot skywards, giving an eerie effect of sluggish lightning in the sombre steaming valley. From the lake a stream of lava, about ten feet across, white hot at first, but cooling to a dull red the further it flowed from the lake, ran down to the rocky boundaries of the valley and gurgled away through crevices in the wall, apparently to return to the molten interior of the fiery planetoid, and again to be thrown up into the boiling lake.

"Doesn't seem to be any life here," muttered Jimmy uneasily, glancing around. "Not that you can see much inside the valley, thanks to the mists."

They moved around the fringe of the lake, picking their way among pillars of congealed lava which rose, like the trunks of dead trees, from the floor of the valley.

"THERE'S the answer," said Ken, triumphantly. "The lava lake ends a few yards short of the other wall. Old Bridger left the valley this way."

Across the narrow strip of rock between the lake and frowning cliffs was a gently rising slope thick with the queer black vegetation they had observed from above.



"Wait!" Jimmy grasped his friend's arm. "There's something moving over there. I saw those leaves move, and there's no wind here. I'll swear there's . . . Great Heavens! What is it?"

Ken stared at the nightmare shape emerging from the black-leaved forest. First came the head, about the size of a bull's, but globular and possessing three eyes set in deep black hollows, no doubt as a protection against the heat in this environment, one in the upper centre of the face and one on either side; obviously the depth of the eye-sockets prevented side vision, a lack which was compensated for by the two side eyes. The mouth was a loosely triangular-shaped aperture surrounded by horny ridges; and the whole face was covered with thick black scales. The body, too, about the size of a small elephant, was covered with gleaming black scales and was supported by hind legs, short and thick, which ended in great splayed hoofs, but the forelegs were slimmer and supple looking and were more like arms in that they possessed a mass of many-jointed fingers.

AS they watched the strange creature, it sat back on its hind legs and, using its forepaws as hands, commenced tearing at the foliage and stuffing it into its mouth.

"It's vegetarian at least," whispered Ken.

"Might be yearning for a change of diet," muttered Jimmy. "Look at those claws. They'd rip a man to bits!"

"Better get back," muttered Ken. "I'd feel safer with one of the Atoblasters in my hand."

They turned, and simultaneously they uttered gasps of dismay. Standing immobile in front of them, evidently having emerged from the misty pall at the base of the cliffs, was another of the weird monsters. Then slowly, its single front eye glowing redly in its black socket, the beast advanced towards them.

"Bolt!" said Ken. "Keep towards the rocks and away from the lake."

The two men shot to the side and raced in the general direction of their craft. Immediately the monster uttered a frightening bellow, and the next moment the valley resounded with answering bellowings.

"Golly! The place is alive with 'em," panted Jimmy.

"Yes, they must have been crouched

over near the cliffs," said Ken. "We'll have to keep out in the open after all."

Through the shifting haze the two men saw the gleaming black shapes of the monsters closing in on them; the thudding footsteps of the lumbering beasts were close behind them; but ahead and visible now was the spacecruiser. Ken was confident of reaching it, for the fiery monsters were comparatively sluggish runners. But his eyes, fixed on the little craft, suddenly dilated with horror, as two of the monsters lumbered across and stood directly in front of the spacecruiser, waiting.

"We're done!" Jimmy, who had seen the monsters cutting off their retreat, uttered the cry in despairing tones.

"We'll have to make for the rocks after all," cried Ken. "They mightn't be able to climb. It's our only chance, Jimmy."

HE could hear Jimmy's flying feet behind him, and the heavy thudding of the dragon-like animals; and then there came a new sensation. From high up on the cliff face a bolt of white flame shot across his head, and the nearest of the pursuing monsters uttered a maddened bellow of pain and stopped dead, a gaping smoking wound in its thick hind leg.

Ken stared upward, and as the mist shifted he saw a human face, the face of an elderly grey-haired man protruding from one of the caves in the cliff side about fifty yards further down.

"Down below me!" roared the man. "I'll keep 'em off while you climb."

He underlined this statement with another blast from his Atoblaster, and a second monster roared with agony and fell out of the race. Ken ran along the base of the cliff until he reached the spot directly below the man, and began clawing his way up the irregular cliffs, with the panting Jimmy at his heels. Another bolt from the Atoblaster, although missing its objective, checked the rush of another of the brutes which had reared up preparatory to lunging at the two fleeing men.

Ken dragged himself up into the cave, and sank down exhausted while Jimmy, quivering in every ounce of his plump body, was assisted up by their rescuer.

"Well," said Ken at last, looking at the grey-haired man, "this is almost as big a



shock as the sight of those monsters. Mr. Bridger. We thought—well—

"Thought I was finished, eh?" The Director smiled. "I thought so myself for a few hectic minutes a week ago. The brutes got between me and my craft and they've been camping at the foot of the cliffs in relays ever since. It is surprising what intelligence they possess. They sit around at the foot of cliffs all the time except when they move off to feed, which they take in turn. I've given a few of them some wounds, but that's all the Atoblaster can do—wound them; their hides are like super-asbestos. I've been stuck here all the week living on concentrated food tablets and catching what water I can from the rocks."

"And now we're all stuck here," said Jimmy gloomily.

"Not at all," corrected Bridger. "There are any number of crevices in the ceilings of these caves leading to the open above. One man alone can't reach them, but between us we should manage without any trouble." He stepped to the cave opening and peered below. "Yes, they're all clustered directly below. Our best plan is to move now. If we get out through the top here and work our way around into the valley from the other side we may find the space-cruisers unguarded; if there are a couple of the creatures standing guard I think I can account for them with the Atoblaster. I suppose there is an entrance into the valley from below?"

"YES," said Ken eagerly, and described the strip of rock at the far end of the lake giving access to the valley.

Bridger led the way into the cave and selected one of the cracks in the ceiling which formed a narrow vertical tunnel with jagged sides which would afford plenty of footholds. Ken supported the older man on his shoulders, and Bridger clambered up and wormed his way above; Jimmy followed and, lying flat on a narrow ledge, hauled Ken after him, and the trio negotiated the tunnel without difficulty, emerging into the open air.

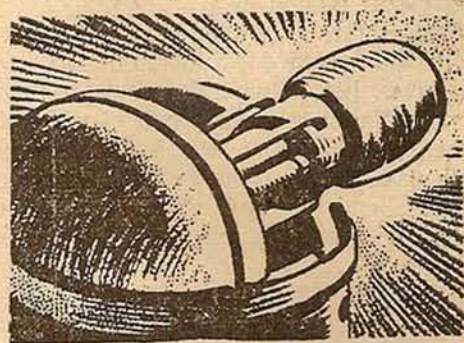
Ahead, they could hear the gurgling and bubbling of the molten lake, and soon there appeared the mists and the occasional pillar of flame from the inferno, and finally, that strip of rock leading into the valley.

But as they approached the strip a great scaly head appeared from out of the mist, and a single eye glared balefully. Bridger's Atoblaster blazed, and the monster uttered a roar as it rose high in the air and crashed down, a black heaving scaly mass.

"Killed that one," muttered Bridger. "Right in the eye." But the next moment his satisfaction gave place to alarm as answering bellows echoed from the valley and a score of the lumbering brutes rushed towards the little strip. "Back!" he yelled. "We'll have to get back to the cave."

JIMMY, who had been in the rear, now led the way up the slope, but before he had taken a dozen steps he halted abruptly and turned a white face to Ken, immediately behind him. "There's some ahead of us, too," he gulped.

Ken stared, aghast, and saw several of the monsters coming towards them from



either side; apparently they had been feeding and were now answering the summons of their kind. "We can't go back," he said grimly. "And we can't go forward. We'll have to go this way." He ran along the sloping ground, crashing through the vegetation, and keeping a course parallel with the lake. But the monsters above were lumbering after them and gradually forcing them nearer and nearer to the lethal white hot lava; and when they had passed the main lake and running beside the molten river the dragon-like creatures had converged on them from all sides.

Already Bridger was coughing painfully as the sulphurous fumes caught at his throat, and by common consent the three men stopped a few yards from the brink of the red gurgling stream.

"Can't go any closer to it," gasped the Director. "We'll have to make a stand here."



"Look!" groaned Jimmy, pointing across the lava stream. "Our craft, and unguarded!"

**K**EN groaned. There, not fifty yards away, were the two spacecruisers; but for all the practical use they were then they may as well have been on another planet. "If only there was some way of getting across the lava!" He mentally measured the distance—ten to twelve feet. If the worst came; if they couldn't hold these brutes off with the Atoblaster . . . But no! It was impossible to attempt that leap. Over a stream of water, yes; but unless he cleared the bank . . . if his foot slipped . . . He shuddered and wrenched his mind from the horrible consequences.

Beside him, Bridger was standing motionless, his Atoblaster levelled as the monsters began moving warily in, red eyes gleaming threateningly. Suddenly Jimmy gave a yell. "Look out! Behind us!"

Bridger turned as one of the monsters, which had moved down to the brink of the lava river, began lumbering towards them. The Atoblaster released a bolt of white-hot flame, and the brute, struck in the thigh, lurched sideways, attempted to regain its balance, and plunged into the river of molten lava, sending up great red blobs of the lava.

Ken stood staring in horror as the great beast wallowed in the red depths, protected by its almost impenetrable heat-resisting hide, but dying in agony as the lava poured into its eye sockets and its screaming mouth. And then, as its dying struggles stilled, the young man gave a cry.

"Bridger!" he yelled. "Keep them off with the Atoblaster. I'm going to take a chance."

**"WHAT!"** It was Jimmy who turned a startled face to his friend, as Bridger again fired his weapon.

Ken pointed to the gleaming scaly back of the monster, now drifting slowly along the red river. "I'm going to try to get across, using that! If I do I'll bring the craft back for you."

"You can't!" yelled Jimmy.

"Look out!" Ken gritted his teeth, ran downstream, waited until the carcass drew abreast, and launched himself forward. His left foot struck the scaly back of the dead monster; for a second his heart almost stop-

ped beating as his foot skidded on the hard surface. He felt himself losing his balance, falling forward into the molten mass, and as his right foot came down, instead of attempting to regain his balance he doubled his legs under him and leapt crookedly for the bank, and a moment later he was sprawling on the hot ground.

He clambered to his feet and raced towards the spacecruiser, but before he reached it he realised his error in believing the two craft to be unguarded. A huge figure loomed up in front of him as he flung himself at the air lock. He had a momentary vision of the monster as it reared up and stretched out its mass of clawing horny fingers; felt the agony of ripped flesh as his shoulder and back were scored by those fearsome claws; kicked out desperately as he clambered into the machine; and as the beast fell back momentarily he was inside, the air lock closed behind him.

He lay panting on the floor of the craft for a moment, blood oozing from his wounded shoulder, then he rose, staggered over to the controls, and the craft began slowly to rise. Through the glastic screen in the floor he watched tensely at the drama beneath, old Bridger blasting furiously at the monsters, keeping them at bay; Jimmy Briscoe, his white face looking upwards.

Ken set the controls and the craft again began to descend, now directly over the two hard-pressed men. He opened the airlock, yelled to Jimmy, and threw down one of their Atoblasters, after which he leaned from the airlock and began blazing away himself.

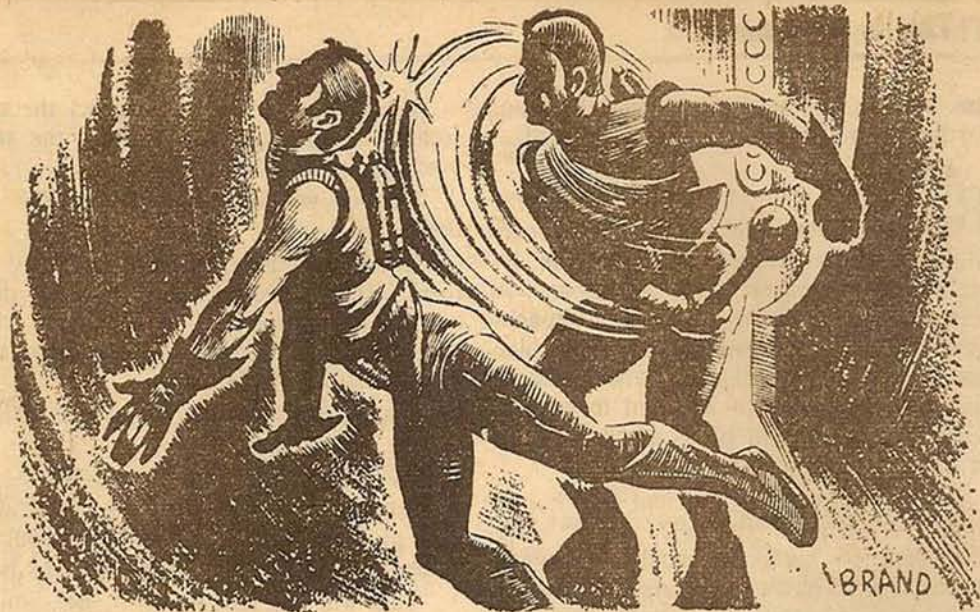
The triple attack was too much for the monsters. Bewildered and bellowing they retreated into the foliage leaving more than a dozen of their number writhing in agony from gaping burning wounds; and a few moments later the craft, having picked up the two men, was soaring up from the valley of fire.

**HIGHER** and higher it rose until the fiery planetoid was no more than a misty nebulous blur, dwindling away in the vastness of Space as the spacecruiser, freed itself from gravity.

"Earth?" queried Jimmy with a crooked grin.

"To Earth!" echoed the other two with sighs of relief. "Good old Earth!"





*It was such a simple crime that only a brain from a bygone age could have conceived this . . . .*

# Method for Murder

by OTTO KENSCH

IN the day of Investigator Marn an investigator needed the full range of science at his finger-tips and when we know that his was remote in the future beyond the age of rocketry and space-travel we know that an investigator was among the brightest of the men on earth. In his day we know that thought-travel was the simple mode of transportation over great distances and that the scientific brains of the era were busy with problems of thought emergence as manifested in certain strange cases where thought of the right place failed to deliver the subject to his correct destination.

But we know, too, that through the eons of time one thing had changed little and that thing was man's basic emotional structure. Hatred, greed, love and disappointment still drove men to crime. Detection was a science most highly developed for life was valued on earth now it was known from the reports of the space trekers that no life existed anywhere in the attainable universe except upon earth.

So when Marn was called by thought-signal to the scene of the murder he was equipped with more than a usual amount of knowledge and with much scientific research

equipment behind him. But when he examined the body he stood up from where it lay in the alley behind the low-class dwellings and his face was grim.

The victim's skull had been shattered by a blunt instrument wielded, Marn supposed, from behind the victim as he walked along the alley. Investigation soon revealed certain facts about the man.

His name was Amport Flore. By occupation he was a scholar—more exactly he was a historian of the first Atomic era. He was not mated though rumor suggested that he would soon apply for permission to marry Sasha Arkon, a flowing bunch of blonde curves and honey sweetness who worked in the library of his research establishment, The Addar Historical Library.

From the shape of the fracture in the skull and depth of the concussion, the particular position of the wound, and also the actual angle at which the body lay across the street Marn was able to determine that the blow had been a harsh one, probably from a heavy man, and from



the position it was deduced that the man, for it was most certainly a man, was tall.

**R**EALISING that he would learn extremely little from any scientific report Marn decided to attack the crime from the place of employment of the dead man. A certain distaste possessed him as he thought over the crime. Never in his experience had he come upon a crime whose blatant simplicity had made it involved to a point where solution would be as much a matter of chance as of science.

A man, presumably tall and heavy, had thought-travelled to this alley at the exact time he knew his victim would be passing through and having materialised behind Flore he had smashed his murder weapon into his skull and then transferred himself back to his original starting point.

At the Library Marn first sought out the girl Sasha Arkon who proved to be even more alluring than Marn had been given to suppose.

"You knew Amport Flore?" he asked deliberately.

"Yes! I knew him," she admitted, failing to see the trap he had set for her.

"You say you know him," he pursued. "How well?"

"I assisted him in his work," she purred lingeringly. "I'm a librarian here."

"You didn't contemplate mating with him?" he fired the question suddenly, but the girl laughed with genuine scorn.

"With him! Mars and Venus, no!" she jerked out savagely. "Anyone but him."

"Why do you deal with him in that voice?" Marn snapped.

"Because I hate him," she bit out through her teeth.

"Yet you assisted him in his work?" he probed quietly.

"I have a job to do," she replied coldly, and Marn smiled as he noted how well the new training schemes fitted workers for their particular jobs and they carried them out despite all else.

"With whom do you intend to mate?" he snapped then, suddenly. She flushed prettily and raised butterfly eyes at him coyly.

"Why do you ask?" she purred sweetly.

"Because Amport Flore was killed this afternoon," he snapped. "Murdered."

"No doubt you will reconstruct the reasoning of the crime and detect the only possible culprit," she purred.

"How do you know of our methods?" he demanded.

"Kodo and Flore talked endlessly of them," she replied slowly. "It is not difficult to learn much when one must work with historians. Those two worked together in the First Atomic Era."

"Where is this Kodo now?" queried Marn quietly.

"You wish to see him?" she asked.

When he nodded she crossed to a drawer and produced an image of the room of Kodo's home and she nodded toward it.

"This will get us there," she smiled alluringly.

**B**EFORE the investigator could object to her company she was gone and he followed through the standard thought-travel technique.

They were standing side by side in Kodo's apartment and he rose to welcome them with a slow smile that could have been either annoyance or fear.

"To what do I owe this visit?" he asked quietly when Sasha had introduced them.

Marn eyed the man quietly for a time before he spoke and noted that he was a small, fierce, man with cold harsh eyes and dark aquiline features. His hands were small and knuckly.

"You worked with Amport Flore?" queried the Investigator quietly.

"I do," replied Kodo just as quietly. "We do researches into the First Atomic Era. It is most interesting. Of late we have read much in the crime records. One investigator who would interest you is a man they called Sherlock Holmes. It seems he was of the police of that time. There was much crime in that part of the era."

Marn made a note to check these statements for they might prove of value and then he switched his tack immediately.

"Amport Flore complains that you threatened him for paying attentions to Sasha Arkon here," snapped Marn in a deliberate lie.

But Kodo blinked back at him coldly without a sensation of any emotion on his face and then shook his head quietly.

"If he says so then he lies," was his reply.



"He was murdered just after five this afternoon," added Marn then. "Bludgeoned to death in an alley on his way home from his work at the library."

"Oh! I'm sorry," Kodo replied softly. "I suppose then, that you should know that Flore and Leist Markor had quarrelled today."

"Who's this Markor?" demanded Marn quietly.

"He's the Director of the library," Sasha told the investigator. "They . . . they quarrelled because I ate lunch with Flore."

"But why? If you hate him," he demanded of her.

"We worked much alone. It was a bargain," she said, slowly.

"Take me to this Markor," he commanded then.

**F**IRST they returned to the library and there Sasha produced the necessary image for them to travel to Markor's home. They found him relaxing on a sweeping lounge and he rose and smiled eagerly as he welcomed the girl and then turned to Marn.

"What can I do for you?" he asked quietly.

"What were you doing at five-five this afternoon?" he demanded quietly.

"Why?" demanded the director of the library nervously.

"Simply for the reason that I ask you!" snapped Marn, the harsh official edge hardening his tone.

"I was with Sasha," the man replied sullenly.

"That is true," the girl nodded. "We were differing on a private matter."

"What private matter?" snapped Marn quietly.

"A matter of why she would not apply to be my mate," put in Leist Markor coldly. "It is no secret that that is my wish."

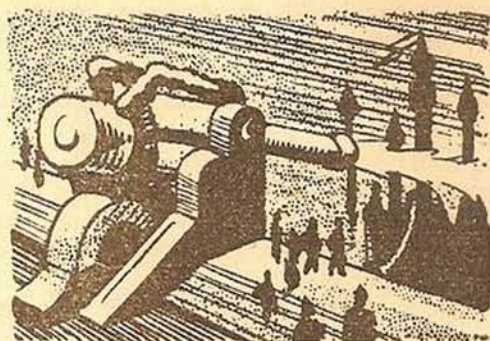
"Then perhaps you'll explain why you killed Flore?" Marn flashed suddenly at the man.

But Markor stepped back a pace or two, looked startled, and then stammered out a denial that seemed so sincere that Marn was puzzled and he excused himself without asking any further question. By thought-travel he was at his office the next instant

and sat down to go through the further clues produced by his assistants.

The weapon had been found. A metal ball laced to a pliable handle and immediately Marn saw that now that this weapon was produced it was not possible to be sure of the height or weight of the culprit for he was quite capable of being either short or tall, heavy or light, depending on just which way he handled the weapon.

**A**LL attempts to trace the origin of the weapon had so far failed, and the further clues did nothing more than to make Marn fairly certain where the blonde hair had come from.



For the rest the assistants had failed to unearth any other enemy Flore might have and nothing from his past record or his personal life outside the library revealed any possible clues. This, Marn was confident, narrowed the crime suspects down to just three people. Sasha Arkon, Leist Markor, or Zorich Kodo.

Of these he placed the girl as the motive and so was inclined to rule her out as a suspect, but when he examined the blonde hairs taken from the lapel of Flore's coat and checked them with those of the girl he was not so sure.

But when he arrived at the library he asked Sasha to show him manuscripts of the period in which the men had been researching and for some hours he flicked through the primitive texts and finally had his interest caught by a volume headed "Method For Murder."

As he read he realised that the primitive writer of the First Atomic Era was suggesting that simplicity was the key-note of successful murder. Slowly he read through the pages carefully until he reached a passage which arrested his attention completely.



"Successful murder methods must above all things be simple," he read slowly. "Any complication that cannot be avoided is a danger which the would-be murderer should reckon as a possible flaw in the armour of his case.

"Every murder that reduces itself to one or two disjointed clues will be extremely difficult of detection for there is little or no possibility for the detective to build any semblance of a framework around them upon which to hang a reconstructed crime. The murderer of brilliant mind will choose the simple method. Such an ideal way of homicide is a sudden blow to the head when the victim is unaware of the murderer's intent and preferably at some spot which is remote from the place where the victim and murderer normally meet. A crime of this sort is the most difficult of solution."

**S**LOWLY Marn closed the book and stood up. All his thoughts were now focused on what he had just read and he moved into the office where he found Sasha working quietly.

"Does Markor read in the era with his researchers?" he asked quietly.

She shook her head slowly. "No! He sees only their final report."

"And in their many discussions of crime in the First Atomic Era was Markor ever present with Kodo and Flore?"

"No!" she replied once more. "Markor didn't mix with his inferiors. He is hated for this."

And Marn smiled for he chose not to follow up that remark then, but went immediately to the office of the Director and entered. After the politenesses had been spoken Marn asked quietly.

"Who would fill your position here if you were no longer in the job?"

Markor gasped at him in surprise for a moment and then replied:

"Now that Flore is gone—Kodo. He is a brilliant mind."

"Then Kodo will be the new Director," Marn said softly. "I'm arresting you for the murder of Amport Flore."

The tall man stepped back a couple of paces and then he stopped. His shoulders drooped and he smiled a sickly grin as he came forward.

"I'll cause no trouble," he told Marn, quietly.

"Please!" Marn interrupted softly, moving in very close. "Say nothing more for the moment. Resist my efforts! It must appear that I am certain you are the killer."

For a moment Markor looked surprised and then he began to play the role requested so that when he was finally dragged from the library building many of his employees were there to gloat at his discomfiture. Kodo stood and watched with a face devoid of expression.

When Marn had his man well away from the building he turned to him and apologised.

**T**HAT evening Marn presented himself at the home of Sasha Arkon and was surprised at the lavishness of the appointments in the rooms and with the very latest models in video-graphs and health equipment. He looked around with a calculating eye and smiled as he turned back to face the girl. She was looking nervous and he winked at the appointments and raised an eyebrow suggestively.

"I can't help it!" she blurted out anxiously. "Men won't listen when I tell them I do not want these things. They give me gifts all the time. They try to buy me."

"Who in particular?" he asked quietly. But to this she shrugged her shoulders and laughed.

"It would be of no interest to you," she replied quietly, her voice purring sweetly. "There have been many, but none to my liking."

"Well enough!" he replied softly. "But I've come on another matter. You must know that I've arrested Markor and that now Kodo will become Director of the Addar Historical Library."

"So?" she put in as the man paused for a moment.

"I am asking you to co-operate with me," he began again.

"And if I don't?" she demanded belligerently.

"Then you, too, may be in the unfortunate position of being under guard also," he told her slowly. "You forget that you vouch for the fact that you were with Markor at the time of the murder."

The girl flushed at this and he knew that she had lied to him about that point.

"What is it you want?" she asked softly, after a moment.



"I want you to play your charms to the new Director of the library," he snapped suddenly. "I want it done to-morrow."

For a long time it seemed that the girl was about to refuse the request, but then her mood seemed to change and she laughed.

"I will join in this foolish plan," she said. "Providing that I am protected while I do this."

"I will be there," Marn told the girl immediately.

"Then leave me be till to-morrow," she snapped at him tartly.

Morning broke over the city with a clear brilliance and Investigator Marn had himself transported to the library building before the workers arrived and once there he hid himself behind the curtains which hung in the Director's office where the windows looked out over the gardens.

Time slipped by slowly and he waited for some period after working hours commenced before he was rewarded with the appearance of Kodo. The small, cold-eyed man settled to his labors quickly and seemed well conversant with all that was required of him. But impatience began to get the better of Marn as he waited for the appearance of the girl.

At last she came and she was dressed as he had never thought to see a female adorned. The simplicity of the outfit was such that it lent to the one jewel, a small brooch used as a shoulder clasp, an aura of intrigue and allure. For the first time Marn was fully aware of the subtle appeals exercised by this woman and he watched as she moved slowly from the door toward the desk.

Kodo looked up and his eyes gleamed as he rose to welcome Sasha. She smiled bewitchingly at him and he reached a hand toward her. Almost immediately she had flicked herself from his reach and was taunting him with her swelling curves.

"You are more than man can stand," he grated angrily. "There is a way with such as you. A good way."

Sasha glanced around quickly and Kodo laughed.

"We are alone," he assured her calmly. "Sasha—alone with the new Director of the Addar Historical Library. That is as it should be," he added gloatingly.

"Perhaps!" she smiled sweetly. "But perhaps a woman wants a man—not just the Director of a library. A man who is cold when he must be—eager when he needs to be."

"I am such a one," he ripped out at her suddenly, and then his cold eyes clouded and his harsh mask fitted over his face.

"How do I know this?" demanded the girl.

"Because I wanted this position," he growled out. "And now it is mine."

"That was the mere working of chance," she scoffed at him.

"CHANCE?" he barked angrily. "Chance that I planned so simply that both men I hated were removed and I left to fill the position I desired?"

"But Markor killed Flore," the girl vamped the man.

"Never!" snarled the little, partly bald fellow. "It was done even as I have read of such crimes from the First Atomic Era. None saw the emotions that were buried deep in me. All saw those that flared when I fought Flore off against Markor. Markor quarrelled with Flore and Flore is dead. Naturally it is Markor who has killed him. All this is logical. Such simplicity is of my genius. But it was I who killed. I alone."

With a triumphant leap he dived to seize the girl, but as she screamed Marn came from his hiding place and Kodo whirled on him with savage eyes glaring hate. Marn stood quite still.

"I knew perhaps because you boasted of certain manuscripts I should read," he explained. "And I knew too because such simplicity of action and thought does not belong to this age, but to the dead past. Only you were in a position to attain such ways of thinking and planning."

"You'll never get me," Kodo snarled viciously and was suddenly no longer there as he flashed himself away in a thought-travel journey.

"Which place would he know best of all?" demanded Marn quickly. "The first place he would image apart from his own home?"

"My apartments!" Sasha replied weakly. "I couldn't stand him after many months, so



I sent him away. He never forgave me. He hated Flore because I made much of him."

All this burst from the girl in a sudden spate of words and Marn stood staring at her for a moment and then he asked:

"Why did you speak badly of Flore?" he asked quietly.

"I feared that it might be thought that I had killed for my own reasons if you thought us more than library workers. I..."

"Where were you when Flore was killed?" he snapped suddenly.

"With him, in the alley," she croaked. "My head was on his shoulder when the blow struck."

This explained much and Marn realised the hopelessness of untangling the webs woven of human emotions without the tool he had used—that of deliberately working on the suspect's emotions in a given way and watching for untrue reactions.

**C**APTURE alone now was the problem still unsolved. He had never been an investigator to carry an ato-sonic gun and he didn't choose to use one now. He had a peculiar liking for turning his captives in alive.

Following the lead offered by Sasha he thought-travelled to her apartment and materialised outside her front door. Softly he crept to the front window and peered through the pane. He could see Kodo hastily making preparations for a long flight and he slipped along to the window opening into the next room and let himself in quietly through it. Once inside he moved cautiously and carefully clicked on the apparatus which alone could ensure privacy against thought-travellers who could otherwise materialise within the apartment.

Once the equipment was in operation the apartment was securely sealed against thought-travel either from within or without and Marn moved toward the door into the spacious living room in which Kodo was busily making his preparations.

Marn paused at the door for a moment and checked. A faint frown crossed his face as he saw that Kodo was armed with a deadly ato-sonic gun. One blast from that and his life would be snapped from him. So Marn decided to wait his chance.

Kodo's preparations were all complete before he set himself an image to thrust

himself forth in thought-travel. But he suddenly materialised again hard up against the wall where the equipment formed its barrier. With an angry gesture Kodo moved across the room to release the guard switch.

At the door he suddenly was confronted with Marn who leapt from cover and dived for the man. Kodo's hand flashed down for his gun, but Marn was quick enough and a fist struck the wrist aside before the hand could close over the butt of the deadly weapon.

"You're trapped, Kodo," Marn snapped as he swung up a savage right to the small man's chin. "Give up now or it'll be the worse for you."

But Kodo's answer was to laugh and suddenly vanish from in front of the investigator. Marn swung round sharply, but he could not sight the man in the room. He was certain that he could not have escaped beyond and knew therefore that he had to be in the other room for thought-travel was instantaneous and an immediate appearance elsewhere was essential. There was no possible way that could be avoided.

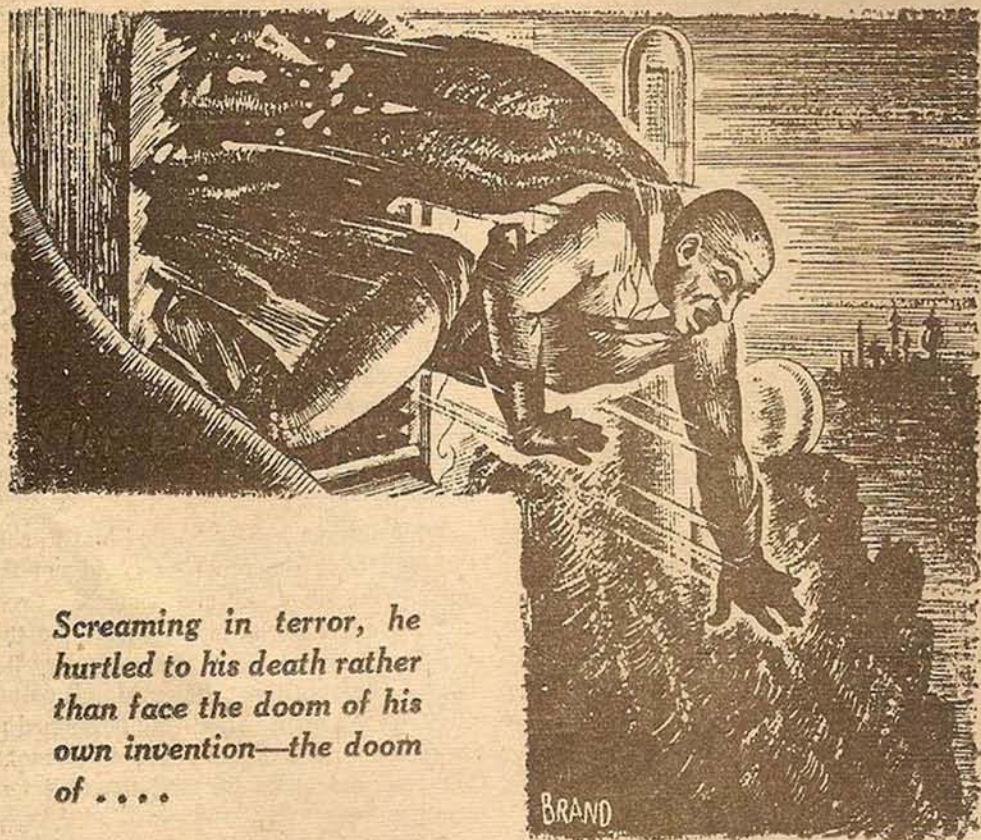
So Marn plunged into the next room with a sudden hurtling movement that flung him spreadeagling on to the floor as the ato-sonic gun blasted over his sprawled form. Before the reckless killer could come round to fire again Marn was kicking from the floor and the deadly gun was flying from the man's hand and slithering into a far corner of the room.

But Kodo was not done fighting. Before the Investigator could get to his feet he clubbed down with both hands and connected with Marn's head. Marn slipped back to the floor, but was coming up again immediately and as he straightened up his fists came up one after another in jarring blows that rocked the consciousness from the little killer.

Guarded in a thought-travel bracelet, which prevented the wearer from travelling in this way, Kodo was taken to the headquarters where his trial was swift and his penalty as certain. Kodo was set into a time cycle from which he could never escape. He would be whirling through time endlessly beyond his natural span of existence where, to Kodo, it would seem as a moment that would never end.



## ★ Our Horror-filled Cover Story.



*Screaming in terror, he hurtled to his death rather than face the doom of his own invention—the doom of . . . .*

# The Escaped Essence

ONE last great secret in nature still lay hidden from the eyes of men. The secret of life itself. All over the earth men of genius worked on that fundamental problem which had escaped the probing researches of wise men through countless ages. In his mountain-top laboratory Andrew Smith was such a scientist.

Short by average standards he stood more than six feet five inches tall with a great, bald head and a face that was guiltless of hair. As he stooped over his apparatus it was easy to see that he was nervous. The great muscles at his shoulders were tensed and his eyes were narrowed to thin slits as he adjusted a complicated system of retorts and burettes. To one of the retorts, which as yet was completely empty, he was nervously fixing several leads which led away to a circuit made up loosely on the floor in one corner. When this was done he walked to the observation look-out and watched as his assistant and his two ser-

vants climbed into the air-craft that stood waiting there by the hangar.

Rocket jets roared into life and a few seconds more and the wingless craft had vanished from his sight. With a satisfied grin he turned back to the benches where his apparatus was set up.

"No sense trusting those fools," he muttered to himself. "There's never been a chance since the first clumsy equations on relativity were discovered. Such a fundamental step comes only once. The rest is mere following. But for me . . . ." He paused. The mere thought of what this could mean left him awed by the very genius he was exhibiting in these completely radical experiments. Life! The very essence of being was waiting to be discovered.

He could feel the tense atmosphere in his laboratory. His years of work were all reaching out towards this one great experiment. This was the time, the chance, the



hope. Success now meant complete triumph. Failure meant complete defeat. Either way Smith knew that this was the culmination of his scientific career.

"It's got to work," he began muttering to himself. "I've checked and rechecked every calculation. There's not a single approximation in error by more than one in ten million. Every possibility had been allowed for. Nothing to chance! Everything as it should be."

All this he was mumbling worriedly to himself as he worked over the equipment which stood waiting to be put into action. But having checked it all for the tenth time he decided to check once more. This was the thoroughness that had won him his high place in the scientific world of his day.

Then, fingers nervously twitching, he reached out and tipped a retort so that the thin violet liquid flowed slowly to mix with a colorless fluid in a second retort. When this process was under way he turned to the electronic circuit and turned a power switch. From the atomic pile deep under his laboratory power flowed through the circuit and to those leads on the empty retort where a strange and violent series of flashes brought a smile to Smith's lips.

This activity mysteriously produced further activity in other portions of the apparatus until the whole bench of equipment seemed caught up in the over-all plan which was Smith's experiment. As he watched he kept his eyes riveted on the timing device fixed in the power line to his circuit and within one thousandth of a second from the accurate time of 1.824 minutes the mechanism cut the power and the empty retort was suddenly quiet and clear. But elsewhere the whole equipment was now excited to very more violent life as the simmering swirling fluids changed color and density as they flowed through a pattern of tubing toward the empty retort.

SMITH'S breath came abruptly and jerkily in gasping sounds when sheer necessity seemed to force even this activity upon him. All his attention was concentrated on that one retort. Slowly, as the fluids converged on that one retort, they faded in color and density until he could no longer see them and it seemed that the experiment was over. A failure.

The man's shoulders drooped dismally and he turned away and as he did so he caught sight of the seemingly empty retort from the corner of his eye and he swung back in a sudden violent movement.

He had seen something in that retort. He was certain of it; but now when he stared directly at the vessel he could see nothing. Desperately he pressed a button which closed the shutters and brought the laboratory to darkness. Then, there in the seemingly empty retort he could see the swirling greenish vapor that was almost non-existent to the eye except that it was faintly glowing in the darkness.

What instinct had compelled him to shut the light from the room he could not tell but now he stood still and watched. From unliving elements he had conjured up this swirling centre of life. The essence of life itself. The very thing that made all nature pivot around man. Man—life developed to its greatest peak of controlled intelligence. Man, dependent on life and the victim of death.

But Smith chuckled softly to himself. That was in the past. Here was the secret revealed. That one fundamental piece of knowledge nature had kept hidden so long. He, Andrew Smith, had laid it bare for all science to know. Never again would society worry over the declining fertility of men and preach the coming doom of all humans upon earth. Here was life itself!

From there great teams of workers would be able to learn to control and manipulate the essence so that it moulded and formed in ways most suitable to the needs of man. Once more many children would run and play through the flower-bordered gardens of the schools. Child-starved parents would once more find their instincts satisfied and a medium for their love through their children.

The doom which nature had been thrusting on man through the inevitable march of evolution would be swept aside. The last door was open—the seventh veil of nature was lifted and he, Andrew Smith, was the man. He laughed with hysterical abandon as he released all the pent up tension that had gathered over the years.



Success made him slightly giddy and a moist palm went to his egg-like skull and caressed there damply. His eyes were moist and but half-seeing or he might have seen sooner. Might even have stopped the thing. But certainly he would have escaped, reached the hangar and roared to the safety of the air in his air-craft.

**B**UT triumph made a weak man of Andrew Smith and so he leaned back against the wall and peered through moist eyes at the swirling pale vapor which was his creation—his masterpiece. **The essence of life itself.**

For minutes he stood like that till he straightened, wiped the back of a hairless hand across his eyes and moved forward to press the button which would flood the laboratory with light. In the sudden glare he lost sight of the essence and then, with a tremendous effort of will, he sat himself down to record the final stages of his achievement. Everything had to be in order before he presented his log-book to the Academy of Science for their approval.

With that deliberate concentration that was a crucial part of the man, the genius of science, Smith wrote out the final report in the cryptic code which was the international language of the scientific world. Since the great havoc when the old moon plunged into the earth to be replaced in its orbit by another, there had been peace and friendship among all peoples but this old code had survived as a curious reminder of the time when war and threatened war had held men in fear over all the earth.

Suddenly, Smith stopped, jerked upright and shifted his foot as he looked down toward it. A sense of horror crept through him as he stared at the boot which was partially eaten away and the thing that had been his foot. Blood should have flowed, but it trickled and gushed forth and seemed to vanish without leaving stain or blemish on the highly polished floor. He felt no pain.

With terror making every move a jerky pause Smith got to the button and once more plunged the laboratory into darkness. All around him he could see the essence in its vaporish greenness as it slowly enveloped and consumed the objects around it. He whirled for the door, made a violent effort

to reach it, but saw that his creation had already beaten him there and that he was trapped.

Trembling, he moved toward the bench where he had worked and flashed a light on the apparatus. The retort in which he had collected his essence was no longer there—just a fragment remained held in the the clamp of the stand.

"Good God!" he gasped aloud "I forgot. Life consumes in order to live. Dog eat dog! Where do I remember that from, I wonder? All that care and I neglect a fundamental."

**H**E shook his head in bafflement. It would be wrong to say that he was not afraid, but over all his fear, now that he knew he could not escape, was the driving curiosity which had made a scientist of Andrew Smith. Then, a sudden thought occurred to him. The world? They had to know. Had to know of his success.

Hurriedly he flashed the laboratory into brilliant light again and then prepared the tiny rocket millajet. Furiously he scribbled the last notes in his log and then loaded it into the chamber of the small millajet. Still, he felt no pain as the green death fed from his foot and his boot, seeming content to leave his other leg completely alone.

Rushing over to the tube he set the millajet in position and fired the mechanism. Nothing but a slow hiss answered his efforts. His face clouded and he slowly sank back into his chair and closed the shutters. All around he could see the greenish essence sending out feelers of itself as it investigated its surroundings. The mechanism of the millajet was wrapped in one of these. Another still twisted about Smith's leg and he stared in fascination as his life was being drawn from him.

Sheer amazement that he could feel no pain was the essential emotion as he sat there. But slowly, as he saw by what slow degrees the thing grew and consumed, Andrew Smith became afraid. Fear crept through him like a faint breath of comet-dust drifted through space. Slowly, the cold hand of fear reached out and caught at his guts and he screamed suddenly, horribly, as he peered down at his corroded foot.

Leaping up on his one good foot he slapped the button which swung open the

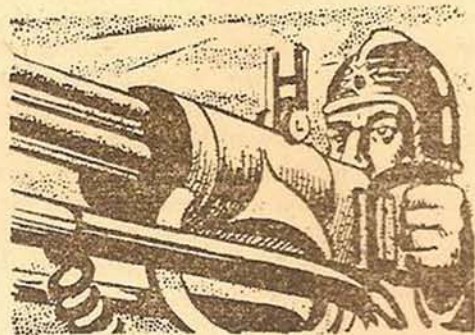


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shutters, and then he snatched up a retort from the bench and hurled it deliberately at the transparent windows. The metal retort crashed through with a shattering splinter of glass and then, one after another, Smith hurled the retorts through till there was no glass in one whole section of the window.

Crying out in his terror Smith leapt through the space and hurtled down the depths that took him crashing to his death at the foot of the cliff upon the top of which his lonely laboratory had been constructed. Useless now, a rocket air-craft waited in the hangar.

But down at the bottom of the cliff the escaped essence lived and grew and soon there remained no sign of Andrew Smith



discoverer of life. Nor, in the harsh light of day, was there any sign of that greenish vapor which glowed slightly in the darkness.

All through the day it lived and worked unscen and when night came the pale green tentacles of the monstrous growth could be seen encompassing the mountain itself and it seemed that the thing was now eating the mountain itself.

Three days passed and the mountain was no longer an inanimate mass of elements, but the life essence had entered into it and devoured it and filled it with life. The mountain was mobile as the pale green tentacles reached out in further quest. They flowed out and gradually formed into the shape of the mountain at another spot and then moved on again.

**I**N the night the pale green horror was a beacon for miles. But though the monster of life moved on it did no further damage for it seemed sated. The essence seemed to have infused all the mass with life it was capable of infusing. Now, dull,

unthinking, moving under pressure of what strange impulse was unknown, the thing moved towards the populated areas around the city.

Smith, before ordering his assistant from his wilderness laboratory, had promised to contact him by video telephone within two days and when no message came through on his private tuning Marx Kordar decided to return to the laboratory. Once his rocket craft was airborne he was directed into a flight lane by the control station and was soon roaring away westward from the city.

Soon he had passed the outer limits of population and was flying slowly over the vast areas where the slowly retreating line of settlement marked the dwindling population of the great nation. Depopulation had set in like a plague and sterility became more common among men than fertility and science had failed to find an answer as the populations of the world shrunk back and back, ever closer to the great centres of life in the cities.

Melancholy feelings always gripped Marx as he flew over the deserted areas, and suddenly he speeded his craft and headed directly for Smith's laboratory. The speed of his flight carried him there within minutes, and he cut speed and circled down slowly. Surprise, then horror, came over him as he saw the smoothly rounded knob of earth which was all that remained of the mountain.

"Venus and Mars!" he ejaculated suddenly. "Smith has wiped himself out, and the mountain with him. No wonder he wanted me out of the way."

Then he dipped his craft down in a steep spin and landed the ship in a perfect poise landing. Once outside he investigated and could find no possible explanation of the strange smoothness of what was left of the mountain nor of certain evidences that other well-known landmarks had been destroyed in a seemingly senseless pattern.

He could think of no precedent of any type of destructive activity which could account for the phenomena he witnessed. Then, stooping from his seven feet four of height, he collected samples of earth and mapped the pattern of the devastation in order that he might be able to make a com-



plete report when he returned to the Academy of Science.

For hours he wandered around testing and trying to prove one working hypothesis after another. Finally, as it approached darkness, he climbed back into his rocket craft and soared up into the higher altitudes in a dizzy spiral which he somehow hoped might shake the wonderment from him and leave him with a concrete sense of the key to the mystery.

But two hours of circling down over the fateful spot failed to tell him anything more and he completed his eye-witness report and tabulated his collected samples. Then, taking over from his robot pilot he set course back towards the city. He flew slowly and at less than five thousand feet for he was shocked by the day's revelations and somehow distrusted the space of the upper atmosphere.

**B**ELOW him and ahead, he caught sight of the greenish thing, saw the long tentacles flowing out and then swelling as the life-thing moved toward the distant city and the populated areas. Cutting his speed till he had just sufficient to remain airborne he circled an observed and used his night-photography equipment to making moving records of the scene.

At three or four places as he moved back towards the old site of the laboratory Marx found evidence of further devastation similar to that seen earlier and between these points the country was just as if the life-thing had never crossed it. Of all he saw he made careful note and then hastened back to the Academy of Science where he sought and obtained immediate audience with the Chief.

Sleepily the Chief of the Academy came into the consulting rooms and sat wearily in a revivifying chair which he turned on with an automatic gesture. As the chair hummed into the life which revived flagged nerves and tired brains the Chief brightened and sat erect.

"Well, Kordar!" he said softly as he turned the chair mechanism off. "What is so important that you should demand an audience at this time of night? Has Smith been up to something outside the code laid down by the Academy?"

"I can't tell, Chief!" stammered Kordar, addressing the Chief directly and in person for the first time in his life. "It's difficult to know . . . Well! You see . . ." he floundered hopelessly.

"Suppose you start at the beginning. That's usual," snapped the Chief, sarcastically.

"I've reported previously to the Academy on the work carried out by Smith," Marx Kordar began quietly, more sure of himself now. "You are aware, I'm sure, of the completely radical, I might almost say blasphemous line of research Smith was following. Of late he has worked much alone and I know little of what he has done since my last report to the Academy. Five days ago he shipped me and the two servants out from the mountain. He said he would contact me within two days. I waited—nothing happened."

"Get to the point, man," barked the Chief irritably.

A quick thought flashed through Kordar's brain that this fellow ought to have taken a few minutes longer in the chair treatment, but he made no comment.

"When he failed to contact me I tried to fish him. He failed to reply and I took my rocket air-craft and investigated." He paused for a moment as he handed across his report. "Here are my complete findings. I have already turned my samples over to the analytical department for reports."

The Chief took the report without a word. He was used to efficiency and couldn't tolerate any lack of it, and so he saw nothing complimentary in Kordar's promptness of action. His eyes, narrow and deepset under hairless brows flashed over the coded report in a lightning perusal which told him all the salient features of the case. When he looked up again his eyes were wide and his lips hung apart a little.

"I've thought much on your reports on Smith," he growled slowly. "The conclusion I arrived at recently that his radical approach to the problem of life was the only one at present being investigated that seemed ever likely to reveal a single useful fact. Now! I'm certain that Smith has discovered that which we'd all sought for generations. **The life essence.**"



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HE broke off suddenly and snapped a switch and then rasped into a seemingly solid piece of synthetic material.

"Have Science Four Air Group alerted immediately. Take-off time is plus twenty-five minutes. Check!"

The message was repeated through that same seemingly solid piece of material which was glowing with the image of a man seated at a large control board. Then the viewer was cleared and the Chief wheeled round and strode toward the door. There, he paused, wheeled round swiftly and rapped out.

"You will accompany me on this flight," he ordered.

Plus twenty-five minutes was gone by thirty minutes before the Science Four Group sighted the life-thing for the first time. It was, when stationary for brief spaces of time, roughly the shape and size of the laboratory mountain, and once it even seemed that the laboratory itself could be distinguished in the shape, but it melted and formed so continuously that none of those in the group could be certain of that.

As they watched with night-vision viewers, the thing seemed to be feeding and it enveloped and digested things mainly living though some noticeable shape differences remained where it took in certain rocky outcrops of land.

The Chief of the Academy watched with enthralled keenness and when at last he reluctantly turned away from his viewer he checked with his men. From a synthesis of their reports it seemed certain to him that this new life-thing was Smith's creation. So he headed his force to the site of the laboratory and they swiftly went to work and within two hours sufficient reports had been turned in by his staff to assure him that this spot was the origin of the life-form.

"If this is a life-form," queried Kordar solemnly. "Will it have the capacity of reproduction?"

"Possibly," the Chief replied thoughtfully. "But more urgent things concern us now. Whether by chance or design this thing is moving directly towards the populated regions and the city. From observation we've seen it feeding and showing a

definite preference for live foods. This means our populations are in grave danger. But there's one experiment we can try first before we spread the warning."

And an hour later this plan was being tried. From the air a force of army craft were herding a huge mob of wilderness cattle towards the greenish vaporish thing.

"If it develops a hunger for them then it must be destroyed," snapped the Chief as he watched the progress of the drive from his superior altitude.

And when the great herd of wild cattle were within two miles of the thing it suddenly swept out great flowing tentacles which formed a huge jaw which closed around the herd. Slowly those rolling cattle melted away into nothingness and the Chief shrunk back from his viewer with a look of disgust on his face.

"Order a bomber fleet out," he snapped to the captain of his army squadron. "Total destruction."

The order was relayed and the Science Four Group climbed high bearing off slightly to be beyond the danger zone when the bomber group zoomed in to attack. Less than fifteen minutes and the group streaked through the sky and dived on the target and loosed their bombs in one tremendous splash of terror. The whole night seemed suddenly strewn with greenish stuff and the land rocked from the dread power of the blast.

"Mission completed," came the video-telephone signal a moment later and the Chief flashed back his all clear with the reply.

"All right! Return to base."

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But Science Group Four circled over the spot and waited. Life still pulsed in those scattered fragments scattered over the countryside in a wide circle. And stark horror crowded the smooth face of the Chief as he watched them moving and coagulating into larger masses which were in turn moving towards the centre of the explosion area where a central mass was already formed.

"Indestructible!" he growled savagely. "The essence of life itself."

"**B**UT the city?" asked Kordar, desperately.

"Issue a warning for the city to be evacuated by to-morrow," snapped the Chief as they headed back towards the Academy of Science.

Meanwhile, all over the country video screens greeted the early risers who tuned for the official announcements, with the horrifying spectacle of the thing engulfing the great herd of cattle and then of its being blasted apart and its reformation. Following came a map of the likely path of the life form and the announcement of the evacuation order. Over and over again the message was flashed throughout the country till there was no single citizen who had not seen and heard all at least a dozen times.

During the day no knowledge could be gained of its whereabouts and panic was sweeping through the outlying districts. Men went crazy and looting and violence ruled through the day. Husbands feared to leave wives and daughters as rape gangs ruled the country in some districts until the army forces were rushed in. Even these well-trained men found it almost impossible to be in all places and the gangs formed and had their way.

Thousands, clinging to the primitive beliefs of the pre-scientific ages went to their knees and uttered ancient rituals the meanings of which had been lost in the darkness of the past. Desperation followed desperation as all available craft were diverted to evacuate the entire population of the immediate danger area.

With the coming of night the army rushed forces of oxygen-fire groups to make an assault on the thing once it had been revealed by the darkness. These men rode the skies in individual craft of the smallest size and of great speeds. In full force they

patrolled the area as the shadows lengthened down over the earth and with the first faint glimmering of green they dived recklessly in to the attack.

In tight formation they loosed their bursts of fire and a solid sheet of flame flayed down over the tentacled horror. It convulsed desperately and then flung its long tentacles off over miles of territory in all directions. But still it lived and moved as they swept in again to renew their attack. Again they failed though it was obvious that some sort of damage was being done to the thing.

The Chief of the Academy of Sciences watched from above and he ordered attack after attack until the force had completely exhausted their charges and had laid waste an enormous area of the wilderness. Then, with the attacks ceased, the Chief slowly watched the thing reform its shape and started forward as he realised that it had been reduced in size by almost two thirds.

"Command more flight of the oxygen-fire fleets," he ordered.

But by the time the next flight had arrived the greenish vapor had sped swiftly across the country to an area unspoiled by the blasts and was there enveloping forest and animal life in giant pincer movements which seemed more virile and active than any previous movement.

"Fire's the chance we have," he growled to Kordar angrily. "But look at that. Somehow we've given the thing vitality even though we've reduced its mass. It's a dangerous weapon to use."

However, when the fresh flights of oxygen-fire craft swept in the Chief commanded an immediate attack and had signals out for the diversion of every available oxygen-fire craft to the area. Flight after flight swept in through the remaining hours of the night but by morning the thing was still sweeping across the country and the later attacks had far less effect on the monstrous form.

"We're beaten!" growled the Chief angrily. "It's already building up resistance against that form of attack. By to-night it will be useless."

That day in the city complete chaos reigned as every terminal for rocket craft was jammed with masses of terror-stricken, fighting madmen, their bald domes in sharp



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contrast to the long-haired heads of the women. At special terminals a fleet of craft were detailed to remove all the fertile males and females to places considered safe. A ticket avowing fertility was a sure passport to escape.

**M**MURDERED bodies were strewn along the length of the city as the army completely failed to keep order and men and women were bludgeoned to death for their fertility passes. Desolation such as was not known in history since before the era of peace was abroad on that day. Looting, rape, murder, and every violent crime almost unknown in recent history suddenly flared as the primitive instinct of self-preservation asserted itself and the highly intelligent giants of that Utopian world were slaughtered in the mad panics to escape.

Sunset came and night. Once more the Chief of the Academy of Science was airborne after day-long conferences with the greatest brains of the era. All day they had puzzled through the many plans for the destruction of the monstrous new threat to their existence and but one suggestion that seemed to merit trial had been brought forward. Immediately a decision had been reached scientists were set to work to supply the necessary equipment, but this could not possibly be ready before the following night despite the colossal output of the automatic factories.

"Kordar! Look!" the Chief growled angrily.

Marx Kordar sighted the viewer from the craft and stared down in fascinated wonder as he saw the twin greenish splashes of vapour nothingness which answered that question which had been posed earlier. The life-thing had reproduced itself. Down below, two identical shapes moved relentlessly toward the city. And now that the thing had split and reproduced itself it was devouring whatever came within their path and growing in size as the men above watched.

"It will reach the city already before morning," Kordar said in an awed whisper.

"Less than half of the population will be evacuated by morning," the Chief muttered

worriedly. "Less than half. All forces seem to be working for the destruction of man on earth. First the great wars, then the havoc when the old moon crashed into earth as the new moon took up its orbit, then the fertility plague, and now this creeping horror conjured up by Smith in his search for the secret of life."

"Smith?" gasped Kordar, slowly. "I'd forgotten him. The... the thing must have gotten him."

"Of course," snapped the Chief, as if it were a matter of little importance. "Order all forces out with oxygen-fire equipment," he snapped then.

**B**UT, despite every effort they made, the greenish death crept into the deserted villages which surrounded the city. When the first was passed there was no sign of the dead who had strewn the streets from the mass violence the day before. They had gone into the hungry maws of the life-thing. Vanished! Not a trace remained of any living thing in the village or around it.

Then, along the video telephone, flashed a message that gave a sudden expression of hope to the Chief.

"It's worth it!" he laughed. "Worth a try! Suggestion from Asia Three has just come in. The suggestion is that we inflict a number of virus diseases on the things."

And while the twin monsters flowed on their way toward the city and the sea beyond, viruses were being rushed from the laboratories where they were bred, and containers of these were dropped in the path of the greenish hills. Viruses were life, and they vanished into that enveloping flood of greenish vapor.

Aloft, the Chief anxiously awaited the results of the experiment, but dawn intervened and the things were lost from sight. All that day the Science Four Group stayed in the air and watched the frantic evacuation of the city. As the day wore on hope became greater, and the first darkness was eagerly awaited.

The city was a place of the dead by the time the last rocket craft had soared aloft in the late afternoon, and the Chief gazed down with a hatred and disgust that he could not repress.



"Our Academy has worked through generations upon generations to raise our people above the animals from which they spring. Look!" and he pointed down. "There is stamped the mark of the beast like a great blot on our history."

"Fear rules all things," Kordar replied, solemnly, voicing his new-learned truth.

"Fear! Fear!" shouted the Chief of the Academy loudly. "The solution! Don't you see it? Fear. One thing alone we have discovered that will send this thing in retreat—Fire. Millions of degrees of heat. We can tame it and control it with fire. Send it scuttling away if it obeys that instinct common to all animal life."

FRESH orders were flashed, and every available craft capable of firing any fire-missile at the things were assembled, and the Chief snapped his orders.

"The shots must be fired on the city side of the things. They must not hit them, but must be close. Slow, steady fire is called for."

Then, with the darkness fully down and the things sighted close upon the city the first shots of the new attack were made. At first the things held their ground and then retreated slowly, and as the attack gained momentum the things were flowing across the country back toward the wilderness in a desperate rush.

Satisfied that this form of attack could be maintained, the Chief hurried back to the Academy of Science, and there he made some swift preparations. They had the breathing space they needed to forge further weapons to eventually wipe out this menace . . . .

But it was three days later that Science Four Group took off from the city with their equipment and headed far out into the wilderness, where the army craft were still keeping the things on the move, and headed away from settled country.

Then the group of craft that carried the scientists settled into a formation and moved out over the life-things Smith had created. At the order of the Chief the apparatus was set humming, and the invisible beams of ultra-milli-high frequency rays

were directed down from aloft. The tight circle of the beams gradually closed around the twin horrors, and they shrank into themselves more and more as they were bombarded with the deadly beams.

Slowly, with the coming of the dawn, the things became inert and remained still, but for a small flicker . . . .

"Shall we completely extinguish our objective," crackled the video as the squadron leader reported.

Kordar looked anxiously at the Chief.



"We can control it . . . must it all go for nothing . . . .?"

"I think yes," deliberated the Chief, grimly. "The secret we've sought for generations must perish down there. And Kordar—your reports to the Academy have been seen by no one but myself. You must never mention the line of Smith's work or anything you know of his experiments. You understand?"

"But all those who seek for the secret of life?" Kordar protested wonderingly.

"They will continue to seek—vainly. Such a secret is revealed but once in an era. Let it die now with those monsters it sired," said the Chief, sombrely. "Life is flexible. Through time it has built up resistance to the perils that threatened it . . . who knows that this will not finally build up an insurmountable resistance to us creatures who have created it . . . and what then . . . .?"

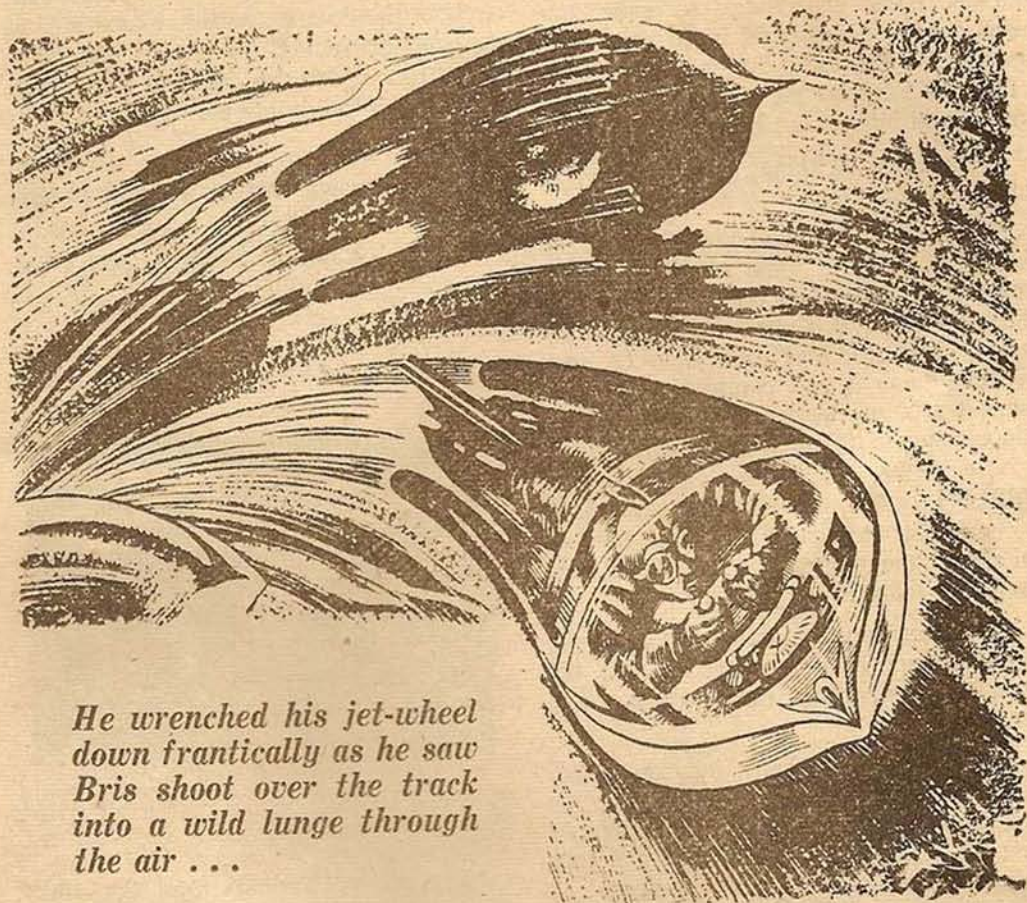
He switched his video screen to "send" . . . . "Proceed . . . ."





Full-length  
Futuristic  
Thriller ...

# JET-WHEEL



*He wrenched his jet-wheel down frantically as he saw Bris shoot over the track into a wild lunge through the air ...*

OSLAND ORTFORD stared out from the Strato-liner circling down over Austral City and grinned at his brother, Bris. In Osland's eyes there was the look of determination that came into them at intervals when things became tough for the boys who had stuck together for a long time.

"This is it, Bris!" he snapped eagerly. "Here's where we'll collect some of that coin which will get us to seeing the other planets. Just because we happened to be born to a father that didn't give a damn for anything but fooling with an atomic motor we don't have to stick with the mob for the rest of our lives!"

"I'm not betting on that. Authorities are getting mighty careful about fellows like us trying to get above their position in life," Bris growled back somberly.

Bris knew how tough life could be in Austral One. He had met up with a couple

of stray genes left in his family for a heap of years since before they knew what to do about radiation effects in heredity. The result was that he had two joints in his arms instead of the normal one.

That made things mighty tough for Bris as he grew up through his first ten years to maturity. There were plenty of tough officials who were all for having him classified as an upper-grade mutant and sending him to the segregated area of his community to live. But mainly because Osland could be mighty tough when he needed, and perhaps too because the ruling classes didn't like treading down the workers too much, he had managed to get by in normal society.

Plenty of folks resented him but he got by. Together, he and Ossie had gone through the three weeks of jet-school training that equipped them, through a carefully worked out system of sleep learning for all that they would need to know to



# JOCKEY

by Wolfe Herscholt

become production overseers in the factories turning out atomic jets for the giant space ships that travelled the normal routes of trade with the sister planets of earth.

Once they were cleared through the inspection rooms at the Strato-liner field they caught a street car into the heart of the city where they were immediately caught in the hustle of the crowds pouring along the street heading in one special direction.

"Say! what goes on here?" queried Ossie, turning to watch the mass of people rushing by as if they were in the greatest haste to get to some special spot.

Bris took shelter behind his brother's six-foot-two of brawn and muscle and shook his dark head somberly. He was only five-feet-six tall and couldn't see much, but leastways he counted that better than being carried away into the mad throng that rushed along the street.

"Let's get into this Pep-drink joint and maybe we can find out," suggested Ossie as he tired of pushing over the mixed crowd of workers and seggies (the segregated workers of the lowest class who were those with mutant genes caused by the primeval effects of war before Bortkratz successfully demonstrated that man could be immunised against the effects of atomic radiation).

Inside the joint they walked to the bar and demanded their drinks. Pep-drink could be had in any flavor from martini through a tremendous range to Martian Blue which was the latest craze in Austral City.

Ossie raised his eyebrows in appreciation as he sighted the girl who slid the drinks along to them. He preened his tunic carefully and grinned at her. The dazzling dark haired head of the girl tossed haughtily as she saw his short-cut hair, which signified he belonged to the worker-class.

"What's the brush-off, Babe?" asked Ossie purringly.

"Worker!" she snapped at him. "What could you do for me? I'm looking for something better than you."

"What's wrong with me?" he growled back angrily. "I'm as good as the next one."

"Ruler-class men have their own strato-ships and seggie maids," she retorted slowly.

"Let's get out of here," snapped Ossie suddenly. "Seems like any Pep-drink slinger is figuring a worker too good for her around here."

"Hold it Ossie!" replied Bris quietly. "Thought we were going to find out what the mob was doing?"

"Yeah! What's the mob?" asked Ossie, turning back to the five feet five of sizzling female behind the bar.

"They're going to the Jet-Wheel Stadium down the street," she told him coldly. "Maybe if you were a Jet-jockey you wouldn't have to wear your hair short like that," she added with a taunting grin.

Ossie stalked out of the street and turned in the wake of the crowd that was now thinning. His eyes were intent as he followed the last of the crowd which was hurrying to the stadium after being released from their factories just after mid-day.

He grinned. Even in Austral Outback they had heard rumors of unrest in the cities. Seggies and workers had too much time on their hands despite the fact that the authorities had raised the working hours from three to four and then to four and a half.

The greatest scientific brains were taxed with thinking up new ideas to amuse the



Laura watched eagerly as Ossie and Bris climbed side by side to the championship —and doublecross . . .



restless underprivileged ones for the authorities dared not increase hours and production further for already they were faced with the situation where there were sufficient strato-liners and space-ships to last for the next fifty years.

Excitement raged as a great team of men were set at work on the problem. Within three weeks they had finally decided on an extremely ancient past-time called "Bike Racing." But, alas! It was soon discovered that the form of machine used was so primitive that even the greatest engineering brain in Austral One could not understand the workings of the motor.

Once more research was called for and the final design was the Jet-wheel. It was to them an extremely crude mechanism. A single wheel with an atomic jet motor of insignificant size set half-way between the axle of the wheel and the strange top where the jockey was called upon to lay, face down, while he raced his machine against the competitors.

And with this craze came stars among the jet-jockeys. And though the size of each separate component was specified by law jet-jockeys found ways of bumping up the speed of their machines by the extra few miles per hour that it required to make them champions. Soon ugly rumors were running that Jet-wheel races were being rigged.

Soon, too, a too-successful jet-jockey could reckon on a thrashing he wouldn't forget in a spell of years. But the sport saved the security of Austral One and allowed it to pursue its war on Mercury, in peace. The Authorities were happy.

AT the entrances to the Stadium Ossie pulled up and headed for the blue gates. He glanced down at his blue tunic and growled as he paid his entrance and passed through. Through a barricade he could see the red-tunicked rulers with their long hair sitting in comfortable seats around the transparent track where the races commenced and finished.

"Just look at them!" he snapped at Bris. "Smirking from their comfort.

But Bris turned an eye to where the yellow-tunicked seggies crowded together, their shaven heads bobbing in their endeavor to keep sight of the jet-wheels which were

moving slowly round the track at a hundred miles an hour getting set for the commencement of the first race.

"One day I'll wear my hair long and wear the red." Ossie snarled.

"That takes money," Bris warned. "And plenty more than the sort of money we're ever likely to earn."

"I'll find a way," growled Ossie stubbornly. "We're going places, Kid."

"Might as well try the number machines," suggested Bris. "Everyone seems to be betting on six."

"Then mine goes on number two," Ossie snapped loudly.

They went across to the numbers machines and slid their coins into the slots with Ossie tipping all he had into the slot numbered two. Bris figured that the crowd knew more about it than he did and bet on six. To the side of the slots into which they had inserted their coins were other slots and from these shot perforated plastic discs carrying their numbers.

Quickly they pocketed these and hurried back to where they could see the track. It was new to them. The craze hadn't hit Austral Outback yet, and they stared in curiosity at the transparent track with its two long straights and its four sharp corners where the track curved right up to form a wall and where the jet-wheels turned from each corner the track arched over to form a roof.

"Damned primitive sort of business," Bris said quietly. "Can't see what's so exciting about this."

"I been listening to the prizes them boys get if they win," put Ossie, savagely. "Take a look! Ain't a one of the best boys that aren't wearing their hair long. They do all right."

"I hear they meet a sudden end often enough, too," Bris answered quietly. "It's dirty, clear through."

"So what!" snapped Ossie, disgustedly. "The money's clean ain't it?"

Bris shrugged his shoulders as the green light flashed and the jet-wheels roared away to a terrific start with ten men balancing skilfully atop their machines as they flung them into the first bed.

A great yell went up from the crowd as they saw the favorite, number six, roar his machine high up on to the roof of the first



bend and sweep down into the second with a clear lead over the field. The race was over twenty-mile laps. The record for the course stood at 3.84 minutes for the twenty miles.

This slow speed had been obtained by the careful design of the jet-wheels. At this speed, and with the design of balance in the jet-wheels, the onlookers could follow the race and see the skill with which their champions won through to the finish.

Already two laps of the course had been completed and number six was still leading the field with flashing atomic jet blazing. Wild with excitement the crowd of seggies were yelling hysterically.

"Just listen to them seggies yelling!" Ossie snapped. "Their money is on number six."

"Those other jockeys won't catch him either," Bris replied matter-of-factly.

"Something will happen," grinned Ossie. "Someone stands to lose a lot of money if number six comes home first."

"What's that got to do with it?" demanded Bris quietly.

"Grow up, Kid!" laughed Ossie derisively. "A red tunicked gent owns this stadium—have you ever seen a **Red Tunic** come off second best?"

Four laps were gone and number six still held the lead though he was taking the corners too fast and his machine was wobbling as it hit the corner leading from the home straight for the fifth lap.

"Number two is riding well in second place," crowed Ossie. "That fool out in front will be taking a fall. Look at his jet-wheel getting out of control."

Beside Ossie a deep voice growled. Ossie turned to look at the big, gruff fellow with his eyes staring hard at the track as he growled angrily at the man at his side.

"One more lap and Lace had better spill off that wheel else we'll be havin' business with him."

The little fellow at his side grinned in anticipation.

"Time we had a job to do," he purred silkily. "I'm getting out of practice."

"Yeah!" nodded the big fellow. "Say! . . . Look! That fool is stepping on the pace."

It was true! Number six was flashing

into the last lap of the gruelling race at a reckless speed that was shooting him further in advance of his rivals. Grimly number two was trying to stay with him. Then, suddenly, a hush came over the crowd. Number six had lost control.

The jet-wheel was roaring along the roof of the second last bend and heading for the edge which would shoot him into space. Fling him far over the heads of the seggies to a certain death when he crashed to earth.

"That wasn't part of it," ripped out the big fellow.

Seggies howled excitedly as the champion came again near the finishing line. He got within a half-wheel of the unpopular number two.

"LACE was after that race," snapped the big man. "He was told to lose."

Then he whirled and caught sight of Ossie staring quietly at him. His eyes closed to mean slits.

"This big Outback fellow has been listening," he purred to his little partner. "We don't like that, do we?"

"Nope! We don't like that," agreed the little man.

"You want to make some money smart?" asked the big fellow then.

"I just did," laughed Ossie, flashing out his winning discs on number two.

"Real money!" snarled the big, gruff man. "That's seggie stuff."

"What? Being a jet-jockey?" demanded Ossie sneering.

"So!" drawled the gruff man. "Smart boy, eh? Maybe you wouldn't be bad at that. Just the type to please the crowd. Here! Forget what I said and see this gent. Maybe you'll be his type."

Then the big fellow wheeled away and stalked off toward where a few people were collecting coin from the pay-out slots of the gambling machines. Ossie and Bris went across to them and saw the big man make a heavy collect on number two and then he himself collected while Bris stared in amazement at the amount of coin he received for his trifling outlay.

"That's a nice easy way to make money if you know which jockey is going to finish in front," Bris said softly.



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"That big tough knew," suggested Ossie quietly.

"What was that card he gave you?" demanded Bris as he recalled the small card that had been thrust into the hand of his brother by the tough individual who had collected so heavily on the win by number two.

Glancing at the card Ossie grinned.

"Here! Read it!" he said as he passed it over.

"Say! You been talking about these boys. This fellow runs a team of riders. Why don't you see him?" Bris asked.

"And be told when to win and when to lose?" snorted Ossie in disgust as he tucked the card away with his winnings. "A few more collects like that one and I'll buy my own Jet-wheel."

But by the time the last race hit the track Ossie was borrowing a coin from Bris to back his fancy for the final event.

"They're crooked!" he was snarling as he slipped the coin into number one, the slot which represented the favorite for the event. Number one came a poor fourth in the event.

Together they were thrust from the stadium by the push of the crowd behind them.

"We'll be needing to start work tomorrow," Ossie snarled angrily as they got away from the pushing throng. "Getting food-ray in this city costs money and somewhere to sleep is important."

FROM the haughty girl in the Pep-drink joint they learned they could get a room upstairs cheaply. This they took and then went to the nearest food-ray dispenser for their quota of food, delivered through the thin blue hissing tube which provided them with all the materials they would need for their bodies till the following morning. Only the richest of the Red Tunics could afford to have their own food-ray equipment. All else raved at the public dispensers where the rays were sold at two gold coins a minute.

Morning came and they plodded to the nearest factory where atomic-jet motors were produced. The owner shook his mass

of long hair stubbornly as he refused them.

"Can't use another man," he said sadly. "Things are bad. Production is too high. This confounded sleep learning is making workers too efficient. An outrage against society! Got to be stopped. Soon a seggie will be able to do as much as either of you if you don't act."

The second night Ossie and Bris slept in Seggies' town. It wasn't comfortable on the hard plastic bench in the shelter. And from the cracks in the old shelter crept the vermin that made sleep impossible.

Dawn came and with it the crackling of the videograph.

"Here is the news!" called the voice from the screen. "Austral Space scouts last night turned back a determined attack by a larger force of Mercurians. On Mercury herself our attacks are proceeding according to plan. An outstanding announcement is expected from Headquarters at any moment. . . ."

"Turn it off!" snarled an angry seggie. "Who gives a damn one way or the other. Them Red Tunics can't think of anything but war."

"And now . . ." the voice continued. "A local item. Lace Lotard, famous jet-wheel champion . . ."

"Turn that up!" a voice cried. "I want to hear that!"

". . . was found in Central Park badly battered. He is now undergoing special ray treatment in an attempt to save his life. No further news on his condition is to hand as yet. Police suspect that he was the victim of the gambling racketeers who are believed to be winning fortunes at the jet-wheel stadiums. Our programme will be interrupted at any time to bring you further news of him."

The voice droned on with other news, but no one listened now as an excited clamor of voices discussed the hot news from the jet-wheel world.

"Let's get outa here," snapped Ossie. "Guess we'll steal a strato-liner back to Austral Outback. There's still work there."

Then he stopped dead in his tracks and clutched at the ticket in his pocket. Slowly



he drew it out and stared at the name and address.

"I'll make that haughty female change her tune," he snarled. "Come on! We've got work to do."

An hour later they had hiked to the address noted on the card and in the first office Osland Orford demanded to see Silas Kramph, and the sultry girl behind the desk pointed to the door down the long hall. Lighted all the way by the glowing walls the floor was soft and easy under their feet.

"This is class!" grinned Ossie as he looked around approvingly.

"There ain't anything lower than a Martian mutant if you except the ones that'll swindle seggies." Bris muttered. "Why don't we just head back for Austral Out-back?"

"I got a date to flaunt long hair and a red tunic in the face of that Pep-drink slinger," snapped Ossie. "This is where we change our Old Man's bungling."

The door ahead of them opened as they approached and they found themselves in a room fitted with an arrangement of contraptions they couldn't figure out. Across from the door they spotted a small, round-faced man snapping orders at a young fellow who was busy throwing his body through seemingly impossible contortions.

"Well!" snapped the cold-eyed Ruler-class as he wheeled to face them. "What do you want?"

"You manage Jet-wheel jockeys," replied Ossie determinedly. "I want to be one."

"Just like that!" sneered the fellow quietly. "Simple! Isn't it?"

"Looked simple to me," replied Ossie slowly.

"And you, too?" asked Silas, grinning coldly at Bris.

"Sure!" nodded the shorter man, quietly.

Suddenly the man stepped forward and began slapping at Ossie through his tunic. Then he switched to Bris. Suddenly again he stopped as he felt the double joints of Bris's arms.

"We don't take seggies!" he growled meaningly.

"He's no seggie," snarled Ossie. "He's got his card."

AT that Kramph grinned slowly—a cruel sly grin that came lingeringly to his lips as he looked them over, and then he laughed.

"You boys are just in from Austral Out-back?"

They nodded. Good! That suited Kramph fine. Bris could see that well enough. For a moment or two Kramph didn't speak and Ossie let his eyes wander round the large room and saw that there were several Jet-jockeys busy working at the devices that seemed designed solely to force them into physical labor.

"Yeah!" grinned Kramph. "Look hard! Look real hard. This is where a jockey does his training. Some little gadgets I thought up myself to get them in trim. It's hard work. Mighty hard."

"The money's good isn't it?" Ossie demanded quickly.

"Sure! Sure! Do like I say for a year and you can switch that blue tunic for a red," Silas mouthed eagerly.

"Then we aren't afraid of work," growled Ossie determinedly.

Hadn't he done more than three hours a day every day of his working life.

But just then the big gruff fellow they had sighted at the stadium sidled up to Kramph and whispered something in his ear. The man's expression changed swiftly and his eyes flashed as he wheeled towards the boys. Into his hand flashed a trance gun. He levelled it carefully at Ossie.

"Thought they were forbidden property except to space boys?" drawled Ossie when he had recovered from his surprise.

"Maybe they are! They can be bought at a price. I find one handy," purred Kramph quietly.

"What's the matter?" queried Bris softly. "Why the sudden change? What's wrong with us?"

"You know too much!" purred Silas softly. "The police would be mighty interested to know what you overheard at the Stadium."

"Was right careless talking with you so close." Bart Stage, the big gruff fellow snarled. "Why do you suppose I gave you



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that card? Sure. To get you here where we could shut your mouth till things are quiet again."

He laughed hoarsely. But suddenly there was a cry of terror from him as the trance-gun was kicked swiftly round in his direction. The blow came from Ossie as he threw his six-foot-two into action.

Knowing that to attack immediately was the most certain way he kicked up as he lunged himself sideways at the same time. His boot caught the wrist of the gun-laden hand and smashed it round with the trance-gun dropping to the floor unfired. Then his hands were streaking out for the throat of the fat little man—Kramph.

Swiftly he had his gouging fingers locked around the pudgy throat and was dragging Kramph close in against him. Bart Stage made an attempt to leap for the fallen gun but Bris acted quickly and kicked the fallen weapon out of reach.

"Hold it!" Ossie barked angrily. "First fellow who moves will cost Kramph his life."

The jet-jockeys who had been exercising at the machines stood around, not knowing what to do. Slowly Ossie backed toward the door where they had come in, but the door was sealed against them and refused to open.

"Fools!" grated Kramph. "Do you think you'll get away with this. The place is sealed. Get out if you can."

Then he began laughing long taunting bellows till Ossie wrapped a long hand round his throat and strangled off the sound. When he released the pressure he growled at Silas.

"Get them doors open. Fast!"

The man hesitated a moment till the fingers began to close on his throat again and then he signalled and Bart Stage pressed a section of the wall and the door came open smoothly and the boys backed through into the corridor and through. Bris whipped a hand through the pockets of the man's tunic and cleaned out all the gold coin he could find.

In the front office they paused as the flash female there loosed a yelp of surprise. With a sudden heave Ossie flung the

man from him and raced into the street. Bris was close behind him and they dived on to the first stationary street car they came upon as they streaked away from Kramph's headquarters.

In a moment the streamlined power of the craft had whisked them away and within a couple of minutes they were in the overhead routes and heading deep into the heart of the City.

"That was a close call!" Bris growled, slowly. "Jet-wheel jockeying must be tough."

"But did you see that lay-out," grinned



Ossie. "That's for me. I'll show that haughty Pep-drink slinger."

"Why get riled over a dame you ain't never seen before?" Bris demanded. "There's plenty of females back in Austral Outback who'd be glad to mate with you."

"Blue tunic bums!" snorted Ossie in disgust. "Jet-wheeling will pay off big. You seen that lay-out."

"Kramph's a big operator," cautioned Bris. "He'll see we don't get far."

"Let him or anyone else try and stop me," growled Ossie. "We'll quit this buggy here and get ourselves a decent joint to bed-down."

**B**RIS knew his brother well enough to make no attempt to destroy his desire to remain in Austral City. Though Bris feared the consequences of their stay he had so long now taken Ossie's final word as law that he could not break the habit. Bris never forgot that he would have long ago been classed with the seggies had not the



efforts of his brother been devoted to his cause.

So, when Ossie arrived back at the seggies' barracks with a beaming face he knew that he had achieved his intention of finding another manager who was prepared to take them on as novices in the sport of jet-wheeling. He waited for his brother to explain what had happened.

Ossie caught him up suddenly in his arms and swung him round without effort. It was one of his favorite tricks when he was feeling really pleased with himself.

"We're in!" Ossie exulted as he set Bris down again. "Bris, Kid, we're in."

"In? How do you mean?" Bris asked, not knowing just what his brother may have committed him to.

"Simple as anything," laughed Ossie from his greater height. "I found a simple fellow who was looking for new riders. Jockeys get killed off quickly it seems. He welcomed me like a lost friend till he suddenly decided he ought to warn me. Tried to warn me off them. Told me the sport was finished. That the gamblers had made it rotten with their threats and their corruption. Regular sermon he gave me. Sounded just like the sort of thing the Authorities put over the videograph for the seggies."

"Sounds like a decent fellow," drawled Bris quietly.

But Ossie gave him little chance to talk. He rushed him out from the barracks and into the small Strato-car which Ossie now had at his command. In this they were whisked off.

"Where is this place?" Bris demanded at the first chance he got.

"West!" answered Ossie succinctly. "There is a small stadium there, where we'll be riding once we're trained."

"But we're heading east," protested Bris quietly, not understanding the turbulent emotions that raced through his brother's brain.

"That's right. East! East to the Pep-drink joint where that drink slinger works" Ossie told him quickly. "No female like her can give me the pass. I'm going to show her something."

In the shortest of time they were before the Pep-drink joint and Ossie was stalking

his way inside. In a wondering quiet way Bris followed into the long room where he heard Ossie greeting the girl familiarly.

"Have you changed your mind any about me?" Ossie was asking the Dark girl with the dazzling hair.

"Red tunic!" she said with an air of finality. "I can do better than that."

"Better than this?" Ossie asked as he flashed a bundle of notes of bigger value than Bris had seen in one worker's hand before.

The girl's eyes opened wide and she smiled with a slow come-on expression to her lips. Each sensuous curve of her body was tinglingly alive with the invitation for Ossie to say more.

"Where did you get that?" she purred through softened lips.

"I took some advice you offered me," explained Ossie. "Good advice. We're signed up as jet-jockeys."

"Where'd you get all that money?" asked Bris, now that he had an opportunity for the first time. "And where did you get that Strato-car?"

"I signed us both up with Amsley," chuckled Ossie quietly. "This is our first month's pay. I borrowed the Strato-car from Amsley."

Bris nodded and took the single note that his brother slipped to him. He knew Ossie and understood that he had turned his charm loose on this fellow Amsley as he alone could when the occasion arose and there was no doubt that the man was now convinced that he had signed up the two best jet-wheelers in the game. Still! If only Kramph would leave them alone it would maybe work out all right in the end. It certainly would be nice to be able to wear the Red.

"Now beat it Kid. Marian and I have to get acquainted," Ossie advised his brother quietly.

So Bris left the Pep-drink joint and headed for the nearest stopping place of the street-cars and waited there till he could board a car that would give him a connection with the west of the city. Once at the stopping place nearest to the address



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given on the paper Ossie had given him he left the car and walked down.

Immediately he was well aware that this was no longer the elaborately decked-out area such as that in which Kramph had his headquarters. It was a poorer section of the city where workers lived and where factories bristled their giant vents up into the sky. And down a side-street he found the address he was given and went slowly in through the entrance. Curiously he looked at the name of the plate by the door and saw that the man referred to by Ossie as Amsley was there mentioned as Amsley Castle and he grinned at the quick and easy familiarity with which his brother assumed a friendship with the manager of the jet-wheelers.

"Who is it you're looking for?" the girl at the desk requested politely.

"Am . . . I mean, Castle," he blurted quickly.

"In the work-out room," she said quietly, pointing down the dingy hall to the door at the far end of the passage.

All around the small room young jet-wheelers were busy at exercise. Among them stood a short slight man in a red tunic. From time to time he snapped advice to one or other of the boys who were working out and then, quite suddenly he turned round and stared hard at Bris.

"You're Bris Ortford," he decided aloud. "Come over here."

BRIS walked across and then Castle slowly walked around him and looked him over. For a time he said nothing, but then he nodded his head slowly.

"Not the specimen your brother is, but then he's an exception. Not many come like him these days. I'll make a jet-jockey of you if it means working you six hours a day."

"Six hours?" Bris queried.

"Jet-jockeys have to be fit to ride those confounded machines the regulations insist are necessary to the sport," growled Castle then. "The seggies have to be kept in their place. They need something that takes more than Sleep-learning to accomplish to thrill them. Something like jet-wheeling. The Authorities insist they need it. You're going to help give it to them."

"If Ossie says so then I guess it's all right." Bris replied with a heavy shrug of his shoulders.

In that gesture he made a movement with his arms that caused Castle's eyes to open wide and then the manager nodded toward a door leading from the room and said quietly.

"Come with me!"

Bris cursed himself for a fool. He knew that he had made the mistake of flexing his second joint in his arms. Red tunics didn't take to the idea of having a seggy in their midst in the blue tunic of a worker. Once in the small office Castle whirled on Bris and nodded toward his arms.

"Your brother said nothing about those arms in his agreement with me. What's the idea of posing as a worker?"

Bris fumbled through the pocket of his tunic and produced his card which gave him status as entitled to wear the blue of the worker class and he handed it to Castle who took it and read it quickly. Then he nodded.

"You're all right." Then he frowned. "Just the same it might be wise if we made certain that the boys didn't get to know about those arms. Jet-wheelers that last long enough get to being of the Red. If the boys knew about those arms I guess they'd refuse to ride with you. There's nothing like a class-climber to bear hatred against those below him."

For the tenth time since they hit Austral City Bris was doubting the wisdom of his brother's decisions, but he lacked the initiative to disapprove. So he allowed himself to be taken off and plastic splints were soon moulded over his arms in such a way that only a normal wrist remained in evidence and even when he was stripped to the skin the splint did not show to the prying eyes of the boys who looked his skinny frame over with derisive eyes.

That first afternoon in the work-out room became a sort of hell of torture to Bris who learned for the first time in his life that there were muscles in his body he had not dreamed existed and before Castle called time to him each and every one of them had been subjected to a variety of treatments that left him completely exhausted. Then he was taken to the food-ray room where the thin blue hissing tube of the dispenser took



close to five minutes to restore him to any feeling of well-being.

"That's certainly some way to learn to be a jet-wheeler," he grinned at Castle when he was finally through.

The slight little manager laughed as he tugged his wig into position.

"That's nothing to the sort of thing they did to the riders in the primaeval past when they had a sport called 'Bike Racing,'" he laughed. "If we were forced to train you boys like they did then we'd never get riders. Men's bodies are no longer capable of standing the strain without the aid of the ray treatments. Already I have taken you through a course of muscle-building that would have thrown those primitive men into weeks of what must have been torture though the old records reveal nothing of their complaints."

THREE weeks slipped by and then a fourth, and during that time both the boys worked harder than they had ever believed it was possible for any man to work. They learned all that was known to Amsley Castle of Jet-jockeying and that was plenty. The rigorous routines he forced on them in the workout room built muscles that were hard and tough.

Almost every night when training was done Ossie would leave with his tunic and wig secretly wrapped and many times he spoke of the Pep-drink girl Marian and more often still of Olgar.

Then, almost before Bris and Ossie had been taught the last dirty trick of the Jet-wheel stadium races they were listed as riders in the same race. It was the first event on the programme at the small western stadium, where Castle raced his boys. For days past they had practised the course and Castle had issued the necessary warnings about keeping clear of the danger line on the track—not taking the corners at too high a speed—and a tip about one or two riders who would be in opposition to them.

At the track in the afternoon he called them aside before the warning light flashed for them to get their jet-wheels on to the track prior to the start.

"Take it easy, boys!" he cautioned them. "I've put a lot into you and I want it back. Don't take risks and don't try and win.

You're in this race for experience and nothing more."

"According to regulations all jet-wheels are powered the same aren't they?" he queried softly.

"That's right!" nodded Castle hoarsely. "But there are ways of getting round that a little. Your wheels, and all the wheels my boys ride have a little extra pep when needed. But you boys remember that you're in this for the ride."

"You're betting against us?" growled Ossie angrily.

"I'll tell you when that happens," snapped Castle. "Just remember Osland—you are not a champion yet. You're in debt heavily to me, and I'll tell you what to do and when to do it."

"The prize for this race would clear us wouldn't it?" asked Ossie quietly.

Amsley Castle nodded. He didn't get a chance to do more for the warning light flashed and attendants got the jet-wheels fired and shot through the entrance hatches on to the mile circuit of the track.

Once the last jet-wheel was through the hatches they were closed down to form a part of the track itself and the jet-wheels moved around in their warming-up spin at slow speeds.

Fiercely competitive, the jet-jockeys gave no friendly smiles to each other. Of the ten riders who were taking part in the event Ossie and Bris were the only two who came from the Castle Headquarters and the other eight riders were divided up among four other outfits.

This pair racing was a development that had come early in the sport of Jet-wheeling in Austral City for it was found that with the gamblers operating it was very often necessary to have a partner to stave off the attempts of one's rivals to put a dangerous rider out of action.

At the slow speed at which they approached the starter it required skill to keep the jet-wheels erect and Bris exerted all his concentration all down the straight to that end. With the flash to go he heard the wild yells of the onlookers for the first time, and he thrust his throttle wide as his machine leapt into a racing pace down the first straight towards the corner where the bunched riders shot high up into the curve



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to get round the bend and then shot down and through the next corner into the back straight.

On instructions from Castle he should be sticking with Ossie but in the badly bunched riders he could not distinguish the marking color of his brother's jet-wheel. Lap one of the track flashed under his machine without mishap and then as they entered lap two he saw a jet-wheel go into a slide and fall ahead of the front bunch.

The bunch split, throttled their jet-wheels high up the wall and round the crashing machine. And there in the midst of that racing pack, Bris sighted the distinguishing color of his brother's jet-wheel. Determined to follow Castle's instructions as best he could he gave his wheel extra power and the blast from the atomic jets thrust his machine forward into a mad race that hurtled him past the second bunch of jockeys and into the front line of riders.

Once there he teamed with his brother and tried to contact him through the video-graph, but found that his brother's video seemed to be out of action. Castle's face flashed on his own screen.

"GET out of that bunch!" Castle warned him. "Those boys play rough."

Bris eased back, but found that Ossie wasn't going with him and so he closed in again and stayed with him as they hit the bend into the fourth lap. Lap fifteen came up and apart from minor jostling for position the situation was unchanged with Castle sending desperate messages for them to quit and get clear. Ossie wouldn't give ground and Bris decided not to quit without him.

Then, Bris saw trouble coming; a jockey was coming in to force Ossie up beyond the danger line as they hit the corner out of the straight. Almost automatically, after the drilling Castle had given him Bris throttled his jet-wheel in to counter the play. Trapped between the team-mates the threatening jockey smartly dropped back out of danger for bad trouble loomed for him.

Bris throttled sharply through a tight-bunched field and warded off the attack and he himself shot to the front with only a lap to go. Then the wild screams coming from the seggies told him that something

was coming behind him and he flung his machine high towards the line of danger to stop a jet-wheel passing him. But, skimming along the danger line at a terrific pace the other jockey roared his machine past him and as they flashed into the final run down the straight he recognised the jet-wheel colors as those of his brother's machine. Almost together they crossed the line, but Ossie's number went up and when they hit the hatches to return to the pits again they were met with Amsley Castle who was fuming with anger.

"What sort of fool riding was that?" he demanded, angrily.

"I won, didn't I?" demanded Ossie as he was released from his jet-wheel.

"Of course, you did!" snapped Castle irritably. "And put yourself into the next class up before I could collect on a win in class 1."

"Collect the prize-money and consider us square," laughed Ossie. "I put a little in the machines on myself."

THE little that Ossie had put in the machines on himself served very well for the plans he had and Marian was delighted with the Strato-car which he purchased for himself, and also with the presents of glimmering delight he purchased for her. Never before, in her haughty contempt of the Blue had she dreamed that her beauty would purchase for her such a mate as this strong one from Austral Out-back.

As she entered herself beside Ossie at Night Delight 4 she was conscious of the jealous looks that the various men in red threw in her direction. At least she assumed they were for her. Some thought came once or twice that she might do better than Orford who now masqueraded nightly as belonging to the Red; but each time such a thought came she knew that this man had a grip on her emotions that was more than material. She had come to feel toward him the true mate spirit of which the video spoke at times. She knew she was tied to this man now whether he were to climb from the blue to the true Red or whether he were to be thrown back in disgrace to serve a sentence with the seggies.

Marian was wrong about those jealous looks. Many a Red Tunic looked on them



coming in with jealous regard, but this feeling was cast at Ossie. Those secret whispers that circulated through the Night Delights told that this newcomer was one who sought the attentions of Olgar, the fire-dancer. Olgar, the unattainable.

More than one wished he could remove Ossie from their midst, but his obvious wealth stayed any hints to the police for an investigation. Such a way was dangerous. It was more than possible that he belonged to the secret police, and was set to spy upon the Reds of Night Delight 4.

So, night after night, Ossie sat unmolested at his table and drank his full of Pep-pep-drink and watched eagerly for the appearances of Olgar. When she danced through the sheets of flame in the pink softness of her skin and the tresses of her flame-colored hair every nerve of the man was awakened to dreams of pneumatic pleasure.

**B**UT as the days passed Ossie ceased attending Night Delight 4 for the simple reason that his money was exhausted and a stubborn Amsley Castle refused to advance him further cash and also refused to allow either of the boys to ride at the stadium, but he kept them at their training till they became heartily sick of the work-out room and the other boys who exercised there. Finally Ossie taxed his manager and demanded a ride the following day.

"We need the cash," he growled heavily. "We haven't ridden in days and we're letting time slip by wasted. How can we make money for you if we don't ride?"

"At least you can't lose it for me like in your first race," snapped Castle in reply.

"Come, Amsley!" Ossie smiled, taking a new tack. "You said you didn't stand to lose on those other riders. How was I to know what plans you had? You didn't tell us."

Just then the door opened from the front entrance and a slight figure of a softly garbed woman came into the work-out room. In surprise Amsley moved across and held out a hand to welcome the woman.

"Laura!" he said. "What are you doing here?"

"I've heard about your new riders and the sensation they made at the stadium the other day. Why didn't you tell me? You

know how dull the City Stadium has been lately. I've come to see those new jockeys ride."

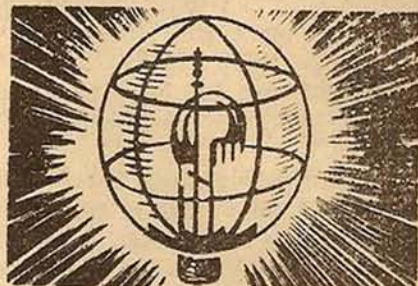
"But! . . ." Castle flustered helplessly.

"But what!" Laura asked.

"I'm not letting them ride for the time being," Castle told her weakly. "They disobeyed orders. We of the Red can't tolerate that."

Laura, the silent one, was not disposed to be silent now. She tossed her head and snorted her disgust.

"We of the Red?" she queried softly, and Castle's face flashed in a crimson blush. "We of the Red? I who trace an unblemished family tree through seventeen genera-



tions say that I am of the Red. Had it not been for your eyes, and your hair before baldness robbed you of it I would never have been fool enough to vote you into the Red."

"As you say, my dear," he purred quietly.

"Are these the jet-jockeys?" she demanded then, pointing at Ossie and Bris.

Castle nodded and introduced them. Ossie bowed lower than was necessary and was not mistaken into believing that Laura was as young as she appeared. He knew that age could be held in check for a stretch of years for those who were wealthy enough to obtain the treatments. But he saw Castle's mate now as a means to an end and he smiled on her with a hint of interest that sent a preening hand to the woman's hair.

"Amsley is fortunate to have such a true Red to mate," Ossie told her smoothly. "Bris and I would be delighted to race and win before you at the Stadium."

"Then you will!" she decided quietly. "This afternoon. See that they are entered for their class race," she added as she turned back towards the door to leave.



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At the stadium before the first event they were idling their time away close to the back of the Red's stand when Bris gripped his brother by the arm and grunted a warning.

"Trouble!" he said quickly.

As Ossie turned to look he sighted Kramph moving up toward them. He was still the same cold-eyed grinning man with his round, pudgy face and his small, grotesque body. When he was a yard away from them he stopped and smiled hugely.

"Silas Kramph never forgets his old friends," he purred. "How are you boys? It's good to see you looking so fit."

"What do you want?" snarled Ossie angrily.

"You boys are wiser than some," Silas Kramph pointed out softly. "You know how to keep your mouth shut and say nothing. That's very wise."

"That's not what you came to tell us," Bris cut in quietly. "Say whatever it is and get out."

"I've been checking on you boys," replied Kramph softly still. "You're going to be favorites for the fourth event. But my money will say that you lose. Is that clear?"

"What if we don't remember that?" asked Ossie, snarling out the words.

"I've been patient for a long while. Bart is getting restless. You boys have been around long enough to know what that means," purred the gambler softly.

And then, before either of the boys had time to make a reply, the paunchy little man had wheeled round suddenly and headed away from them. It was as easy as that to him. In a moment they were alone and looking at each other with inquiring looks.

"He's not a man to cheat," Bris said quietly.

"Scared!" taunted Ossie quietly.

**B**UT Bris had his own ideas about who was going to win the event and he knew that his secret training on the track hadn't been wasted. Also he knew that lack of sleep and too much Pep-pep-drink had reduced the benefits of Castle's preparation of Ossie.

"Laura will be here to see us win," snapped Ossie angrily. "Seventeen generations without a black gene in the family tree puts her among the top Reds. We've got to

please her if we want to wear the Red ourselves. We got to!"

"Whichever way you want it, Ossie. That is the way it'll be."

"Then we'll laugh in the face of that gambling fool," replied Ossie quietly. "I'm not squaring off with him to miss with Laura. She's too important to us."

By the time the fourth event came up the boys were moving nervously beside their machines. One class above the bottom now they were meeting more experienced jockeys and knew that the race would be faster than their previous run. As they were strapped in position by their attendants Amsley arrived and growled.

"If you boys know what's good for you you'll win this race."

Time didn't allow the boys to express any such feelings on the subject for soon they were shot through the hatches on to the track and as they moved off slowly for a first circuit of the course they caught sight of Laura in the official stand and she waved at them through the transparent track.

It seemed to the boys that they were riding the air over the heads of the seggies as they crowded down under the track to get the best possible view of the race from their bad positions on the course.

The flash of light! The start! Ten jet-wheels flashed into action and roared their way round the track with number ten soaring high on to the roof at the first corner and sending his machine full blast into the second bend at a speed which left the field well behind.

On their video screens flashed a message from Castle.

"Stay on his tail you fools! Don't try and pass him yet."

Lap ten was over and no change in position was registered. But at lap twelve Ossie signalled Bris who responded immediately with a burst of speed in the back corner that sent his jet-wheel screaming down for an opening on the inside of the track.

While on the outside of the track Ossie and the jockey who was now third were duelling for position with neither daring to make full pace so close to the rim of the track. But when at the commencement of lap eighteen Ossie realised that Bris was creeping more and more into the lead he



suddenly gave up his struggle and cut his throttle wide and flashed through the two corners after leaving the straight at a speed that seemed certain to shoot him to his doom.

ALWAYS he had kept Bris under his wing and away from trouble, and now it seemed that Bris was fighting for the winning position. The second last corner found the boys slightly clear of the previously leading pair and as they swept into the straight for the winning line Bris gave his jet everything the throttle had and he leaped ahead to gain the race by a yard.

As they circled the track again to slow their machines before going out through the hatches to the pits the face of Kramph flashed on to their video screens and it was flushed and angry.

"You'll be hearing from me!" was all the infuriated gambler barked at them before he cut off.

"I want you boys to come to a little party to-night!" Laura told them when they could pay their respects.

"Delighted!" grinned Ossie, turning to shake his brother's hand with a magnanimous gesture that was proof to Laura and all present that he didn't mind his team-partner stealing the honor from him.

But underneath this calm acceptance, Ossie felt the stirrings of reproach, annoyance and a sort of wonderment. He found it hard to believe Bris had stolen the race from him. Never had he reckoned on Bris as anything but someone whom he cared enough about to protect and take care to keep out of trouble.

While Bris returned quietly to team-headquarters to rest Ossie had a lot of arranging to do to settle that he could not be at the Night Delight 4, even though he was once more financial enough. Then he returned to the headquarters and rested too. But he found it hard to relax.

Long ago he had determined that nothing short of the championship of the City Stadium would do him as a goal, and now he could feel that his grip on that possibility was slipping away with every effort made by Bris. He glanced across to the other divan and saw his brother resting peacefully and cursed the nervous tension that kept him awake. Then he glanced at the arms lying on the divan opposite and knew that finally

he would not be defeated. Finally it would be he who climbed to the very top. He, and he alone. And at the top were many things. The one that Ossie called most frequently to mind was the writhing form of Olgar. And no sense of shame blotted his thoughts. Society would never know. Secrecy in such matters was all that mattered.

AMSLEY CASTLE was well pleased with his two new ace jockeys of the jet-wheel stadium and more so this day, for he had succeeded in pleasing Laura and that had been increasingly difficult of late. Now, with her good graces, and the money he was certain to make from his new stars of the track, he was certain that the way lay open to him that led to—Olgar.

Later, a little after seven, an elaborate strato-car came to a stop outside the Castle jet-jockey headquarters and from it stepped a blue-tunicked attendant who asked for the Orford boys. They were promptly awakened and hurried to the waiting car and immediately they were seated the door sealed shut and the atomic-powered vehicle raced them away.

"Some day for us!" grinned Bris happily. "I imagine Kramph will think awhile before looking for us now that Laura is taking an interest in us."

"I guess so," nodded Ossie without enthusiasm. "Seventeen generations of unblemished ancestry means a lot nowadays. This segregation policy is getting more and more vicious. It soon won't be safe to look twice at a seggy beauty. Not that it doesn't cause enough trouble now for a wearer of the Red to be caught with one on rendezvous."

"Heh!" shouted Bris, excitedly. "We're heading west away from the city—not north-east towards Laura's."

Swiftly Ossie checked direction and then leapt towards the door and slammed his hand hard against the escape lever. It failed to work and as he turned back the cynically leering face of the man Kramph flashed on the small video screen before the boys. His voice boomed.

"I warned you fools from Austral Out-back!"



Then the screen went blank and Ossie threw himself back into the softness of the cushions with a grimace of hopelessness.

"Trapped!" he muttered. "We've stepped right into the clutches of Kramph and there's not a thing we can do about it."

"The driver!" Bris suggested softly.

But Ossie tried the window opening into the other compartment of the luxurious strato-car and shook his head glumly. It was no use. Kramph obviously had spies in the right places and knew of Laura's invitation and had sent his own car to be ahead of hers.

Then, beyond the city's limits, the strato-car berthed in a field where there seemed to be nothing but gardens from which the food-ray machines drew their sustenance. But immediately the strato-car had touched down the ground sank away and they were below the level of the field and when the door was opened from the outside they were confronted by the savagely excited face of Bart Stage and several henchmen.

"Remember what the Master said," warned Kramph. "They must be fit to race again within two weeks."

Then the hulking fellow reached in through the door suddenly and caught hold of Bris and dragged him bodily from the car. At once Bris was caught and seized tightly by another two of the men. Their faces were all grinning their triumph and satisfaction of the task they had to do.

"No Austral Outback fool can cheat with Kramph!" grinned Stage with that white-toothed smile so familiar to Austral One citizens, but which now somehow managed to look hideous in that gloating distortion of a face.

Before Ossie could protest he was thrown from the car too. At once he was set upon by the waiting men and they battered at him with fists that were covered with gloves of a thin synthetic material that left no mark on he skin, but sent stabbing thrills of pain rocking through his body.

Ossie flung his whole strength and weight into his first attack as his nerves rebelled against the stinging pain of those vicious gloves which assailed him. A tremendous swinging hand struck down the first attacker in such an awkward manner that those fighting men who had lived in the remote days when "Bike Racing" had first been a sport

on earth would have laughed at the clumsiness of it.

But among these men, long trained to rely on their police and their space army for protection, that blow was a vicious punch. As the first man went down Ossie warded off a series of blows from the gloved attackers and swung a chopping blow at Stage and the butt of his hand hit the leering tough on the side of the neck and struck a nerve centre and dropped him to the floor of the underground passage unconscious.

Bris wasn't having anything like the same success but he was standing up to the punishing rain of blows far better than he was expected to and one of his assailants was gasping from a low blow that had smashed into his groin. Towering above Bris's mere five-feet-six two other toughs still smashed at him with the special gloves inflicting their burden of pain and damage.

"Fight for that door!" Ossie called to his brother shrilly. "There are too many of them! We've got to get out of here somehow. Fight for the door!"

So, side by side they fought back towards the door until, almost there, Bris dropped to the floor of the passage with his face swollen grotesquely from the hammering of the pain gloves. Ossie got him by his tunic collar and hurled him backward through the door as he kicked out in some long-latent instinctive effort to protect himself. Pain and anger released the deepest buried instincts of his ancestors from the long ago prehistoric past and he fought back against the toughs until three of them were out of the fight.

"That other door," gasped Ossie. "Quickly! We've got to get out of here."

Dazedly they staggered toward the other door and got through as the other door opened to admit the toughs. Then, just before them the boys spotted the open strato-car which had brought them to this spot. With some sign of vitality returning they dived into the strato-car and slammed the door behind them. Swiftly Ossie set the mechanism in operation and they lurched upward in a sudden jerk of power toward the entrance hole in the ground.

"Now! East to the city and full speed," cried Ossie as he worked the controls.

But before the city limits were in sight



the cold-eyed face of Silas Kramph was flashing on their video screen and his voice purring its fury at them.

"I meant to use you again," the voice snarled. "Now you're finished. I'm seeing to that personally."

But Ossie laughed back and called a taunting invitation to Kramph for in the distance he could see police scouts searching the air and he headed straight toward them. Within seconds their craft were circling the strato-car as the boys flashed them a message and then the convoy turned back towards Austral City. Ahead of the boys waited the little party held by Laura in their honor.

INSIDE the home of Laura and Amsley Castle the guests awaited the boys' arrival and police waited to question them. Ossie, thinking quickly, took the lead and denied they knew anything of the cause of the kidnapping and beating and also denied



that they had been threatened with trouble if they did not lose the race that afternoon. But once they were alone for a moment Bris anxiously asked what this was about and Ossie smiled.

"They wouldn't get Kramph and his gang," he said quietly. "They must have friends among the highest Authorities and we'd only be inviting certain death if we were to inform on them."

"But Kramph had promised to get us, anyway," Bris growled. "I don't want another going over like that. We were lucky to-day."

"Kramph knows where his money comes from. He'll be more sensible now that he has time to think things over," Ossie told his brother confidently. "Didn't I tell you we were going to the top. This is it! Look

around! We're the only Blue Tunics here. Doesn't that mean something? Here comes Laura! Leave us alone. I've got something in mind."

A moment later Laura came up to Ossie and he smiled in such a way that it was a compliment to her. Then, after they had talked for a time they drifted away, as if by mutual agreement to an apartment room that was vacant when they arrived. For more than an hour then Ossie proved to Laura that Austral Outback men were not the dullards City women might believe them and then, with the wife of his manager relaxed and smiling, he suggested quietly:

"It wouldn't be wise for a Blue to be seen with you too often."

"That's true!" she sighed regretfully. "That's true. What a pity you are not one of us."

"A vote can make a Red of a Blue," suggested Ossie quietly. "A vote from such a highly-placed person as yourself."

She smiled sadly.

"Not any more!" she shook her head quietly. "New decrees have been issued. Only exceptional cases now can be raised in class through such a vote."

"Such as!" he suggested with less enthusiasm.

"The champion jet-jockey of the City Stadium might be such a one," Laura told Ossie quietly. "Now we must go back or Amsley will be wondering. Come! I'll go part way with you and then leave you to find your own way from there on."

He smiled. Even the highest of the Reds were not above such little intrigues. Perhaps it was just as well. And in such a frame of mind Bris found him again in the main hall where the guests were drinking their rounds of Pep-pep-drink and watching the dancing of the entertainers from Night Delight 6 who had been engaged for the evening.

TWO weeks passed during which the boys rocketed to success and championship of the small stadium under the watchful eyes and guardianship of Amsley Castle. With the boys his fortunes soared and he was well pleased. Even Laura seemed content to leave him be and Castle de-



lighted in the new freedom that came with the tide of his success.

Then came the time when Ossie finished his workout and turned to Amsley with a frowning face. Slowly the jet-wheel jockey asked.

"When are we riding at the City Stadium?"

"They're rotten right through in there," Castle replied slowly. "I've kept you boys straight all the way. Two days in there and they'd kill you both."

"That's rot!" Orford growled savagely. "I want that championship. I'll take the risks, but you get me the rides at City Stadium. I know what I'm after."

"I guess I stick with Ossie," Bris told him quietly. "We always stick—Ossie and I."

"All right!" nodded Amsley in resignation. "I'll get you a ride for the Championship, but don't say I didn't warn you."

Ossie laughed. There was a glint of recklessness in his blue eyes now. Right to the very top. He could see it. There was no stopping him. There was nothing in his way now but that one thing. The Red was as good as his. Then—position, wealth, power and freedom. The top and nothing to stop him.

But his smiling expression changed suddenly when he entered their apartment just ahead of his brother. A deep frown creased his face as he glared at the girl with dazzling black hair who rose from a divan nervously. Marian!

"I thought I told you . . ." Ossie began angrily.

"But you promised!" broke in the girl anxiously. "I don't care any more about the presents and the color of your tunic. I don't care about anything—only you," she pleaded.

"What's the matter?" asked Bris, looking with sympathy at the girl.

"This Pep-drink slinger still wants to keep me to a promise I made to become her official mate. Her—a Blue tunic," laughed Ossie hoarsely. "What sort of a fool does she think me?"

"You could do worse!" snapped his brother with more anger than he had ever shown to Ossie before.

"So you're at it again!" taunted Ossie derisively. "Wanting to quit again?"

"No one said anything about quitting. Not a thing. But . . ."

"Then there's nothing more to it," snapped Ossie quickly. "No Blue female is going to hold me back. Give a Red mate card to her," he scoffed as he pointed at Marian.

For a minute then there was a silence as the girl stood and stared at him without a sign of emotion on her stony face. Then, almost as if she were in a dream she turned and quit the room. When she was gone Bris wheeled on to his brother and began to speak but Ossie cut him short quickly with:

"Time I was leaving. I've got business to attend to."

THREE days later Amsley Castle came to the boys and his face was bleak. For a while he just looked at them and then he announced in a voice that was cold and defeated.

"I'm sorry, boys," he told them. "I can't get you a ride at the City Stadium. Kramph has the whole place tied round his fingers and he decides who the next Champion is to be. He and no one else. That Stadium's crooked from beginning to end. There's not a hope in Austral of getting you boys a ride there."

"Didn't he offer terms?" asked Ossie quickly. "He couldn't have flatly refused to talk business."

"Yes! He had terms," admitted Castle quietly. "Crooked, dirty, terms. Terms that a Martian Mutant wouldn't accept from the lowest seggy in Austral One."

There wasn't anything more to be said about it then, and the group broke up. But at the first opportunity Ossie slipped away and headed for the east. Outside Kramph's headquarters he left the strato-car parked in line and walked straight through without a sideways glance at the alluring girl at the desk.

Into the work-out room he went and then through it into Kramph's office when the manager couldn't be sighted among the jet jockeys' groups. Kramph was sitting behind a desk comfortably waiting and the smile of pleasure on his face told that he knew of Ossie's arrival long before the Jet-wheeler had reached the work-out room.



"Well!" grinned the cold-eyed gambler. "We meet again! I thought I'd see you here before you were through. What is it?"

"I want the Championship of the City Stadium!" snapped Ossie bluntly. "I could ride any and all your boys off the track. I'm entitled to that Championship."

The manager thrust back his head and laughed. It wasn't a pleasant sound, but came from deep down in his chest in a grating rattle that was sinister and unmoved. Then he leered.

"You owe me plenty!" he laughed again. "And you'll pay it all for the Championship. Every last bit of it—and more."

"What are your terms?" Ossie demanded savagely.

That afternoon at the stadium Amsley Castle was more excited than usual before the commencement of the boy's event. He had staked a tremendous sum on the pair to win and he issued the last minute instructions to them before they were strapped into position in the saddles of their Jet-wheels. Ossie nodded that he understood and then they waited to catch the flash of the warning light that would send them on to the track for the warming up spin.

As they waited the voice grated from the video screens around the track.

"In this event the Champion partners of this track will defend the title against the champions from tracks one, four, seven and eight."

Then he called a list of names and the seggies and workers went to the machines to drop their coins in at their favorite slots and collect their numbered discs. All the small stadiums were fairly close to the Castle headquarters and he had arranged this trial Championship as a special award for the boys and as a sort of peace offering for his failure to secure them a Championship ride at the City Stadium.

Betting was confused for seggies and workers knew all ten riders, but had never seen the five pairs in competition and in this scramble Castle was sure of getting better odds than ever about his boys from the machines. For this reason he had gambled heavily, confident that they could not be beaten.

The warning light flashed and the jet-wheels were thrust through the hatches on to the transparent track through which the

crowd was able to see the ten jet-wheels circling the track for the first time. Bris rode close to Ossie in his normal position and they gathered speed and gave a speedy wind around the circuit. Then, checking their pace they moved into the straight towards the start with the other machines lining-up carefully for the running start.

Go! They were off. Racing up to the first corner at a pace that was recklessly fast for the clumsy jet-wheels. Seggies were yelling madly at the spectacle as ten wheels took the first corner in a bunch and roared high up into the second bend with those on the inside forcing the riders towards the dangerous rim of the track.

Ossie was on the extreme outside and battled his machine into that of his brother and this in turn forced Bris into the one closest him and so they fought their way down into the long straight with every jockey checking his speed now to secure a reasonable position for the next few laps.

Then, Bris, sensing the advantage of being well clear of the tight packed bunch of wheelers, signalled Ossie and shot his machine rocketing forward with his throttle wide open. The extra power that came from his jet-wheel now surprised him and he flashed into the lead with Ossie following through on the outside.

In the stand with the Red tunics Amsley Castle grinned with a private satisfaction as he saw that his secret addition to the fuel had given an extra throttling power to the Jet-wheels his boys jockeyed. But before they had hit lap eight Ossie was in the lead and in trouble with his machine wobbling dangerously in front of Bris's racing wheel.

Desperately Bris tried to get round his brother's machine as the other jockeys closed in on them as the boys checked their speed. In a very few seconds in the ninth lap the whole field passed the boys leaving Ossie and Bris trailing. But then, with half a lap gone by and the distance from the field increased, it seemed that Ossie got his wheel under control and they raced in pursuit of their rivals again.

As the boys fought their way back close to the leading bunch of riders the seggies rose in an excited multitude and cheered and yelled their favorites on. Five laps passed with the battle swaying in the balance



and Bris and Ossie trying to force their way through the tight-packed field.

A rider fell, sending two more down and leaving an opening through during the eighteenth lap. With full throttle power Bris raced his machine through and tight on his tail came Ossie who was riding superbly now.

They were clear and with but two riders ahead of them as they flashed into the first corner of the last lap. Speed was the essence of the struggle now. Only the most skillful and reckless riding combined could get them home winners.

**R**IDING on the outside Bris signalled his partner and then shot high into the bend with full throttle and hit the roof of the track with a jarring of muscles and bones as he fought his jet-wheel down into the back straight. He was riding close on the heels of the leading jockey and went into the second last corner with his jet roaring at full power.

Too much speed thrust him high and he was forced to cut his pace desperately to avoid the plunge over the brim. Wild with excitement then Bris caught sight of Ossie flashing towards the lead again, but when Bris swooped to join him Ossie lost control again and they wavered over the track towards the outside as they shot into the straight with a rider shooting through on the side nearest the centre to steal the race by a wheel from Ossie with Bris less than a half wheel away third.

Back in the pits Castle stared at Ossie with angry eyes and snarled out viciously:

"What sort of fool riding was that? What was wrong with you?"

"We were going too fast," defended Ossie humbly. "I couldn't keep control."

Bris glared at him and Amsley turned away and left them. The greatest wager he had ever made had been lost and there was nothing he could do—nothing. But Bris reckoned that he **could** do something, and when they were alone he turned to his brother and demanded savagely.

"What did you get for losing that race?"

Ossie laughed and slapped his back heartily. Then he replied.

"A chance at the title at the City Stadium."

"You sold out—sold out to Kramph?"

"Put it that way if you want to," defended his brother quietly. "We've got a chance to ride for the title now and that's what we want."

"What you want," snapped Bris, ready to quit. "I never did want to get mixed with the rotten game to gain a Red. It's crooked and dirty from end to end."

"Look! Kid," said Ossie quietly. "Take it easy. Stop trying to ride me into anger. You've done all right sticking with me. Stay with me now and you'll still do all right."

"And what about Castle?" Bris wanted to know.

"He'll do all right," Ossie assured him quietly. "We can repay all the money he lost on us this afternoon and square him with more than that. We've got to think of ourselves, Kid. We're the best team in the jet-wheeling. We're entitled to the Championship at the City Stadium."

"But it isn't worth cheating for," Bris snapped angrily.

At this Ossie pointed to the plastic skin which hid the mutant second wrists in Bris's arms and he demanded slowly.

"What would you call those plastic splints? Isn't that cheating?"

There was acid in his words and with these questions Bris's shoulders slowly slumped and he dropped his head and nodded.

"All right! You always have an answer for everything. I'll tag with you."

"Then we'll pack our gear and head for Kramph's headquarters straight away. There is no point in waiting to see Castle. We'll leave a message that we're through with him."

"Whatever you say," nodded Bris dully.

Together they hurried back to Castle's jet-wheel headquarters and packed their gear and were soon leaving the place in Ossie's strato-car. It had always been Ossie's car though Bris had been thinking lately that it had been his share of their earnings that had gone into the purchase price. That ought to have made it his, but somehow he didn't ever think it worth his while to point this out to his brother.

Nor did he mention the two or three times he had gone round to the Pep-drink joint to pass a word or two with Marian. The last time he had seen her she had been



looking sick but she denied there was anything wrong with her when Bris had tried to probe. It was tough on the girl and somehow Bris felt responsible for his brother's actions. Perhaps when he had won the Championship he would pull up sharp and see things straight? Perhaps. But when Bris was half way honest with himself he didn't believe anything could straighten Ossie out in his thinking till he was right at the top with his Red tunic and his assured position.

**K**RAMPH welcomed the boys with a slick smile and glinting eyes.

"I'm glad you boys have seen the sensible thing to do at last," he purred softly as he showed them to their apartment in his ultra-modern headquarters. "Saves us all a lot of trouble."

"I guess we know where the money is," Ossie said quietly. "I swore a long while ago that I was going right to the top and that's where I'm going," he added with a tone of hard determination.

"The Championship is yours," smiled Kramph quietly. "But not just yet awhile. There are a few races before that one."

Ossie wheeled on his new master and glared angrily at him.

"That was no part of our deal," he growled out. "I had to lose that race to get our chance at the Championship."

"Now be reasonable!" Kramph replied smoothly. "See it this way. I lost a lot of money when you boys didn't play along with me before. Surely I have a right to get it back."

For a moment Ortford stood up to Kramph, but he saw the man's hand hovering close to that bulge beneath his tunic and he shrugged his shoulders and turned away.

"All right! I suppose we've got to pay for that," he growled out, "but don't keep us waiting too long."

"It won't be long before you get what's coming to you," Kramph assured them quietly. "Just a few races."

That night Ossie didn't meet Laura as usual, but got a video connection and spoke with her for a time before he explained that he had other things to do. Then, when he had donned his Red tunic and his wig he headed for the Pep-drink joint and there met Marian.

"Hello!" he smiled quietly. "I've come to see you."

For a moment then the girl's eyes lighted but they soon dulled again for she could see no grounds for hope after all that had been said. But the jet-jockey's next words set her listening.

"I had to break with you when I thought I'd never get to be Champion," he explained glibly. "Now! Well now I've got the chance and we'll be at the top—just like we planned. I'm taking you to Night Delight 4 to-night, just like old times."

Once at that hot spot of the Authoritarian Class Ossie made his excuse and quit his



table when Olgar had finished her first dance routine. Behind the stage he found his way through a maze of short passages of sparkling floors and walls and by suitable bribes arrived at the door of the fire-dancer from the Moon. Those who had seen him come could forget quickly for they were seggies and the bribes had been large.

Inside the palatially appointed dressing room he smiled his warmest smile and all the fierce desire came out into his eyes. Swiftly he spoke words that he had not known he knew. Words deep with a fiery passion. Olgar laughed.

"Even below the Martian Mutant do you of the Red place me," she told him softly. "Yet the richest and most powerful of you vie with each other for what I can give. Who are you to come seeking?"

"I am Osland Ortford," he announced proudly. "Future Champion jet-wheeler at the City Stadium. I offer twice the sum ever offered before."

Only then did she unbend to smile on him and Ossie suddenly felt cold and damp. Perspiration crept from his skin in a stealthy trickle for somewhere deep within



him was awakened the horror of this stranger to earth. This female of the pink flesh and flame colored hair from the Moon who could defy the ravages of fire and dance within the circle of flame. The primitive fear of the strange was full awake within him and he wanted to quit but he could not.

Above all else he had to get to the top. That unswerving drive was compelling him to have all things that other men desired and Olgar was chief among them. But that fierce desire for her, that had been his own and truly now could he see why she was loathed as beneath that lowest of all things—the Martian Mutant. She was a snare and a trap that defiled.

But he stayed and watched her tantalising rhythms and finally his pleading won through. When he was jet-wheel champion and entitled to wear the Red he now usurped and had double the sum she mentioned they would talk again. He agreed. Then, almost eagerly he hurried back to Marian and the warmth of her humanity.

**D**URING the next week the brothers won several races and lost three. And all the while Kramph worked his plans and collected the gambling fortunes poured into the machines by the seggies and the workers. But he was never foolish enough to have them lose all the time and many went home from the City Stadiums with sums of winnings that meant fortunes to them. Truly, they thought, Jet-wheeling was a rare and worthwhile sport.

Then, towards the end of the second week, after Ossie had lost three races running to his brother, Kramph called him into his office off his workout room and sat him down. Ossie wondered. But not for long. Kramph came straight to the point.

"It's about Bris!" he growled out with seeming anger. "I thought you were to be champion when I gave you your chance at the title?"

"That's right!" nodded Ossie solemnly. "I'm to be champion of the stadium."

"Then what about Bris?" demanded Kramph belligerently. "That mutant seggy is beating you too often. Three times in a row now. How can I make you champion with that going on?"

Ossie was angry, but he wasn't sure about what. He tried to tell himself that it was

because Kramph knew the secret of his brother's arms and had called him a seggy. He tried to believe that he was angry about that but somehow he couldn't. Then he was forced to admit that he himself had been worrying in the secret places of his mind about his brother's successes. They came too frequently and despite the fact that Bris was more than six inches shorter than himself, he knew that he was a favorite with the mob—the great yelling crowd who offered up their pay to the yawning jaws of the gambling machines day after day.

"Well!" Kramph growled angrily when Ossie did not reply for some time.

"I'll talk to him," Ossie snapped back in reply. "Tell him I'm to be champion and he's got to give up winning."

Kramph made a noise that might have been a scoff of derision or it might have been a splutter of disgust, but when he looked up there was no doubt from his expression how he felt about Bris.

"A seggy!" he spluttered disgustedly. "You'll talk to him. Treat him like a human being. Tell him to stop. You're a fool."

"He's got his ticket. His Blue," snapped Ossie savagely. "He's my brother."

For a while Kramph just looked at him and smiled slowly. Then when he spoke his voice was silky smooth and quiet in the big room.

"He's a seggy despite his ticket," he spat suddenly. "While ever he is racing I can't give you a chance to win the championship. Now if . . ." he paused a moment and Ossie growled.

"Go on!"

"No! You're sentimental. You believe he's a human like the rest of us. With arms like that? Seggy! Nothing more."

"Go on!" barked Ortford again.

"If he weren't racing anymore . . . if . . . well! If he met with an accident . . . a serious one. Serious enough to put him out of the stadium for good. Well! There wouldn't be any chance then of anyone but you being champion," purred Kramph softly.

Ossie didn't say anything to that for quite a time and then he nodded quietly.

"An accident! Of course. That would put him out of jet-wheel jockeying for a spell."



"A long spell!" Kramph grinned quietly. "You're racing to-morrow—why not then?"

"An accident!" Orford was saying over to himself as he got up from the seat and left the office.

That night when he saw Laura he talked about it—talked for a long while and Laura, the quiet one, said little, but at last she murmured close to his ear.

"You belong with us!"

That was all she said. Nothing more. But somehow it troubled Ossie. More than anything, he wanted to get to the top. Get where the futility of his father had failed to get him, but now he hesitated.

Jet-wheeling was crooked right through and it was his only ladder from a blue tunic and short hair to the Red and long hair. There wasn't any other way and Kramph controlled jet-wheeling.

The pudgy little man with the cold grey eyes could hand him a Red or take it away. Kramph was his master. Orford didn't sleep well that night, and the following morning exercised lightly in the work-out room, and the other boys watched him and his brother with distaste.

**B** RIS and Ossie were outsiders — men from Austral Outback. They had no right in the city challenging the jet-wheel jockeys of the city. And among the jet-wheelers feeling was high against the boys who had beaten them more than once and who seemed to be favorites with Kramph.

But before the race the following day Kramph came up to Ossie and demanded quietly:

"To-day?" And in answer, Ossie gave a short nod of his head.

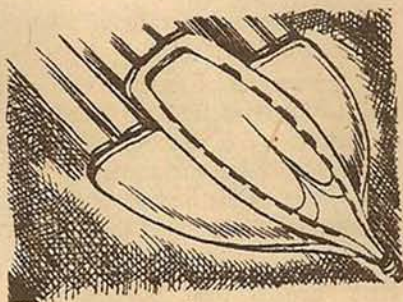
To this Kramph grinned slyly and moved away and gave his own instructions to his other jockeys. Then he went back and set his money through the gambling machines and received his numbered discs in exchange.

Packed to capacity, the stadium was a frenzied mob of howling seggies and low-grade workers after the leading rider had lost control and been swept off the track in the third event. Another jet-wheeler proved the wisdom of the decree that had long ago been issued that no Red Tunic could compete in the stadiums unless his tunic had been first won there.

Then came the fourth event and Bris and Ossie were strapped to their saddles and their jets set ready as the jet-wheels rested in their supports prior to being pushed through the hatches on to the tracks. Bris looked over at his brother and grinned.

"I've got news," he whispered softly. "I've been reading up the rules of the stadium and there's one that we need to know. It says: 'Any jet-wheel jockey who breaks the track record time automatically becomes the Champion.' This is our chance."

Suddenly a lot of things snapped into place in Ossie's plans and he glanced back



at his brother and signalled his agreement. Bris made an attempt to say something more, but before he could get it out the warning light flashed and the jet-wheels were thrust through the hatches on to the track and began their preliminary circuits before the start of the race.

Warmed up, the ten jet-wheels came slowly up to the start and crashed into instant action as the go signal flashed at the start. Ten men with definite orders charged into the first corner with throttles wide open and roared high up on to the roof of the track as their terrific speed swooshed them down into the second corner and down the back straight.

Three point eight four minutes was drumming through the mind of Ossie as he gave his jet all the throttle power he had and flashed into the bottom corners less than a length behind the main bunch and with Bris racing at his side. On the video screen he switched a dial and got the time-clock image clearly and grinned as they crashed through the finish for a fast first lap.

Never for a long while at the City Stadium had the fans had such a thrilling



race, with eight riders hugging together in a bunch and keeping just ahead of the brothers at a pace that was screeching them through the corners in a tight-packed bunch that seemed almost as one giant racing round the track.

Five laps slipped by, and as they crossed the line the time-clock registered nine-tenth of a minute for the five miles. Better than the record so far and Ossie began to see his hopes realised in a way that would give him a let-out. Then from the video screen close under his face the clock faded and Kramph's face flashed instead in one of the selective pick-ups which were a feature of these tiny pieces of equipment.

"Don't cross me this time," the voice warned him quietly.

And the menace of the tone was obvious enough to Ossie as the face faded and the time-clock flashed once more once the selective message had come through. Orford stole a glance at his brother and signalled. Bris received and signalled the agreement.

**T**HEY hugged their positions and the pace was amazing to the packed stadium who gasped silently as their heads swung round as they followed the screeching field of jet-wheels running a perfect race with none of them giving the slightest ground. Almost as if the ten Jets were locked together, they took the corners, and ten laps and half the race was over before there seemed any change in the order.

Once Ossie had checked the time and seen that they were still bettering the track record with a first half of 1.9 minutes, he signalled once more to his partner, Bris, and they eased the throttles a little wider in the back straight and by the time they hit the back corner they were screaming high above the bunched pack of eight jockeys who were taken by surprise. Before they could get their plan into action the boys had flashed past them in a flashing roar of wide-open jets as they ripped through the straight and into the straight corner.

Angrily, the face of Kramph slashed the time-clock from the tiny screen and Kramph's voice purred murderously.

"Remember, Orford! Don't cross me."

This time Ossie snapped a switch as they

screamed through the back straight and he selected Kramph and his voice was recklessly wild as he snapped back his answer to the man who controlled his fate.

"We know what a record-breaking time means, Kramph. Try and stop me now."

Fifteen laps were done and the time well within the record still at 2.85 minutes. Five laps still remained and through them the tenseness mounted to a delirium among the seggies strained forward so as not to miss a single facet of the stirring race.

Among those in the Blue arena, Amsley Castle clenched the numbered discs tightly and wondered what was to pay. Determined to get his money back from the double-dealing Jet-jockeys from Austral Outback he had been frequenting the City track and following the gambling moves of Bart Stage whom he knew as Kramph's agent.

By careful wagering he had more than recouped his losses and was now plunging most of his gains on this one event. Stage had placed a large sum on one of the unpopular jockeys in the event, and though the seggies boldly favored either Ossie or Bris, Amsley noted with a certain assurance that none of Kramph's money had been placed on either of these ace riders.

But now, with less than five laps to go, and with the two brothers holding what seemed to be an unassailable lead, Amsley once more began to realise that the Austral Outback boys were playing a dangerous lone hand in this event.

**F**IERCELY, his face livid with emotion, Kramph once more flashed his face on to the video screen before Ossie and issued his warning. Laughing, recklessly keeping his throttle full open in the seventeenth lap, Ossie switched his video in tune with Bris's and Bris saw and heard what Kramph had to say:

"Get that seggy over the edge! Fool! Finish him now!"

Uncertainly Bris glanced across at his brother with a look of disbelief on his face and Ossie signalled back.

"Speed will do it! I'll be Champion after this."

"Kramph will kill us," croaked Bris nervously.

"I'll fix that!" signalled back Ossie in the



short code they used for such messages on the track.

He got Laura's tuning on his video and then he rapped out.

"Get police protection immediately after race. Fear attempt on life."

Panicking, Laura called her brother of the police and a force was ordered within a few seconds. Strato-cars raced protection to the stadium. Then, one lap yet remained and suddenly Ossie realised that Kramph had fooled them completely. The jet was spluttering wildly as the last of the fuel was being used in the second corner out of the straight. The Jet-wheels would coast the track past the finishing line, but there would be no possibility of breaking the record. Angrily he glanced back at the pack of riders flashing closer, then he flung his controls over and sent his machine slithering down the track and bumping into Bris.

Bris's fear-ridden face flashed at him for a moment as the machines collided and then they both flashed down from the track to be caught in the safety netting device with which the centre of the stadium was fitted.

By them crashed an angry group of eight jockeys eagerly sorting themselves into a grouping that would allow the correct number to win. Past the post in a howl of angry and disappointed bawling from the seggies' enclosure. Like a great force of ants disturbed in their nest they rose and shouted their disapproval.

One after another they yelled and screamed and swiftly Kramph consulted the judges and the police. At last the seggies had awakened into the solidity of mob action and they were a tremendous force that could only be stopped by annihilation and the police angrily refused to do this. Every living-death by the trance guns of the army would have brought ravagement among the seggies and spread the seeds of restlessness and malcontent which the Jet-wheel stadiums had been designed to prevent.

Down from the towering height of his sky-reaching offices the face of the Red Tunic No. 1 flashed on to the videos throughout the stadium and his soft voice somehow penetrated the violence of sound and made itself heard.

"Owing to an oversight two of the Jet-

wheels were not correctly supplied with fuel. Seeing that this is a breach of rules the race will be re-run later and all bets will stand as made."

A tremendous cheer screamed up for Red Tunic No. 1. But when, later, the boys went on to the track again Ossie was soon aware that the other jockeys were aboard faster machines.

"We've got to fight our way through," he growled at Bris.

"Let them win," Bris growled.

"These jets can still break that record,"



snarled Ossie savagely. "Just let them try and stop me."

"Kramph won't stand to see us win," spat Bris. "We're through."

"I'm taking that Championship and what goes with it—Olgar!" burst out Ossie suddenly. "The highest. The most desirable to the highest. That's what I'm having."

FOR a moment Bris stared at his brother and then asked.

"But Marian! And . . . and Laura?" he gasped out.

"Even they can be useful. Marian for beauty as a cover in Night Delight 4. Laura to vote me a Red Tunic when I'm Champion. Olgar to prove I can have what other men cannot get."

The fiery venom and yet cold-blooded way in which Ossie rapped out this summary of that part of his activities in Austral City made his brother draw back and stare at him in disbelief.

"That Pep-drink colored female from the Moon?" Bris demanded. "You wouldn't . . ."

"I'm going to the top," snarled Ossie angrily.



"Lower than a Martian Mutant!" Bris snarled slowly.

"Dirty ungrateful seggy!" snarled Ossie ferociously. "Watch out or I'll play Kramph's game."

"Better a seggy headed for the decomposers than a Blue Tunic brother to a filthy thought such as you," Bris said grimly.

The warning light flashed then and the Jet-wheels flashed away from where they had been idling on the track. By decree from Red Tunic No. 1 the re-run was to be over ten laps instead of twenty and suddenly Ossie cursed when he realised what that meant. There could be no championship won in such a race.

Recklessly he streaked his machine through the first three laps well ahead of Bris who was keeping just ahead of the bunch behind. Three more laps slipped by and Kramph's face flashed on to the video of Ossie's machine.

"Crash that seggy madman," Kramph snarled. "I'll run the Championship immediately following for you. The Red Tunic and a fortune," he promised.

With a wild wrench at his throttle Ossie jerked his machine back and waited till Bris roared beside him, and then his jet-wheel gathered speed as they swept high into the following corner. Higher and higher up with grim screwed face Ossie forced them in a seemingly uncontrollable slide, and then from the brink of the track he wrenched his jet-wheel down to safety as he saw Bris's shoot over the track into a wild lunge through air.

Laps ceased to have meaning then and the bunch closed around and he fought them off with every dirty trick he had learned from his short and meteoric career to fame in stadiums.

Two would-be wreckers were crashed and another shot over the track leaving but six jet-wheels on the course.

"Lose this you fool!" Kramph ordered him by video.

Ossie laughed. He laughed for already he knew that Red Tunic No. 1 had ordered a Championship race that afternoon to pacify the angry seggies who were more excited than ever now. Trouble stalked abroad in Austral One as Kramph fought

to keep one reckless jet-wheel jockey under control.

In the final lap Ossie broke free and clear and crossed the line a half-wheel ahead of his nearest rival. Automatically he became an entrant in the Championship event. Such was the decree of Red Tunic No. 1. It was seldom that he interfered publicly, but when he did the seggies went home elated with a feeling of success—a very harmless feeling.

OSSIE felt sick when he reached the pits after the re-run event. Deen into his mind was inscribed the image of Bris shooting high over the rim of the track and into space beyond. His stomach muscles contracted in spasms that would have caused vomiting to his remote and far-distant ancestors. To Orford, long fed from the thin blue hissing tube of the food-ray, these muscular movements caused pain. Over and over to himself he kept hissing:

"Filthy low seggy! That's all! I protected and shielded him and what came in return? Treachery! Filthy low seggy!"

And even when Kramph came snarling up to him he stared at the man dully without paying much heed and seemed not to hear the words.

"Lose the Championship or I'll personally finish you," purred the manager of the jet-wheel stadium in a screaming whisper.

And then he was gone, his rage and hate boiling into a fearful crescendo of banked emotion within him.

Then, close on his heels came Amsley Castle and his face was bleak and his eyes heavy. His fortune was gone and he looked at Ossie inanely and grinned slightly.

"I made something of you and you ruined me," he said softly.

"Look!" pleaded Ossie quietly. "Get me in shape for the Championship later and I'll win you back everything you've lost. Get me in shape and I'll win," the jet-wheel jockey pleaded.

"How could I win with every seggie in the place betting on you? How could I win that way?"

"Listen to them!" Ossie said quickly, pleading. "They've seen me. They know I'm finished. They'll wager against me.



Get me in shape. Take my prize-money from this race and wager it on me for the championship. But get me in shape."

Amsley looked at this tall blond fellow who had been so sure and proud such a short time before and he laughed. Why not? So he nodded his head and took Ossie quickly away to a private workout room and there began to work on him. An hour slipped by before he was satisfied with the results and then, with a last few minutes under the food-ray tubes Amsley was satisfied with his jockey.

"You'll do!" he growled sullenly. "I've brought a Jet-wheel from our old headquarters and I've wagered every last coin of money I could raise on you. The seggies think you're through. They're restless and in a savage mood. Red Tunic No. 1 has ordered that the winner be conferred with a Red Tunic immediately he wins and before the whole assembled stadium. He thinks that will satisfy them. Kramph will be investigated for this day. Now I've got to leave you."

"I'll win," Ossie said sombrely. "I'll get to the top. Nothing will stop me."

And while he relaxed after Amsley Castle had gone Laura came to the room and he smiled at her and nodded towards the divan.

"It won't be long now," he grinned quietly. "I'll be wearing a Red Tunic and a wig before the afternoon is through."

"I've been waiting for that time," sighed Laura softly.

"I've got to rest," he said quietly. "Leave me now."

CHUCKLING to himself at the success of his efforts in Austral City he headed for the pits as he heard the call for riders for the last event—the special event—the championship.

Amsley had a special jet-wheel waiting for him and Kramph snarled an angry tirade at him when Ossie had himself strapped into the saddle of the jet-wheel, brought to the stadium by Castle.

The warning light flashed and they went through the hatches on to the track with the openings swinging shut behind them. Six riders in all, and all without partners. Six

individualists striving for the honor and the Red Tunic and the fame and privilege.

As they circled the track for the warming up, Ossie was aware of the constant swelling babble of the seggies as they moved about restlessly in their special area. Trouble was brewing. Jet-wheeling had brought to a head the simmering emotions of resentment and anger among the seggies. They were united and voicing their grievances, and Red Tunic No. 1 was keeping in touch by video and Kramph was crouched snarling in his place in the stand for he knew that this was one race he could not rig to suit himself, but he also knew that Orford wasn't such a fool as to win.

With the Go! signal flashing, the six jet-wheel aces settled into the turmoil of the race with all the concentration of a guided missile following a fore-ordained course. With Red Tunic No. 1 watching them they dared not try and follow the orders of Kramph, so each jockey settled down to ride a race and strive for the coveted award.

With the laps whipping by, the seggies screamed abuse as Ossie, whom they had thought exhausted, fought his way to the lead, and at fifteen laps he was well clear. Angrily the jet-wheel jockey smashed his small video screen as Kramph flashed on and off in a warning staccato of images.

From the seventeenth lap there was never doubt and Ossie finished lengths ahead of his nearest rival. And then down the long back straight past the seggies he moved and he was smiling as he looked them over. Seggies! The fools! Look at them! And then here he was with the Red Tunic as near to his as it was possible. He had climbed—climbed to the top.

Then from the massed crowds of Red Tunics came one with an outfit to place on Orford as he waited in the centre of the arena. Once it was presented the privilege and the class that went with it could never be taken away from him.

"I knew I didn't have to stay down just because my fool father didn't become immunised before he played with atomic jets." He chuckled to himself as he waited, after having been unstrapped from his Jet-wheel.

"There is always a way to climb through the tangles of class," he congratulated himself. "I've got there—to the top."

But while these meanderings and seem-



ingly vague thoughts were racing through his head he found Laura before him with the Red and she removed his blue tunic and placed the Red upon him. The seggies shrieked with delight, having forgotten for the moment that this Jet-wheel jockey had robbed them of their wages by winning.

Then, in traditional ritual style, Laura stooped and unlaced the blue soft leather boots from the feet of the new Jet-wheel jockey champion. She drew off one of them and then suddenly drew back with a shriek of terror. Immediately video screens tuned to the scene and on to the tiny portable screens flashed the startling image of cloven hooves where feet should have been.

Osland Ortford had fought his way from the segregated classes to the very top and vindicated himself to himself. Removed the curse his careless father had thrust upon him. Never could the Red be taken away now that it had been given and Ortford laughed as he saw the woman shrink back away from him in horror.

From the stand high above, a snarling burst of wrath screamed from Kramph as he realised the greatness of the deception and fraud. And, used to cheating but not being cheated, he suddenly leapt up and snatched his trance-gun from its hidden place. He fired the blast from the gun before the nearest police officer could wrest it from him.

The aim was true and Osland Ortford was suddenly transformed from that animated and triumphant seggy who had fought his way, cheated his way to the very top; and instead the dreadful effects of the trance-ray settled over the features of the man. He was suddenly transformed into a creature in a state of suspended animation from which no scientist had been able to revive a victim of the trance-gun.

At the sight of this sudden defeat of what for them was a supreme triumph, the seggies were turned in the moment into a howling screaming mob of diabolically intentioned fiends. They smashed their way from their special enclosure and raced toward the area set aside for the Red Tunics.

There, half chanting, half shouting, they committed a carnage that was later buried beneath the blast of the Argon Bomb which Red Tunic ordered to be dropped over the

arena as a final resort when all else had failed and it seemed that the mounting tide of rebellious seggies would flood further afield into the surrounding country, upsetting the well-defined social structure on which he believed the life of Austral One depended . . .

ON a public articulated strato-car a pale-faced Bris smiled weakly as he lay back in his radia-splint . . . there would be many painful weeks absorbing the life nurturing radiator; they had even offered to do something about those second joints, but the shudder that had gone through his tortured frame had been eloquently final.

The video reporter fidgetted impatiently as the bleak look returned to the young man's eyes . . .

"So Ossie stopped a trance . . ." his voice was flat, dead. "It certainly was a triumph . . . a triumph for our system that a seggy could finally win the Red . . . a triumph . . ."

A few minutes later his video comment was flashing to the entire asteroid system, but there was no hardness in his eyes now as he watched with the dark-haired girl by his side . . .

"It won't be a red card, Marian . . . you know that!"

"I know . . . But I read a quotation from the ancients once . . . they had a phrase all those thousands of years ago. 'True blue' they said . . . Bris! Do you think they knew about people like us even then?"

"Maybe they knew a lot about people we might have forgotten, Marian . . ."

"Then we'll find it out again, Bris . . . we'll find it out again, and maybe the out-back will help us!"

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