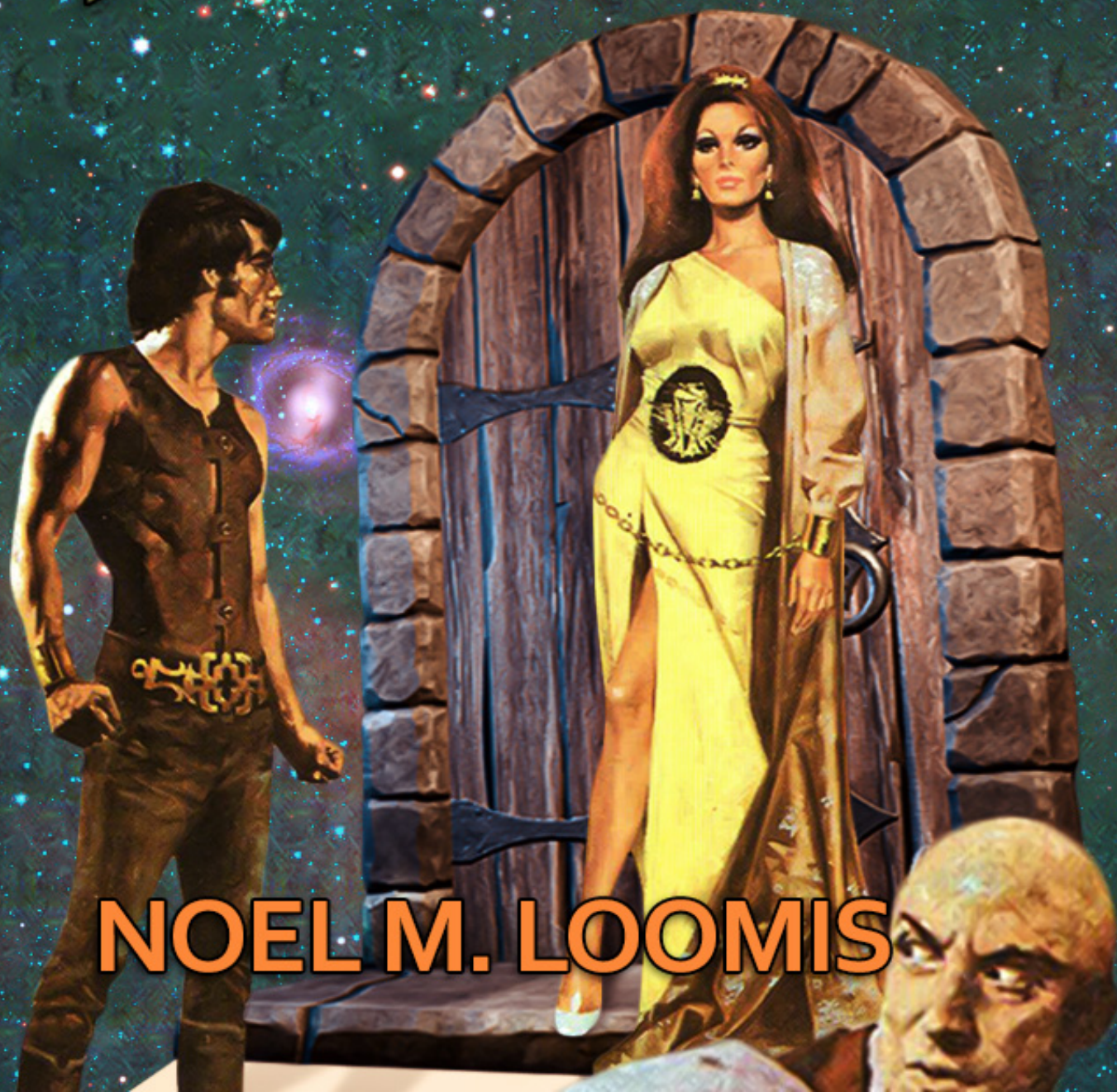


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VOLUME 71



NOEL M. LOOMIS

Amazing Stories

Volume 71

Noel M. Loomis

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The Wealth of Echindul

*Though he carried with him the loot of the ages,
who in The Pass—that legalized city of vice and
corruption—would dare risk his neck to help
Russell, the Hard Luck Man of the Swamps?*

He came up out of the Great Sea-Swamp of Venus like old Father Neptune. He was covered with mud and slime. Seaweed hung from his cheap diving-suit. Brine dripped from his arms that hung limp and weary; it ran from his torso and made a dark trail in the sand.



A flash of intuition hit Russell. He knew now how to win this fight.

Without even looking back, he stood for a moment as if fighting to keep on his feet, while the brine made a small puddle in the green sand. Finally he unscrewed the helmet and took it off. He turned around slowly and looked back across the two hundred miles of deadly swamp, at the flaming craters of the Red Lava Range from which he had come.

With fingers that would hardly function from weariness he took off his diving-suit and straightened up. His stooping shoulders were free of that weight for the first time in forty days. He was a small man, hardly over four feet tall, and not

well formed. It seemed incredible that he had crossed the Great Sea-Swamp on foot.

And as he looked back at the distant rim of green fire that marked the mountains it seemed incredible to him too. A great sigh of relief and gratefulness shook his unsymmetrical body, and all the nerve and colossal will-power that had carried him for six months, suddenly flowed out of him in a single wave and left him empty. He forgot about the ordeal that still lay ahead. He forgot everything. He pitched forward on his face in the sand, and slept.

Some hours later a whistling noise awoke him. He rolled over, awake instantly, for in past months his ears had saved his life as often as had his eyes. High in the sky he picked out a cannibal fish from the Acid Sea. It had set its great wings in a dive.

He raised his heat-gun, fired once, saw the feathers burst into blue flame, saw it falling; then he rolled over and went back to sleep. Not even the thud of its heavy body on the sand disturbed him, but an hour later he heard another warning—a rasping sound—and through the stench of the ancient swamp he smelled a fetidness that meant danger.

This time as he turned he rolled to his feet. He saw the huge coils of the Venusian water-constrictor. One lidless phosphorescent eye gleamed evilly at him, but its great jaws were spread and the dead fish was half-way down its bone-plated throat.

Grant Russell relaxed. Ordinarily he would have been scared to death to be within miles of the big saurian. But now for a few hours, with the fish in its throat it would be comparatively harmless.

Grant rubbed his eyes and stretched. How wonderful sleep could be! For six weeks he had been in the swamp where he never had dared to take off his diving-suit even when he was resting on a clump of floating grass, for fear it would suddenly sink and drop him into a hundred feet of brown water; six weeks walking through mud sometimes over his head, with the brown, infested water above that; six weeks pitting all his swamp lore against sudden death in a thousand forms, with only the light gravity of Venus to aid him, and his indomitable determination to keep him going. But now he felt like a million.

No man had ever crossed the Great Swamp alone on foot before. Few had crossed it in any fashion. Few would have tried it but Grant Russell because few wanted to do it as much as he did. In spite of his small size and his scrawny muscles, in spite of Venus which catered to big men and strong men, he had done it.

The food problem alone would have stopped most men, but Grant had spent a lot of time around the swamps of Venus. Often he had gone prospecting with food enough for only one week because he couldn't buy more, and he had stayed four, five, six weeks.

To do that he had had to experiment. He'd eaten all sorts of things. Sometimes he had been ill but he had acquired immunity to certain poisonous plants that contained food values.

The oxygen problem for a diving-suit for forty days would have stopped most men but Grant had solved that too. If he had not, he never could have gone to the Red Lava Range after the fabulous gizzard-stones of Venus's prehistoric echindul.

For oxygen, he had discovered a plant that grew in the bottom of the swamp. You could cut its stalk into sections and put them in a container and they would exude oxygen for several hours. But he had to carry at least one extra stalk all the time, and he had to keep his eyes sharp for more. Sometimes it had been close.

Grant looked at the Red Lava Range and felt the precious leather bag inside his shirt and smiled. Yes, he'd done it. He'd found one of the fabulous nests of the echindul—and it had been loaded with stones, just as ancient Venusian legend insisted.

The extinct echindul had been a sort of flying lizard that had nested in the mysterious, almost inaccessible Red Lava Range. Every echindul had had two gizzard-stones, and each matched pair of stones had an unusual property.

Grant reached in his watch-pocket and brought out the one he had kept out of the bag. He held it up and watched the sunlight, filtering through Venus's thick clouds, and the firelight, reflected from Red Lava Range two hundred miles away, play on the chatoyant interior of the stone as if they were chasing each other.

Those stones would be worth forty thousand Earth dollars a pair if he could get them to a reputable dealer in Aphrodite, Venus's largest city. Therein lay Grant Russell's next problem, and in spite of the satisfaction he felt at emerging from the Great Swamp, he knew that getting safely to Aphrodite might be an even more serious problem.

Aphrodite's only approach over the Lead Vapor Mountains from the southern hemisphere was through The Pass, a legalized city of vice. On one side The Pass was flanked by the Bubbling Zinc Pits and on the other side it was skirted

by the Fluoride River, and man had not yet devised any way to navigate either of these. It was doubtful, even, that any species native to Venus could cross those two areas, but on this authorities did not agree for in the year 2542 Venus and its natives were still largely unknown.

Not so far unknown, however, that Grant Russell failed to recognize the single luminous eye that had risen out of the water on a long, slender stalk. "A fish," he thought, or as some would have said, a Venusian. It saw that he was looking at it, and it dropped out of sight. There was the swirl of brown water that marked its under-surface progress. It swam like a fish, but it wasn't really a fish. It was one of Venus's four dominant species and the most "human" of all.

The swirl moved fast across the surface of the water and disappeared in the direction of Aphrodite but Grant knew that its place would be taken within a few minutes by another. And if Grant had had any forlorn hope that he might be able to slip through The Pass, he gave it up, for he knew now that his movements were reported hourly and that his possession of the fabulous stones was undoubtedly known to Relegar, the Uranian.

Relegar was the master of The Pass. He was no human and he had no human feelings. Killings and stealing were a business to him, and he had the most efficient spying system on any planet. It was well known unofficially that he kept an underground factory busy extracting a drug from the stamen of the swamp-orchid. The drug was labeled "Venus-snow," and Relegar found it highly profitable to trade it to the fish in the Sea-Swamp on the southwest and to the semi-aquatic people in the great Gallium Bogs to the southeast—some called them "frogs"—for information.