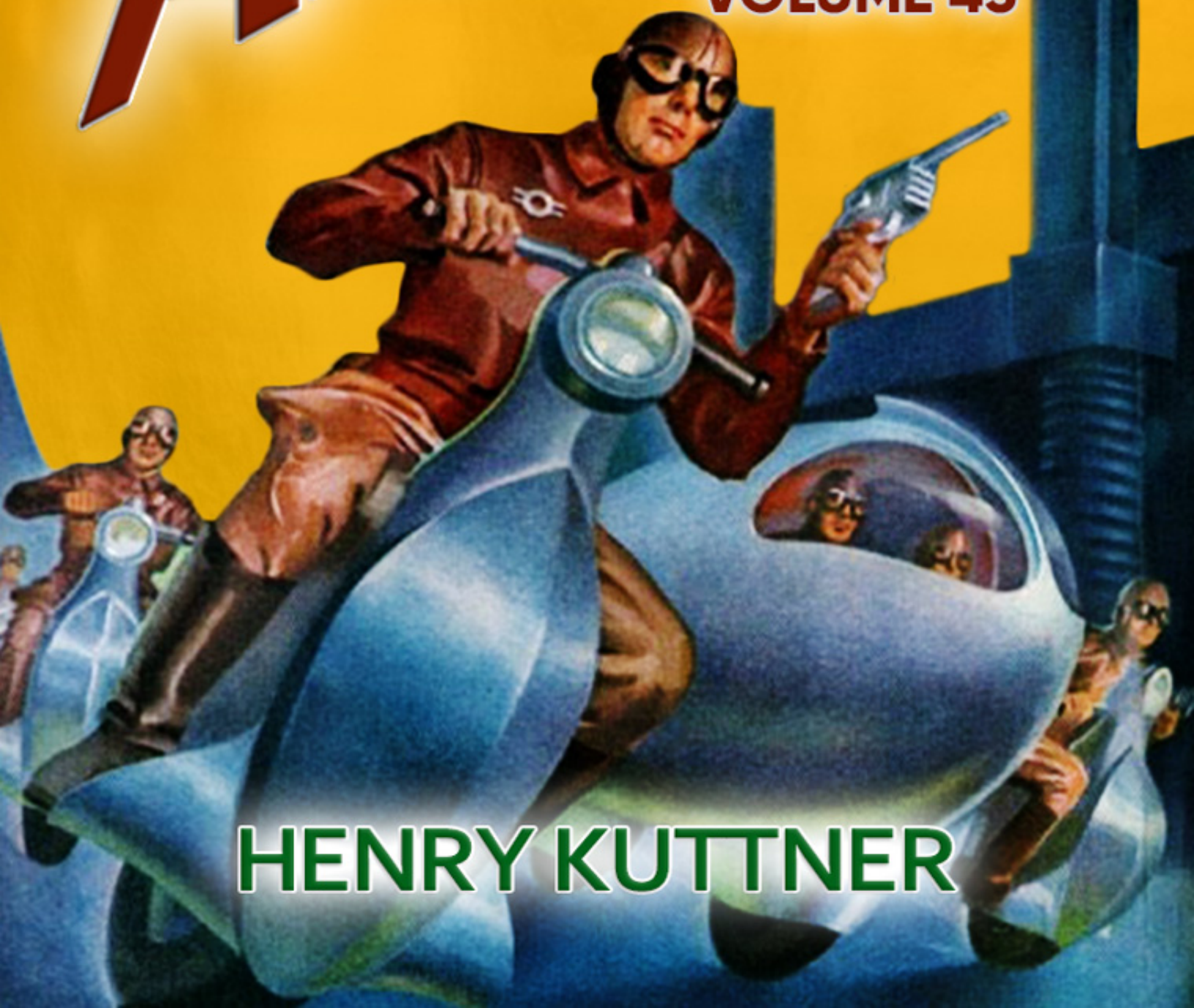


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VOLUME 45



HENRY KUTTNER

Amazing Stories

Volume 45

Henry Kuttner

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What Hath Me?

The thousand tiny eyes raced past him, glittering with alien ecstasy, shining brighter, ever brighter as they fed. He felt the lifeblood being sucked out of him—deeper stabbed the gelid cold—louder roared the throbbing in his ears ... then the voice came, "*The heart of the Watcher. Crush the heart.*"

The man running through the forest gloom breathed in hot, panting gusts, pain tearing at his chest. Underfoot the crawling, pale network of tree-trunks lay flat upon the ground, and more than once he tripped over a slippery bole and crashed down, but he was up again instantly.

He had no breath to scream. He sobbed as he ran, his burning eyes trying to pierce the shadows. Whispers rustled down from above. When the leaf-ceiling parted, a blaze of terribly bright stars flamed in the jet sky. It was cold and dark, and the man knew that he was not on Earth.

They were following him, even here.

A squat yellow figure, huge-eyed, inhuman, loomed in his path—one of the swamp people of Southern Venus. The man swung a wild blow at the thing, and his fist found nothing. It had vanished. But beyond it rose a single-legged giant, a Martian, bellowing the great, gusty laughter of the Redland Tribes. The man dodged, stumbled, and smashed down heavily. He heard paddling footsteps and tried, with horrible intensity of purpose, to rise. He could not.

The Martian crept toward him—but it was no longer a Martian. An Earthman, with the face of some obscene devil, came forward with a sidling, slow motion. Horns sprouted from the low forehead. The teeth were fangs. As the creature came nearer, it raised its hands—twisted, gnarled talons—and slid them about the man's throat.

Through the forest thundered the deep, booming clangor of a brass gong. The sound shattered the phantom as a hammer shatters glass. Instantly the man was alone.

Making hoarse, animal sounds in his throat, he staggered upright and lurched in the direction from which the sound came. But he was too weak. Presently he fell, and this time he did not rise. His arms moved a little and then were still. He slept, lines of tortured weariness twisting the haggard face.

Very faintly, from infinite distances, he heard a voice ... two voices. Inhuman. Alien—and yet with a warmth of vital urgency that stirred something deep within him.

"He has passed our testing."

Then a stronger, more powerful voice—answering.

"Others have passed our testing—but the Aesir slew them."

"There is no other way. In this man I sensed something—a little different. He can hate—he has hated."

"He will need more than hatred—" the deeper voice said. "Even with us to aid him. And there is little time. Strip his memories from him now, so that he may not be weakened by them—"

"May the gods fight with him."

"But he fights the gods. The only gods men know in these evil days—"

The man awakened.

Triphammers beat ringingly inside his skull. He opened his eyes and closed them quickly against the sullen red glow that beat down from above. He lay motionless, gathering his strength.

What had happened?

He didn't know. The jolting impact of that realization struck him violently. He felt a brief panic of disorientation. Where —?

I'm Derek Stuart, he thought. At least it isn't complete amnesia. I know who I am. But not where I am.

This time when he opened his eyes they stayed open. Overhead a broad-leafed tree arched. Through its branches he could see a dark, starry sky, the glowing, ringed disc of Saturn very far away, and a deeply scarlet glow.

Not Earth, then. A Saturnian moon? No, Saturn didn't eclipse most of the sky. Perhaps the asteroid belt.

He moved his head a little, and saw the red moon.

Aesir!

The message rippled along his nerves into his brain. Stuart reacted instantly. His hard, strong body writhed, whipped over, and then he was in a half-crouch, one hand flashing to his belt while his eyes searched the empty silence of the forest around him. There was no sound, no movement.

Sweat stood on Stuart's forehead, and he brushed it away impatiently. His deeply-tanned face set into harsh lines of curiously hopeless desperation. There was no blaster gun at his belt; that didn't matter. Guns couldn't help him now—on Asgard.

The red moon had told him the answer. Only one world in the System had a red moon, and men didn't go to that artificial asteroid willingly. They went, yes—but only to be

doomed and damned. From Venus to Callisto spacemen spoke of Asgard in hushed voices—Asgard where the Aesir lived and ruled the worlds of Man.

No spaceships left Asgard, except the sleek black cruisers manned by the priests of Aesir. *No man had ever returned from Asgard.*

Stuart grinned mirthlessly. He'd learned a lesson, though he'd never profit by it now. Always before he'd been confident of his ability to outdrink anyone of his own weight and size. And certainly that slight, tired-eyed man at the Singing Star, in New Boston, should have passed out long before Stuart—under normal circumstances.

So the circumstances hadn't been quite normal. It was a frame. A beautiful, air-tight frame, because he'd never come back to squawk. Nobody came back from Asgard.

He shivered a little and looked up warily. There were legends, of course. The Watchers who patrolled the asteroid ceaselessly—robots, men said. They served the Aesir. As, in a way, all men served the Aesir.

No sound. No movement. Only the sullen crimson light beating down ominously from that dark sky.

Stuart took stock of his clothing. Regular leatheroid spaceman's rig; they'd left him that, anyway. Whoever *they* were. He couldn't remember anything that had happened after the fifth drink with the tired-eyed man. There was a very faint recollection of running somewhere—seeing unpleasant things—and hearing two oddly unreal voices. But the memories slipped away and vanished as he tried to focus on them.

The hell with it. He was on Asgard. And that meant—something rather more unpleasant than death, if the legends were to be believed. A very suitable climax to an

unorthodox life, in this era when obedience and law enforcement were the rigid rule.

Stuart picked up a heavy branch that might serve as a club. Then, shrugging, he turned westward, striking at random through the forest. No use waiting here till the Watchers came. At least—he could fight, as he had always fought as far back as he could remember.

There wasn't much room for fighters any more. Not under the Aesir rule. There were nations and kings and presidents, of course, but they were puppet figures, never daring to disobey any edicts that came from the mystery-shrouded asteroid hanging off the orbit of Mars, the tiny, artificial world that had ruled the System for a thousand years.

The Aesir. The inhuman, cryptic beings who—if legend were true—once had been human. Stuart scowled, trying to remember.

An—an entropic accelerator, that was it. A device, a method that speeded up evolution tremendously. That had been the start of the tyranny. A machine that could accelerate a man's evolution by a million years—

Some had used that method. Those were the ones who had become the Aesir, creatures so far advanced in the evolutionary scale that they were no longer remotely human. Much was lost in the mists of the past. But Stuart could recall that much—the knowledge that the Aesir had once been human, that they were human no longer, and that for a thousand years they had ruled the System, very terribly, from their forbidden asteroid that they named Asgard—home of the legendary Norse gods.

Maybe the tired-eyed man had been an Aesir priest, collecting victims. Certainly no others would have dared to land a ship on Asgard. Stuart swung on, searching the empty skies, and now a queer, unreasoning excitement

began to grow within him. At least, before he died, he'd learn what the Aesir were like. It probably wouldn't be pleasant knowledge, but there'd be some satisfaction in it. And there'd be even more satisfaction if he thought he had a chance of smashing a hard fist into the face of one of the Aesir priests—or even—

Hell, why not? He had nothing to lose now. From the moment he had touched Asgard soil, he was damned anyway. But of one thing Stuart was certain; he wouldn't be led like a helpless sheep to the throat-cutting. He wouldn't die without fighting against them.

The forest thinned before him. There was a flicker of swift motion far ahead. Stuart froze, his grip tightening on the cudgel, his eyes searching.

Between the columnar trees, bright amid the purple shadows, a glitter of sparkling nebulae swept. A web of light, Stuart thought—so dazzling his eyes ached as he stared at the—the thing.

Bodiless, intangible, the shifting net of stars poised, high above his head. Hundreds of twinkling, glittering pinpoints flickered there, so swiftly it seemed as though an arabesque spider-web of light weaved in the still, dark air—web of the Norns!

Each flickering star-fleck—watched. Each was an eye.

And as the thing poised, a horrible, half-human hesitancy in its stillness, a deep, humming note sounded, from its starry heart.

Star-points shook and quivered to the sound. Again it came—deeper, more menacing.

Questioning!

Was this one of the—Watchers? Was this one of them?

Abruptly its hesitancy vanished; it swept down upon Stuart. Instinctively he swung his cudgel in a smashing blow that sent him reeling forward—for there was no resistance. The star-creature was as intangible as air.

And yet it was not. The dazzling web of light enfolded him like a blazing cloak. Instantly a cold, trembling horror crawled along his skin. Bodiless the thing might be—but it was dangerous, infinitely so!

Pressure, shifting, quicksand pressure, was all about him. That stealthy cold crept into his flesh and bones, frigid icicles jabbing into his brain. Gasping with shock, Stuart struck out. He had dropped the club. Now he stooped and groped for it, but he could see nothing except a glittering veil of diamonds that raced like a mad torrent everywhere.

The humming rose again—ominously triumphant.

Cursing, Stuart staggered forward. The star-cloak stayed. He tried to grip it somewhere, to wrench it free, but he could not. The thousands of tiny eyes raced past him, glittering with alien ecstasy, shining brighter and ever brighter as they fed.

He felt the life being sucked out of him.... Deeper stabbed the gelid cold ... louder roared that throbbing tone in his ears.

He heard his voice gasping furious, hopeless oaths. His eyes ached with the strain of staring at that blinding glitter. Then —

The heart of the Watcher. Crush the heart!

The words crashed like deep thunder in his brain. Had someone spoken them—? No ... for, with the command, had come a message as well. As though a thought had spoken within his mind, a telepathic warning from—where?

His eyes strained at the dazzle. Now he saw that there was a brighter core that did not shift and change when the rest of the star-cloud wove its dreadful net. A spot of light that—

He reached out ... the nucleus darted away ... he lurched forward, on legs half-frozen, and felt a stone turn under his foot. As he crashed down, his hand closed and tightened on something warm and living that pulsed frantically against his palm.

The humming rose to a shrill scream ... frightened ... warning.

Stuart tightened his grip. He lay motionless, his eyes closed. But all around him he could feel the icy tendrils of the star-thing lashing at him, drinking his human warmth, probing with avid fingers at his brain.

He felt that warm—core—writhe and try to slip between his fingers. He squeezed....

The scream burst out, an inhuman agony in its raw-edged keening.

It stopped.

In Stuart's hand was—nothing.

He opened his eyes. The dazzling glitter of star-points had vanished. Only the forest, with its purple shadows, lay empty and silent around him.

Stuart got up slowly, swallowed dry-throated. The creatures of the Aesir were not invulnerable, then. Not to one who knew their weaknesses.

How had he known?

What voice had spoken in his brain? There had been an odd, impossible familiarity to that—that mental voice, now that he remembered it. Somewhere he had heard it, sensed it before.

That gap in his memory—

He tried to bridge it, but he could not. There was only a quickening of the desire to go on westward. He felt suddenly certain that he would find the Aesir in that direction.

He took a hesitant step—and another. And with each step, a queer, unmotivated confidence poured into him. As though some barrier in his mind had broken down, letting some strange flood of proud defiance rush in.

It was impossible. It was dangerous. But—certainly—no more dangerous than supinely waiting here on Asgard till another Watcher came to destroy him. There were worse things than the starry Watchers here, if legends were to be trusted.

He went on, the curious tide of defiance rising higher and ever higher in his blood. It was a strangely intoxicating sense of—of pure, crazy self-confidence such as no man should rightfully have felt on this haunted asteroid.

He wondered—but the drunkenness was such that he did not wonder much. He did not question.

He thought: *To hell with the Aesir!*

The forest ended. At his feet a road began, leading off into the purple horizons of the flat plain before him. At the end of that road was a thrusting pillar of light that rose like a tower toward the dark sky.

There were the Aesir....

II

Every spaceman has an automatic sense of orientation. In ancient days, when clipper ships sailed the seas of Earth, the Yankee skippers knew the decks beneath their feet, and they knew the stars. Southern Cross or Pole Star told them

in what latitudes they sailed. In unknown waters, they still had their familiar keels and the familiar stars.

So it is with the spacemen who drift from Pluto to Mercury Darkside, trusting to metal hulls that shut in the air and shut out the vast abysses of interplanetary space. When they work outship, a glance at the sky will tell a trained man where he is—and only tough, trained men survive the dangerous commerce of space. On Mercury the blazing solar corona flames above the horizon; on clouded Venus the green star of Earth shines sometimes. On Io, Callisto, Ganymede, a man can orient himself by the gigantic mother planet—Saturn or Jupiter—and in the Asteroid Belt, there is always the strange procession of little worlds like lanterns, some half-shadowed, others brightly reflecting the Sun's glare. Anywhere in the System the sky is friendly—

Except on Asgard. Jupiter was too far and too small; Mars was scarcely visible; the Asteroid Belt not much thicker than the Milky Way. The unfamiliar magnitudes of the planets told Stuart, very surely, that he was on unknown territory. He was without the sure, safe anchor that spacemen depend upon, and that lack told him how utterly he stood alone now.

But the unreasoning confidence did not flag. If anything, it mounted stronger within him as he hurried along the road, his rangy legs eating up the miles with easy speed. The sooner he reached his goal, the better he'd like it. Nor did he wish to encounter any more of the Aesir's guardians—his business was with the Aesir!

The tower of light grew taller as he went on. Now he saw that it was a cluster of buildings, massed cylinders of varying heights, each one gigantic in diameter as well as height, and all shining with that cold, shadowless radiance that apparently came from the stone—or metal—itsself. The road led directly to the base of the tallest tower.

It ran between shining pillars—a gateless threshold—and was lost in silvery mists. No bars were needed to keep visitors out of this fortress!

Briefly a cool wind of doubt blew upon Stuart. He hesitated, wishing he had at least his blaster gun. But he was unarmed; he had even left the club back in the forest.

He glanced around.

The red moon was sinking. A heavier darkness was creeping over the land. Very far away he thought he saw the shifting flicker of dancing lights—a Watcher?

He hurried onward.

Cyclopean, the tower loomed above him, like a shining rod poised to strike. His gaze could not pierce the mists beyond the portal.

He stepped forward—between the twin pillars. He walked on blindly into the silver mists.

Twenty steps he took—and paused, as something dark and shapeless swam into view before him. A pit—at his feet.

In the dimness he could not see its bottom, but a narrow bridge crossed the gulf, a little to his left. Stuart crossed the bridge. Solidity was again under his feet.

With shocking suddenness, a great, brazen bellow of laughter roared out. Harsh mockery sharpened it. And it was echoed.

All around Stuart the laughter thundered—and was answered. The walls gave it back and echoed it. The bellowing laughter of gods deafened Stuart.

The mists drifted away—were sucked down into the pit. They vanished.

As though they fled from that evil laughter.

Stuart stood in a chamber that must have occupied the entire base of that enormous tower. Behind him the abyss gaped. Before him a shifting veil of light hid whatever lay behind it. But all around, between monstrous pillars, were set thrones, ebon thrones fifty feet tall.

On the thrones sat giants!

Titan figures, armored in glittering mail, ringed Stuart, and instantly his mind fled back to half-forgotten folk-lore.... Asgard, Jotunheim, the lands of the giants and the gods. Thor and Odin, sly Loki and Baldur—they were all here, he thought, bearded colossi roaring their black laughter into the shaking air of the hall.

Watching him from their height—

Then he looked up, and the giants were dwarfed.

The chamber was roofless. At least he could see no roof. The pillars climbed up and up tremendously all around the walls that were hung with vast stretches of tapestry, till they dwindled to a pinpoint far above. The sheer magnitude of the tower made Stuart's mind rock dizzily.

Still the laughter roared out. But now it died....

Thundered through the hall a voice ... deep ... resonant ... the voice of the Aesir.

"A human, brother!"

"Aye! A human—and a mad one, to come here."

"To enter the hall of the Aesir."

A red-bearded colossus bent down, his glacial blue eyes staring at Stuart. *"Shall I crush him?"*

Stuart sprang back as an immense hand swooped down like a falling tree upon him. Instinctively his hand flashed to his

belt, and suddenly the red-beard was shouting laughter that the others echoed.

"He has courage."

"Let him live."

"Aye. Let him live. He may amuse us for a while...."

"And then?"

"Then the pit—with the others."

The others? Stuart slanted a glance downward. The silver mists had dissipated now, and he could see that the abyss was not bottomless. Its floor was fifty feet below the surface on which he stood, and a dozen figures were visible beneath.

They stood motionless—like statues. A burly, leather-clad Earthman who might have been whisked from some Plutonian mine; a slim, scantily clad Earthgirl, her hair powdered blue, her costume the shining sequin-suit of a tavern entertainer. A stocky, hunch-shouldered Venusian with his slate-gray skin; a Martian girl, seven feet tall, with limbs and features of curious delicacy, her hair piled high atop that narrow skull. Another Earthman—a thin, pale, clerklike fellow. A white-skinned, handsome Callistan native, looking like Apollo, and, like all Callistans, harboring the cold savagery of a demon behind that smooth mask.

A dozen of them—drawn from all parts of the System. Stuart remembered that this was the time of the periodic tithing—which meant nothing less than a sacrifice. Once each month a few men and women would vanish—not many—and the black ships of the Aesir priests sped back to Asgard with their captives.

Not one looked up. Frozen motionless as stone, they stood there in the pit—waiting.



Again the laughter crashed out. The red-beard was watching Stuart.

"His courage flags," the great voice boomed. "Speak the truth, Earthman. Have you courage to face the gods?"

Stuart stubbornly refused to answer. He had an odd, reasonless impression that this was part of some deep game, that behind the mocking by-play lay a more serious purpose.

"He has courage now," a giant said. "But did he always have courage? Has there never been a time in his life when courage failed him? Answer, Earthman!"

Stuart was listening to another voice, a quiet, infinitely distant voice within his brain that whispered: *Do not answer*

them!

"Let him pass our testing," the red-beard commanded. "If he fails, there is an end. If he does *not* fail—he goes into the pit to walk the Long Orbit."

The giant leaned forward.

"Will you match skill—and courage—with us, Earthling?"

Still Stuart did not answer. More than ever now he sensed the violent, hidden undercurrents surging beneath the surface of this by-play. More than he knew swung in the balance here.

He nodded.

"He has courage," a giant repeated. "But did he always have courage?"

"We shall see ..." the red-beard said.

The air shimmered before Stuart. Through its shaking his senses played him false. He knew quite well who he was and where he stood, in what deadly peril—but in that shimmer which bewildered the eyes and the mind he was a boy again, seeing a certain hillside he had not seen except through his boyhood's eyes. And he saw a black horse standing above him on the slope, pawing the ground and looking at him with red eyes. And an old, old terror came flooding over him that he had not remembered for a quarter of a century. A boy's acute and sudden terror....

Who had opened the doors of his mind and laid this secret bare? He himself had long forgotten—and who upon this alien world could look back through space and time to remind him of that long-ago day when the vicious black horse had thrown an inexperienced boy rider and planted a seed of terror in his mind which he had been years outgrowing? But the fear was long gone now, long gone....

Was it?

Then whence had come this monstrous black stallion that pawed the floor of the hall, glaring down red-eyed at him and showing teeth like fangs? No horse, but a monster in the shape of a horse, a monster ten feet high at the shoulder, wearing the shape of his boyhood nightmare that woke in Stuart even now the old, unreasoning horror...

It was stamping down upon him, shaking its bridled head, snorting, lifting its lip above the impossible teeth. He saw the reins hanging loose, he saw the saddle and the swinging stirrups. He knew that the only safety in this hall for him was paradoxically upon the nightmare's back, where the hoofs and fangs could not reach him. But the terror and revulsion which the boy had buried long ago came welling up from founts deep-buried in the man's subconscious mind....

Now it was rushing him, head like a snake's outthrust, hissing like a snake, reins flying like Medusa-locks as it stretched to seize him. For one instant he stood there paralyzed. He had faced dangers on many worlds to which this nightmare was nothing, but he had never since boyhood felt the paralysis of horror that gripped him now. It was a child's horror, resurrected from the caves of sleep to ruin him....

With a superhuman effort he broke that frozen fear, snatching for the flying reins, whirling as the monstrous thing swept past him in a thunder of terrifying hoofs. Desperately he clung to the reins, and as the thing rushed by he somehow got a clutching hand upon the saddle-horn and found a stirrup that swung sickeningly when it took his weight.

Then he was in the saddle, dizzy still with the terrors of childhood, but astride the nightmare.

And now, with a sudden intoxicating clarity, the fear fell from his mind. For an instant he sat high on the back of the incredible fanged thing, an old, old terror clearing from his mind. Confidence which was, he knew, his own and no bodiless reassurance drawn from dreams, such as he had felt in the jungle, flooded warmly through him. He was not afraid any more—he would never be afraid. The festering terror buried deep in his childhood had come to light at last and was wiped away. He caught the reins tight and flashed a sudden grin around the hall—

Brazen laughter boomed through the building. And beneath his knees Stuart felt the horse's body alter incredibly. One moment he was gripping a solid, warm-fleshed, hairy thing whose body had a familiar pitch and motion beneath the saddle. Then, then—

Indescribably the body *writhed* under him. The warm hairy flesh flowed and changed. Cold struck through leatheroid against his thighs, and it was a smooth, pouring cold of many alien muscles working powerfully together in a way no mammal knows. He looked down.

He was riding a monstrous snake that twisted its head to look at him in the moment he realized what had happened. Its great diamond-shaped head towered high and came looping down toward him, wide-mouthed, tongue like a flame flickering....

It laid its cold, smooth cheek against his with a hideous caressing motion, sliding around his neck, sliding down his arm and side, laying a loop of cold, scaly strength around him and pressing, pressing....

His hands closed around the thickness of its throat, futilely—and the throat melted in his grasp and was hairy with a hairiness no mammal ever knew. The motion of the body he