

# Weird Tales

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*Eli Colter, Edmond Hamilton, Grege La Spina, Seabury Quinn,  
Victor Rousseau, Henry S. Whitehead, and others*

# Weird Tales

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## Contents for October, 1926

- Cover Design ..... C. Barker Petrie, Jr.  
*Illustrating a scene from "The Supreme Witch"*
- The Supreme Witch ..... G. Appleby Terrill 436  
*There were terrors that Nora Shafto dreaded worse than death, but she had witch's craft enough to protect herself*
- The Voice of Bills ..... John Martin Leahy 449  
*A rational ghost-story, which loses none of its thrill because the reader feels that it could have happened*
- The Throwback ..... Orlin Frederick 461  
*A five-minute tale, about an atavism, a hark-back to primordial savage ancestors*
- The Great God Pan ..... Seabury Quinn 463  
*Jules de Grandin throws a wrench into the schemes of the pagan high priest of a new kind of Pan-worship*

(Continued on Next Page)

(Continued from Preceding Page)

- The Woman With the Crooked Nose**.....**Victor Rousseau** 473  
*The second of a series of stories, each complete in itself, dealing with Dr. Ivan Brodsky, "The Surgeon of Souls"*
- The Chair** .....**Marion Heidt Mimms** 481  
*Alan Carvel restores a murderer to life, with consequences that were as terrible as they were unforeseen*
- The Corpus Delicti** .....**Eli Colter** 495  
*Burgensdorf heard Hasting's boastful story—and then out of the clouds there flashed the wrath of the Almighty*
- Cattle of Furos** .....**Everil Worrell** 503  
*Frank Alison pursues the green-faced man and the girl in red to the dark star—a sequel to "The Bird of Space"*
- Across Space (Part 2)**.....**Edmond Hamilton** 520  
*A three-part weird-scientific serial—strange beings in Rano Kao volcano pull the planet Mars from its orbit*
- Weird Story Reprint**  
**No. 16. The Bagman's Story**.....**Charles Dickens** 534  
*The phantom might have been an old chair, but it brought happy consequences to the bagman*
- The Projection of Armand Dubois**.....**Henry S. Whitehead** 543  
*A tale of voodoo in the Virgin Islands—a specter that threw vitriol—and a little goat that frightened Madame Du Chailly*
- The Coffin of Lissa**.....**August W. Derleth** 551  
*A short tale of the horrors of the Inquisition—a story of frightful tortures under a coffin-lid*
- Seven Minutes** .....**Frank Owen** 554  
*The physician's wife lost her soul—so the physician crossed the borders of life in search of it*
- Fettered (Conclusion)** .....**Greye La Spina** 559  
*Frightful doom menaced two men and two women in the northern woods—a novel of midnight horror*
- Grave Chains** .....**A. Leslie** 569  
Verse
- The Phantom Express**.....**H. Thompson Rich** 570  
*The ghost in this story was no ordinary specter—it was the ghost of an express train*
- The Eyrie** ..... 572  
*A chat with the readers*

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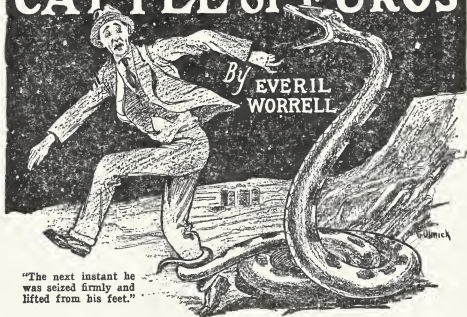
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# CATTLE of FUROS

By  
EVERIL  
WORRELL



"The next instant he was seized firmly and lifted from his feet."

**F**RANK ALISON awoke from strange dreams of a dark star on which lived green-faced men, who fed on slaves; and of a great Bird of Space that flew between the stars and carried on its back men of Earth as captives to this dark star, to be drained of their blood in the slave-pens of Furos—for such was the name of the dark star. And in his dreams was a woman, clad in red, who had been kidnaped from a moving train by one of the green-faced men—and the pathetic beauty of this red-clad figure brought tears of pity to his eyes.

The tears were real, for he wiped them away with his hand as he awoke. Thankful for the awakening, he raised himself on his arm and gazed out of his window on the smiling landscape. Then like a chill came the old horror. For it was not all a dream. Like a nightmare the remembrance of it haunted his days,

and distorted caricatures of the grotesque happenings filled his nights. It was all true—the green-faced man from the dark star, who called himself Gorlog; the pathetic face of the girl in red; the other captives whom the green-faced man had brought to the top of Castle Rock that ill-omened night a year ago; the great Bird of Space that carried them away to feed the overlords of Furos. For he, Frank Alison, had himself been dragged from a Canadian Pacific train in the dead of night by the green-faced man from Furos; he had seen his fellow-captives placed among the feathers of the Bird of Space; and he had staggered down from Castle Rock in the gray light of dawn, clad in a suit of pajamas and a silk dressing gown.

Of these things he had tried—only once or twice—to tell the story; once to a friend, his best friend in his club, a man named Hallam. But the

story was one he could not tell. He had found that to attempt it was to meet strange glances, to be credited with possible madness. Yet he could not forget. He could not take up his old life in peace. For him, there was no peace—would never be peace or forgetting again.

The things that had happened to him were so stupendous, and their possible import so tremendous—why, the whole Earth should have been warned! And his thoughts turned in upon him so, that he paid for his silence by nights of nightmare horror, nights of insomnia when nothing could make him forget his conjecturings and sleep, days when he feared a slip of the tongue every time he opened his mouth, and when he could indulge in none of his normal pursuits.

And suddenly, twelve dragging months had slipped away, and it was August!

Alison looked at his calendar on the morning of the first, with a feeling of excitement. He had not realized that the mere coming of the anniversary of this time that had cut his life in two would so affect him. It was as though he had waited, desolately, through a lifetime or an eternity, for nothing—and suddenly a clock had struck. For two days he went about in a dream of expectation, which gave way to a strong impulse to be up and doing. Doing what? What, but one thing, was there to do in this month, so haunted with memories? What, but to go back to Castle Rock? He made a resolution—the first real resolution that had brought peace to his heart in the whole year. The twentieth of August should find him keeping vigil on the top of Castle Rock; and the twentieth of next August, and of every August so long as he should live. It was on the twentieth of August that the green-faced man had watched for the Bird of Space. Well, he would watch always

on the twentieth of August—for the Bird of Space, or for the green-faced man. Either one, or both—and he would know what to do.

With a light step, and a feeling of purpose and anticipation that made him feel like his old self, Alison bought his ticket west. He outfitted himself in Chicago, getting a suitcase larger than his old one, and filling it with miscellaneous odds and ends. If he was crazy, he might as well be thorough about it; and he was making arrangements for a trip to Furos. If he never found a way of getting there, perhaps the time would come when he would spend his life behind bars for his foolishness, but these plans he was making now gave him back his faith in himself for the present. At least, this was action after the long months of inaction and introspection.

So he loaded the suitcase until he could hardly carry it. Tins of concentrated food went into it, dried milk powder, steero cubes, hardtack, corned beef and chocolate; there must be water on Furos, but there might be no food at all that he could eat. He shuddered, remembering the food of the overlords of the dark star. And then went out to buy a revolver, and plenty of ammunition for it. Toilet articles and all personal accessories he dispensed with, except for his razor and a tube of shaving soap. It was no part of his plan to come down from his vigil attracting general attention by a tramplike growth of whiskers, and besides, the razor might be as useful as the revolver. His thoughts turned toward Furos with a mighty impulse of longing, but with no love—except for the poor victims to whose defense he wished to go. As for the rest of that unlit habitation, his motives were not philanthropic. Obedient to a last afterthought, he visited the laboratory of a chemist friend and took away a large container marked with a skull

and crossbones. Inside was potassium cyanide enough to put a period to the life of every person on the train on which he afterward embarked, and he could have obtained the stuff of no one else in the world; but the chemist friend was an old college chum who did not even question him.

ALISON made no attempt to follow in detail the procedure of the green-faced man in getting to Castle Rock. The last stage of his journey he made in a second-hand flivver. He avoided the west face of the Rock. His intention was to appear on the summit on the night of the twentieth, and in the meantime to keep as much out of sight and as far from the scene of his captivity of a year ago as possible. He had his watch, but it would be hard to time his arrival definitely, and moreover, he did not know just how he wanted to time it. He finally decided that he would get himself and his suitcase to the top of the Rock soon after dark, and watch there through the night. That was what Gorlog, the green-faced man, had done; and if they two should encounter each other during the night his plans would be in the way of fruition.

His hands torn with climbing, his back strained with the weight of the suitcase, Alison arrived at the summit. His heart leaped with the force of the memories that assailed him. For a moment, the old terror clutched at his heart. He had forgotten the desolation, the utter loneliness of this spot. Of all places on the face of the Earth, in its uttermost wildernesses and farthest deserts, surely no more suitable place could be found for traffic with the sinister forces of an unseen, hostile world. One thinks of the Earth on which we live as a series of homes, of plotted countryside, of crowded cities; with occasional possible excursions into unde-

veloped places, places of little account. Up here on the mesa, Alison thought of the Earth as a tiny point in space, a lonely sphere most of whose surface was desolate in spite of the far-flung network of human enterprise and human population. A sea of water separates Europe and America. True, but it can be crossed, and many are the lonely spots on either continent through which an invading horde could be poured. There has been much speculation on this point, but little on the other, which filled Alison's mind. A sea of space, of ether, of nothingness, divides the Earth from the other solid bodies which swing eternally on their separate courses. If it could be crossed by an invading horde, who could guess, or who surmise, the future of our planet?

Alison settled himself comfortably, his back against the suitcase. There would be no sleeping tonight. He was tired, but not worn out with drugs and imprisonment. He was healthily tired, but alert as he had never been alert in his whole life. He sought the red and white stars near which, he had been told, hung the invisible dark star Furos, and fixed his eyes on them. There would be hours of waiting.

A LONG time passed. Alison became aware that he was listening to something—some sound that had replaced the utter silence, and that yet had been in his ears now for some time. It was a little, he thought, like the soft slipping of sand and pebbles on a quiet beach where the waves themselves make no sound. But there was nothing of that sort on top of the mesa. There were sand and gravel, but no waves to stir them, and tonight no wind, as there had been no wind on that other night. With a strange feeling of uneasiness, he cast a hasty glance behind him. A few low rocks were scattered about him,

but there was not even a shadow the height of a man—not even the height of a man sitting down. Perhaps his nerves were running away with him.

There was desperation in Alison's heart, as he leaped to his feet. If he were crazy, he would be thorough. He would wait till the dawn, since he had come. But he would not try any longer to behave as though he were here on a reasonable, dignified expedition. He would pace the rock, run if he felt like it, in obedience to the wild restlessness that swayed him. He rebelled against the fate that had visited upon him, a sane and healthy man, an experience that swayed his whole life, a memory of the truth of which there was no proof.

And, suddenly, his hasty footsteps were arrested, and he stiffened into an attitude of horror. In his careless pacing, he had all but trod upon a serpent!

His breath coming fast, goose-flesh rising upon him, his eyeballs staring, he stood still and looked at the thing lying before him in the half-light.

A serpent? Yes, but of a size associated with South American jungles, or with nightmares. And yet not for a moment did Alison doubt the evidence of his senses now. This thing before him was real—real enough, although it lay half-uncoiled in the dim shadows, so that it was no wonder he had almost fallen over it. One step more, and he would probably now be crushed and mangled, and perhaps poisoned with snake venom besides.

Carefully, he took a half-step backward. His impulse had been to avoid sudden motion, when, indeed, he was capable of motion. There had been a few moments when he had been motionless because he could not move. There was no sign of life from the thing before him, and he continued to retreat. He reached his suitcase, and lifted it. And then, suddenly, he let it fall, as a sibilant hiss reached

his ears. Another move on his part, and the serpent moved, rearing and falling, and rolling awkwardly toward him. The thing seemed clumsy, as though it were a little torpid—the idea of South American jungles persisted in Alison's mind. But it moved fast enough, and somehow there ensued a dialogue of motion between the two, in which it was made clear to Alison that much or rapid movement on his part, or anything that might be construed as flight, was the signal for a menace from the enormous snake. Twice it glided in front of him; twice it reared as though to strike him; and once it circled and undulated around him, until Alison could all but feel its coils crushing and strangling him.

In the end, he sat down quietly on his suitcase. At least, there was something to wait for now. The monster might tire and go away. It might lose interest, so that he could get away. It might attack—that was not a pleasant thought. Rather late in the day, Alison knew that if his revolver were to do him any good under any circumstances, it should have been in his pocket and not in his suitcase; but it was in his suitcase, and Alison's foe had shown an aversion to his handling the suitcase, possibly sensing that it might be used as a weapon.

Mercifully, this grim vigil did not last long. Alison's eyes were on the serpent, now, and not upon the heavens. Suddenly, a long, pendulous head was upreared—not toward Alison this time, but pointing steadily in an oblique direction, toward the south! Instinctively, Alison whirled, following the direction of its gaze.

At first he saw nothing but the star-strewn sky. Then a small black shadow—a bird was gliding downward through the night, clear-cut and black against the starlit sky. A small bird, wings spread motionless. A small bird, growing larger. Larger

and larger, and changing contour as it drew above the Rock.

Alison's heart leaped with joy and hope; beyond the highest anticipation of his life, this moment's thrill! The thing lying coiled on the Rock near by was forgotten. Alison was master of himself again, and at peace with himself. He was no incipient lunatic. Tonight he was wide-awake and in his full senses, and this was the Bird—the Bird of Space!

His mind worked clearly and rapidly. Even though his fears were allayed, even though life had again cohesion and meaning, his mission was already partly thwarted. He might achieve more, after long delay. He dared to hope, now, that on each twentieth of August, the Bird of Space touched on this point in its year-long pilgrimage of space. That there was some cycle of time in its wanderings that strangely brought it here, once in each earthly year! It was strange enough, but he had reason now to think that it was true. Then, another year, perhaps with equal luck he could dare attempt to cling to it, to risk life on its long flight. But on this trip, his plans had hinged partly on the green-faced man. Had he found him, too, he had hoped that he would be willing to facilitate his flight with him; the ogres of Furos would be glad of one more victim. That was why his revolver had been packed away; he had depended on the appearance and cooperation of the piratical overlord of Furos. True, he had counted the seeing of the celestial visitant whose wide-flung pinions now cut off the starlight as an end in itself; he still did so. But this was only for the sake of verifying his old memory, and bringing peace to his soul. Dare to lay hold on the Bird, to clamber among its feathers, to cling to it, to hope that it would go to Furos with him—he might have dreamed of such a thing, if he had dared to make more

complete preparations. He might devise a portable oxygen tank, a thermal equipment which would give a one in a hundred chance of his surviving the trip through space. He might dare to take the one in a hundred chance alone—a mad, desperate thing to do, a reckless invitation to Death!

But he had made no such arrangement, no such plans. Indeed, there had been no time for such elaborate preparation since he had hurriedly determined to come thus far. Without the presence of the merciless captor who had been so anxious to make the journey safe for him before, the suitcase full of futile equipment was less than useless. As well leave it here, before he started the downward climb.

GENTLY, as a cloud settles against a mountain slope, the mighty pinions hovered low and lower. Softly as a bit of thistledown, the immense bulk of the Bird came to rest on Castle Rock—not so near to Alison, this time, that he had any fear. He had chosen his position carefully, and it was near the sheer face of the cliff, and a little distance from that grooved-out hollow in which he had lain before. In his encounter with the giant snake he would have forgotten to think of this, but since he had not been allowed to go far from his suitcase and his original position, that matter had taken care of itself. So there was a moment in which he stood, quite safe and calm, regarding the Bird whose mere existence meant so much to him.

The next instant he was seized firmly and lifted from his feet.

Twisting his head around and suppressing an inclination to cry out with horror, Alison engaged in a silent struggle. The serpent, which he had forgotten, had crept up to him, had reared itself upward to the height of a man, and was holding him



in the grip of its tail. Snake, monster, dragon—whatever it was, it was a thing no mortal man could contend with successfully. When he had fought it to the point of exhaustion, the thing had not even loosened its hold. Neither had it injured him, seeming content to hold him, and to do battle only in self-defense.

Suddenly, Alison was conscious that he was being drawn toward the Bird.

He was being raised through the air, pulled and pushed, dragged through a dark, fluffy mass of something that reminded him of enormous ostrich plumes. And among them he came to rest. He was reclining, by no volition of his own, among the feathers of the Bird of Space.

Reaching his hand upward, he was conscious that the thick, soft plumage which surrounded him as softly as though he had been packed in cotton wool, was a sort of down lying close to the body of the Bird. There were feathers above this, feathers something like the feathers of the birds of Earth—light, strong, long and not very flexible.

He had not long to conjecture, before calm thought gave way to a torrent of excited feeling. The great Bird upon which he reposed so securely was moving; stirring, jerking a little upward, as though getting to its feet; moving forward, swiftly, throbbing with life and motion—rising, falling, beating its way upward—flying upward from the Earth, out into the desert spaces of the night!

Into the night of space, that held a swift death for him.

Moments passed. A thrill of intense cold, cold more absolute, more piercing and blood-freezing than anything he had ever dreamed of, shot through him. Among the soft, downy feathers of the under-plumage, there had been warmth. The warmth was

streaming away like water from a sieve hurled swiftly through the air. Alison could feel it go. He burrowed more deeply into the feathers, feeling with his clutching hands the odd, scaly texture of the skin beneath. Perhaps that was the secret of the Bird's endurance—a skin of unknown texture, that did not radiate, beneath the luxuriant plumage. It did not matter—nothing mattered but the deadly cold.

Yes, there was something else that mattered. Alison could hardly breathe. He panted and gasped for air, and felt blood gush from his nostrils and freeze instantly upon his face. He caught a glimpse of the sky above him, a bitter black, blacker than any sky he had ever seen, with steady, baleful points of brilliant white and colored fires that mocked him—the stars toward which his unknown corpse would speed—how long?

It was the end. And even as consciousness forsook him, he had the unhappy knowledge of another horror added to his passing, as the head of the serpent he had thought to have escaped undulated toward him, the eyes shining in the darkness.

**U**PON a dark shore stood a watchtower. Like an evil, torpid, unwinking eye a dull red oval set high up in its wall made the surrounding darkness visible.

A tideless sea that stretched away to an unseen horizon; a stagnant-smelling ooze of mud where the black water met the black earth, and higher up the low slope a straggling growth of sickly, whitish vegetation; a group of seven gathered near the water's edge—seven shapes like men that yet were not like men in the manner of their moving and standing, that spoke together in no tongue ever heard by human ears upon a sunlit planet; on these things the lurid glow beat dully.

After a while, the lifeless waters moved sluggishly. Small waves, waves made heavy because in them mud mingled with water, pushed their way inshore. The red light touched dimly something seaward, and by degrees an oddly shaped dark boat detached itself from the gloom. A small boat with a silent motor grounded softly, and a figure resembling the figures of the seven watchers landed, throwing out several heavy objects. One of these moaned as it hit the muddy bank, and the seven immediately busied themselves about it. The thing was large, long and heavy, and not what it appeared to be at first. For after a short fumbling, and the casting off of something that enfolded it, it became recognizable in the dull red glare—a man.

He lay upon his back, his head turned to one side, his eyelids tightly closed, his limbs inert—the picture of a peaceful sleeper. And around him moved the unwholesome figures, eight of them now. Soon several of these busied themselves with the several things that had been thrown upon the muddy bank. These were bundled together and carried toward the dark tower. A moment later, the sleeping man was lifted to a sort of stretcher, and borne by two toward, and into, the dark tower. The door that opened to receive them showed a fainter glow, as though the interior were lit only indirectly by the source of the light that streamed through the oval window. It closed instantly, and the sounds of the murmuring voices of the eight were lost. Outside the tower were only the shrouding darkness, the lifeless waters and the sad land, and the dismal light that made them visible—and silence. Until the silence was shattered by a sound that came strangely in this setting, and yet accorded with it well: a woman's wail.

ALISON'S watch was a great comfort to him, though it did not aid him in marking off the time that had elapsed since he began his journey from the top of Castle Rock. Nor could he in any way compute it.

He had wakened within the dim-lit tower, and his first feeling had been one of self-disgust. It seemed that in all his dealings with Furos and the inhabitants of Furos, his chief characteristic was to lapse into unconsciousness. Of course he was unfair to himself. The swoon in which he had passed the journey had been induced by the near approach of death, and prolonged, as on the former memorable occasion, by the drugs of Gorlog, the green-faced man, who had also been the means of saving his life. He had counted on the co-operation of Gorlog to aid him in reaching Furos—and he had had it. Gorlog had shown all his former willingness to explain detail. Glad to have his interpreter back, he had spent what amounted to nearly a week by Alison's watch, sitting beside him in the little prison room in the watch-tower, explaining many things to him, and also forcing into his head a working knowledge of the language of Furos. Alison had been restored to his original place in the plans of Gorlog. He was a prisoner, and under ultimate sentence of death. But there seemed to be a number of ways in which he was expected to be of use before he shared in its entirety the fate of other captives. He was a sort of prisoner of war, accorded consideration and honors.

In the corner of the little prison chamber were piled several bulky objects. These Alison had explored before the first visit of Gorlog. Among them was his suitcase. But there were two other things there that startled him inexpressibly, and for a while held his entire thought and wonderment. These were two enormous snake-skins, either one of which

might have been taken from the monster reptile with which he had done battle on the Rock, and whose hideous head had made his last fainting moments of consciousness more grotesquely horrible than they would otherwise have been.

Had he mysteriously survived the journey and been deposited on the distant dark star, and had there been not one but two serpents, both of which had been killed by the men of Furos?

Gorlog set him right at once, when he appeared. He himself, Gorlog, had worn one of the snake-skins, and Alison had made most of the journey in the other. Such skins, prepared by a process Alison did not understand, were the thermal equipment which preserved Gorlog and his various captives from the cold of interstellar space. An oxygen equipment was stored in the head, an equipment small and efficient beyond anything Alison could have dreamed possible. The eye-holes were fitted with a transparent substance, clear like glass, but very flexible, through which Gorlog looked as through his own eyes. And, what was strangest of all to Alison at first, although not strange on second thought, was the manner in which Gorlog had possessed himself of his awkward covering, conformed to it in his movements, so that beyond a little apparent sluggishness he had presented the exact appearance of a snake. Of course, the strange, rubbery suppleness of his body was the cause of this. And, indeed, Alison was not long in surmising that the men of Furos were as closely related to a reptilian form of life as the men of Earth are related to the apes. He learned that the slimy mud which thickly bordered the watery portions of the star was infested with reptiles of which the people of Furos went in terror, as was the water itself. If, then, a high intelligence could be imagined to have

occurred in a physical development that was something between reptile and simian, the type of man living on Furos might be considered accounted for: beings with the intellect of men, and the bodies and moral sense of an animal between a reptile and an ape, living on the murky shores of a reptile-infested sea, under a lightless sky—for the air was always filled with a heavy vapor which cut off the stars.

These things weighed heavily on Alison's imagination. But for one thing, it would have been easy to give up all hope, and to sink supine before whatever fate had in store. But for one thing, it would be easy to admit that he had made a ghastly mistake, and there was nothing left but expiation. Before he had come here, he realized now that he had had wild fancies. He had seen himself defying the overlords of Furos in a body, conquering them or reforming them, or at the worst dying in a brave defiance—just what, he did not know, but he had seen himself in a heroic rôle. He certainly had not seen himself shut up endlessly, like a wild animal in a cage or a dog in a kennel—or a calf or a pig waiting for market! He shuddered in a sudden realization. But for one thing, he would call himself a fool, treat himself to a pinch of the potassium cyanide in his suitcase—they had taken away his gun, as he might have foreseen—and die. But for one thing—

A DOOR opened softly in the metal wall of his prison, and the One Thing stood before him. To Alison, the dusky, lurid glow became a soft rosy light, like the light of rose-shaded candles in a quiet room. The grim walls that had reminded him of his captivity took on something of beauty, and something of kindness, since they shut out a dismal world, and shut in—two.

It was only a girl, or rather the

shadow of what had been a girl, that made the change: his fellow prisoner-of-honor, the one other of all the prisoners from Earth to escape the common fate. It was his girl in red, the girl for whom he had come here.

She was still in red. The red she had worn inside Castle Rock had been a dainty, beautiful dress on that fatal night on the train. It was now a pitiful garment of rags. It had been mended with a glue-like substance, and torn again in many places, and it had been washed to doubtful advantage many times—to doubtful advantage, because the water which the people used was piped from the sea, and, being taken from near the shore, was muddy. This was not because means could not easily have been devised for obtaining pure water, or purifying the water used; it was simply because the people of Furos were satisfied to drink and use muddy water. In fact, like the reptiles they resembled, they seemed to prefer it. Alison had seen them bathing in the mud.

Hitherto when he had seen the girl—Irene, as now he called her—he had not noticed this dress, being filled with such pity at the sight of her pallor and thinness, and the hollows around her eyes, that he had no thought for other things. Today he spoke of it.

"Couldn't they give you some of their slouchy clothes to wear—that would be more comfortable? Haven't they that much decency? Perhaps I might get Gorlog to do something about it."

He had noticed before how she started at the name of Gorlog. Now her hands went out to him in a quick protest. It occurred to him that it was the start of a gesture of supplication, which she had probably learned during her captivity on Furos. Many times she must have sobbed out her heart in futile pleading.

"Never mention me to Gorlog. Never let him know you care for me. Do you not know why he has left this door open, not caring to keep us apart? It is because he seeks to please me with a companionship which may while away the hours, but which yet will mean nothing much to me. I have made him think that I dislike you, but that I would question you about—the Earth."

Her voice broke on the word. Small wonder!

"As for this dress—they do not make clothes like this for the women of Furos. Science is theirs, but art is beyond them. And so Gorlog must see me in this. I am beautiful to him—in this."

Even to Alison, who loved her, Irene was no longer beautiful. She was too worn, too scared, too haggard. And the dress, with one foolish pink rosebud clinging to the shoulder! A sudden thought struck him.

"For God's sake, Irene! You have never told me why he keeps you here. What does he intend? I don't know what he means to do with me; but you—do you mean that that beast is—fond—of you?"

She bent her head in desolate assent.

"In his way."

"At least, then, you are not in danger of being treated as the others are treated—before I find a way for us to escape."

"Dear friend, you do not yet understand the ways of Furos."

There was a silence, while Alison waited for more.

"I am—so treated—now. On Furos, the overlords have a caste to consider, besides which the classes of Earth—even the castes of India—are nothing. There is no love-making between an overlord of Furos and a woman not of his caste. I have that to thank God for. But when an overlord of Furos looks with favor upon a woman who is one of the Cattle of

Furos—the slaves—or upon a woman of Earth, who has become one of the Cattle of Furos—she is his slave alone, as the others are slaves——”

There was a long, hushed interval.

The light that had been like the light of rose-shaded candles was again the light of the Tower of Furos. It was the color of blood, and baleful as the fires of hell. Alison walked the floor. At last, with a great effort, he spoke.

“I know, of course, what you mean. I think I know. Then when he visits you——”

“Yes, that is what I mean. Like the vampire stories. That is why I am so weak. That is why——”

She extended her arm. The wrist was bandaged.

“And how long——?”

“Not long. He will not keep me alive long. He has made me sing for him, and I am too weak to sing now. My dear—you have told me why you came here. You should not have come. Within a week, perhaps it will be all over for me.”

Alison took her in his arms and kissed her for the first time.

After a while, she went back through the narrow doorway, to rest; and he was left alone.

USUALLY, when he was solitary, the hours passed soundlessly as hours spent within a tomb. Alison had come to connect nearly all natural phenomena with sunlight, as we know natural phenomena. Since Furos had no encircling planet, there were no tides; that accounted for the stagnation of the water. There were also no winds, no calm and storm, no rainfall. As water and land mingled for a long way in mud, so air and water seemed to mingle. A slow process of evaporation went on constantly, and at the same time a slow process of precipitation. The air was thick and heavy, murky with fog and canopied

with clouds which hovered endlessly. But little of this could be seen by Alison, because of the darkness. Lights on Furos were used as signals, as in the case of the watch-tower; and even they were dim, because the phosphorescent eyes which found light in darkness could not easily endure a strong illumination.

Tonight, however (it was that period of the twenty-four hours of darkness that Alison called night) there was a distant booming in the air. Alison had learned that off to the inland there lay a great city; and the sound seemed to come from that direction. Opposite the doorway that led from his prison to the outside world, a window of the transparent fabric which took the place of glass was set into the wall. Many times Alison had pressed his face against the fabric, which seemed tough and unbreakable, and stared into the empty, meaningless blackness. He did this now, expecting to see nothing.

A moment more, and his heart leaped with excitement. At least, for the first time, there was something to see!

Near the tower, the pale vegetation stood out with some distinctness, illumined by faint rays of vari-colored light. Farther away, a great plain swept gradually upward toward the source of the light, which was the towered city of which he had heard.

And it was a city indeed! Some twenty miles distant, Alison guessed; and yet with a skyline flung against the gloomy, vaporous sky, that reached far up toward the zenith. The Furians built high. And tonight must be a gala night, a night of much excitement, since from perhaps a hundred towers issued the soft illumination. Light and color, used sparingly here, had always meaning.

Absorbed in the strange vision, he failed to note the constant augmenting of the booming sound that had first held his attention, until the door

behind him was flung violently open. He turned swiftly, to behold Gorlog.

"To the city! To the Council! It is the time when we have need of you. Not as I had planned, we need you, but for our very salvation. All is ruin—ruin!"

Alison had wondered if the art of flying had been mastered here. He found the answer to the question in the luxuriant plane into which he was hustled. An unseen pilot directed their course toward the distant towers, which loomed instant by instant higher and nearer. As they went, Gorlog talked.

"Know, Interpreter, that the Council is composed of the eight wise men of Furos. We are the rulers of slaves and overlords alike, the lords of life and death and the directors of destiny. Only we are taught the full knowledge of the science of Furos, whence is our power. Our number is limited, always, to eight.

"You know how, and why, we have brought Earthlings here, to add to our slaves. We have found the Earthlings good. Their service is good, their endurance, their nerve—their blood and their flesh are good. But the number of captives we could secure, bearing them here by the help of the Bird of Space, is small.

"So, through the years, have we worked to perfect an interstellar ship, that we might sail to Earth, or to other stars or planets, at our will; and not once or twice in a long cycle of time, but as often as we liked. We have perfected such a ship, we eight, and we alone have the secret of it!

"Now, a thing has happened. Of us eight, one man is a fool. Of our slaves, who work for us and nourish us with their flesh and blood as is suitable and ordained for slaves of inferior caste and breeding, many are fools since the coming of the Earthlings. In yonder city, our capital city of Gooloom, all is chaos because of the teachings of the Earthlings

and the rebellion of the slaves. Even now one of the Council lies quiet in the deepest room of his dwelling, because of a blow on the head inflicted by a slave; resting until the hour of Council meeting.

"And the Councilor who is a fool, he has established a religion. The religion of the worship of the Bird of Space! We of the Council, we have permitted no religion on Furos. The slaves have shown tendencies to set up such things, weaving fancies to forget their wretchedness. We have not permitted it, but this Councilor who is a fool, he has united them.

"And this Councilor, he has one of the instruments which destroy matter by disintegrating it—instruments which are known only to the Council, which may not be even talked of to any other man or woman on Furos. He can destroy with it, even while we seek to destroy him. He is in hiding but we can not hide the things he may destroy—our capitol, our Council building, our underground factories, our interstellar ship.

"I meant to hold you, guarding you carefully, until we had brought a goodly colony from Earth. Now I have need of you. You shall stand before the Council and swear our oath of fealty. You shall go with me before the Earthling who has incited the slaves, and treat with him that there be no more rebellion. And if you fail, you shall be tortured in ways you know not of.

"But whether you succeed or fail, you shall not be slain. For there is a thing that must be done, which none of us dare do because of fear of the vengeance of the Councilor who is a fool, and who has established his religion.

"They threaten the destruction of the interstellar ship on which hangs the future of Furos—a great future of conquest! They threaten this, because they believe—the fools!—that

only the great Bird should be allowed to sail through space!

"To end this talk, the Bird must be slain. We have no more need of him. And you, Earthling, must slay him. For if they kill you in vengeance, it matters not."

"It matters not." How typically Furian!

The airship was gliding among the towers of Gooloom. Gorlog's words had flashed through Alison's brain like lightnings.

"The Bird! Kill the Bird of Space! Why is that necessary?" he asked, stupidly.

"I tell you, they hold him as a sacred thing. They oppose conquest. Having now the secret of interstellar travel, we need him not. Let him die. Without him, we can enslave your Earth—perhaps many other worlds.

"He shall die—not by our methods, that his death may be avenged upon us, but by you—base-born of Earth."

Suddenly, a doubtful ray of light shot through the chaos of Alison's mind. The Bird of Space he had thought never to see again. At least, he would be allowed to approach once more the mysterious being that had been since time unknown a link between Furos and the Earth.

"How long before the Bird returns?" He asked the question with a quickening of anticipation.

"He has not gone. On Earth I told you, the Wise Men of Furos befriended the Bird. No farther in these skies he goes, but rests upon a high place raised above the waters by our builders, then returns toward the place from which he comes, far in the regions beyond the Earth. And for a few moments in his flight each way, he stops upon the Earth, perhaps on other stars and planets. The skies in which he is no alien, but at home, are far beyond our guessing. He has served us well in his long voyages. But he will never return to those far places that are his home."

"Traacherous—devilish!"

Alison murmured the words below his breath. His heart was full of sympathy. There was something of benevolence about the great traveler of space that had kindly borne on its pinions the sly men of Furos and whatever freight it had been loaded with. There were a grandeur and a mystery, too, which made him understand why the one Councilor who was a fool, an anachronism on Furos who indulged in fine feelings and poetic thoughts, had come to hold the Bird in reverence.

But there was little time for philosophizing; and moreover, Alison's heart was heavy with dread. Was his pathway already diverged from Irene's? Would he ever win back to her in her despair?

HE WAS unloaded on a landing stage and rushed down a spiral stairway; across a street along which vehicles seemed to pass suspended by wires; down another stairway and into a large room.

"The headquarters of the rebels!" Alison thought excitedly.

A sickly blue light filled the room, proceeding from a bowl full of liquid, and resembling phosphorescence, which perhaps it was. By it, Alison saw strange things.

The room was packed with the slaves of Furos—the same simian-reptilian type as the overlords, but made infinitely more repulsive by their miserable condition. Many were the bandaged wrists—Alison knew what that meant. Blood had been drained from these poor victims to furnish tidbits for the ghoulish lords of Furos. Yet every phosphorescent pair of eyes was turned upon one man, and in every pair of eyes there shone a strange light—the light of hope that had been an unknown thing through countless generations.

Alison turned his eyes upon the man who held the gaze of all, even

through the distraction of the newcomers.

He gasped. And small wonder.

The central figure of that room was one of the captives from Earth. He wore a uniform, and service stripes. His face was gaunt and pallid, his wrist wore a bandage, and he swayed where he stood. But upon his breast was pinned a large badge, and on it was printed clearly:

John Northrup  
First President  
of the Republic  
of Furos.

John Northrup was an American ace who had seen service in France. Having seen him once, Alison remembered the face before him in spite of its emaciation. He thought quickly, and then spoke rapidly in French—a language Gorlog did not know.

"Pretend to capitulate. I am ordered to kill the Bird of Space. I shall pretend to agree—and try to escape. If you and the others can get there—where the Bird is, I don't know where—but if you can, come. It may mean escape, even if it is death also."

"Can't make it, brother. I'll go on with what I'm starting here. But I'm for you."

Alison's arm was being crushed in the grip of Gorlog's powerful, rubbery fingers.

"We were comrades in France," he said in English. "Northrup uses his influence against the uprising for my sake. I'll take your oath of allegiance to the Council, and, if I can, I'll kill the Bird of Space."

"I will do as he asks," Northrup confirmed in English.

"You can kill him," said Gorlog grimly, producing Alison's revolver. "He will suspect no harm. You shall climb upon him and reach his head—and shoot through one of his eyes."

Alison shuddered. Suppose they were to compel him to do just that?

He would almost as lief kill a trusting friend. He felt no trace of superstition concerning the Bird of Space, but somehow he, too, held it in awe. What things had it seen in its journeyings? What did it know of the secrets of the universe? And what if the God in Whom the men of his own planet believed, of Whom the men of Furos had never heard, had spoken to the heart of the one Councilor who was not like the others, moving him to halt the projected destruction of the Earth?

Strange thoughts and strange conjectures were in Alison's mind. What chance was there that the one Councilor and the rebellious slaves might achieve their republic, and that the Earth might be saved from attack? So far as he could see, while the seven lived, there was no chance. The slaves held meetings, and there were no soldiers in the streets. The seven did not fight with such crude weapons. No; but once let them be assured of the necessity and they would safeguard their rule by the ruthless destruction of many millions. They were holding their thunderbolt in leash; the weapon to which Gorlog had referred; the weapon that reduced whatever it was focused upon to nothingness—to "an invisible vibration." Long ago, in his captivity in the cave, Gorlog had illustrated this to him, destroying sections of the granite rock by slipping a tiny lever. And Alison had not forgotten. He would wager his life that as soon as the matter of killing the Bird of Space was attended to, Northrup's life would last but a little time; probably a large number of slaves would go with him, as an object lesson. Only, there was the one enemy Councilor who was in hiding, and who also possessed one of these weapons.

He knitted his brow, trying to puzzle it out. The wholesale destruction



of Furos? If he could not escape, he would gladly welcome that.

They were before the Council. Before seven solemn, loathsome "Wise Men" with green faces, Alison took a strange oath that he tried to forget during the saying. It was a gruesome thing, that oath, and the penalties called down for its breaking were not nice.

THEY were in the airship once more—Alison, Gorlog and the other six. They went swiftly, the strange skyline of Gooloom dropping away behind them. The booming sound Alison had heard before arose again, and died swiftly. He surmised now that it was a demonstration which the slaves were making, and which Northrup this time had stopped quickly. He was helping him, giving him his chance. A very little chance, and hardly worth the giving.

They reached the red-lit prison tower. Alison suddenly read a new thing in the faces of the seven. If he killed the Bird, or if he did not, he would never tell the story of this night on Furos. His sands were running out. To him would be imputed the killing, with his own weapon; but he would not be needed to corroborate the story. That "dead men tell no tales" was known well on the dark star.

"This is a dangerous mission," he pleaded. "Give me a moment alone with the girl from Earth. I may never speak to an Earthling again."

"While the boat is prepared," consented Gorlog.

The seven went out.

It was more than he had hoped. He tapped on the door, and Irene glided in. Swiftly he told her of the night's events and his all but hopeless plan.

"Try to follow us and stow away in the boat. If you think there's no use at all, I won't go. I'll refuse

them here, and let them do their worst."

"Go! Promise me that you will try to escape!" Irene caught his arm frantically. "They will torture and kill you before my eyes, and you can spare me that. I have a plan."

Her words were almost unintelligible in her haste, as sliding footsteps were audible in the mud outside.

"If I can call back some of my old strength, there is a chance. I will try to follow you. We may escape to die together, out there away from these monsters. We may even escape—to live. Trust me, and go."

She glided through the door.

Alison took a step after her, and wheeled suddenly. Something that had been missing from his plan had slipped into place in his mind. He rushed to the corner of the room and worked frantically at his suitcase. After a moment, he crammed a stoppered bottle of milk powder into his pocket, and snatched the tin of stereo cubes, beginning to suck one as the door opened suddenly and the seven entered. One of the seven snatched at the tin of stereo cubes, helping himself. They were all munching as they went out, including Gorlog. Alison had expected that. The overlords of Furos prized but one food—but they were greedy and experimental and eager to possess themselves of anything that might be a special treat.

Alison had come, now, to the point beyond which he could do nothing, save yield to his grim captors and hope for a chance—a chance the very nature of which was indistinct in his imaginings. He was marched between a double file of the grotesque, dimly seen figures, down toward the waterside. There lay a boat—the boat that had been but now prepared for use. This much he had expected, for he knew that he had been brought to this shore in a boat, unconscious. It was the same boat, lying low in the

water, but with a tall prow in front. His feet sank deep and deeper in the sucking mud, and drew up, as did the feet of the seven, with a sound that was somehow horrible to him, as was the sound made by the rubbery lips around him, each sucking upon a steero cube. The cubes had evidently been a gustatorial success, but Alison's stomach turned.

Once, something moved under his shrinking foot, deep down, as though under a foot or so of the slimy mud. Alison leaped forward a pace. They had reached the boat, and it was with gratitude that he climbed within it and took an indicated seat in the stern. Instantly he strained his eyes, looking to see whether, in the leisurely embarking, Irene might have gained the boat, might have found a corner in which to hide away. There was a dim light high in the prow, which shone in all directions, and by its light he could see that there was no chance of that. In the boat, which somehow, to his fancy, resembled a hearse with the prow of a gondola, there were himself and the seven, one of whom had assumed charge of the motor. There was no trace of Irene, and no place in which she could be hidden.

The boat moved slowly in the sluggish water, which sucked at its sides as the mud had sucked and clutched at Alison's unwilling feet. They were on their way—on their way to the adventure that awaited him alone, and which had lost its point for him.

His eyes were hot with tears. Looking back, he saw dimly that the tower door had been left open. But no girlish form came through.

In the dull glare on the dark waters, he saw great reptiles moving—the deadly reptiles that infested these waters, and that, when slain, furnished the snake skins in which one might live in space. He thought of the two that had lain in his prison

chamber in the tower since he had been brought there by Gorlog, but it did not matter now that he had had no means of taking them, or of smuggling them within the boat. It did not matter that he had no hope of living, since Irene had been left behind. He did not want to live.

FOR perhaps an hour they slid through the dark, foul waters. Their speed was low, their way was tortuous. Whether this was necessitated by shoals, high-lying bars of mud, or by the thickness of the unwholesome inmates of the water, he could not know. He knew that their goal was the high structure which had been built, like a solid tower, upon an island, and that many steps led to the top—and that on the top brooded the Bird of Space. So much, Gorlog had told him. He wondered whether he would be suffered to mount upon the Bird alone, or whether he would be dragged to his task, to its very fulfilment, by Gorlog! Perhaps the former, since it must be a dangerous thing to be upon the back of the monstrous Bird in its death agonies. Much had depended on this point, and connected with it, somehow, was the one chance he had vaguely hoped for.

He became conscious of a sound like the wail of a distant, rising, falling wind. Somewhere, off to the left in the blackness, something was making the sound. And it was not the wind. Not the wind, for there were no clean, wholesome stirrings of the air on Furos. The moaning grew louder—yes, that was what it was. Moaning and wailing, grievous sounds coming through the eternal night, and coming nearer. Surely, not so far away, there lay a blacker blot of darkness, low and long—an island! Their course did not turn toward it, and Alison was glad. For the first time, he asked a question, and Gorlog answered shortly.

"Slave pens. That they may live as long as possible, we send them here from the mainland when they are too weak for service, and their blood is not good to drink, nor are they themselves fit to be killed for the market. And very careful must we be that there are no weapons on the island of the slave pens, or they would cheat the market. The Earthlings you did not see are—there."

The dismal sound drew behind, and still the gondola prow with its high, dim light breasted slowly the dark waters. Alison, sick with disgust, leaned back in the stern.

More than anything else in this world of horrors unspeakable, this had driven home to him the nature of the captivity of Furos. Irene's story had wrung his heart—yet, now, he pictured her meeting the end she had anticipated as coming soon—meeting it surely, but only, perhaps, after experiencing such horrors as even she had not yet dreamed of. Days and nights—perhaps weeks and months—in this dreary antechamber to hell!

And then his heart gave a frantic bound. His hand, restlessly moving on the gunwale, had touched a soft human hand, a hand attached to a delicate wrist—Irene's, he would swear upon his soul!

Then Irene was clinging to the boat, trailing her frail body through the death-infested water!

His hand closed over the small, deadly cold one, but with the supreme effort of his life, he made no other move. She had gotten thus far—he must not interfere. Better, perhaps, to be the prey of the evil things of the sea of Furos, than of the half-human monsters of the land.

After an eternity—Alison's lip was bleeding, where he had clenched it between his teeth in futile anguish—the boat grounded. Another muddy shore. He dared not turn his head. Before they reached the land, Irene's hand had slipped from his.

Why? She might have been torn from her grip on the gunwale by one of the monsters of the deep. She might—horrible thought!—have been seized and torn away before—leaving her dead hand in his grasp. He forced himself to move forward steadily, to control his thoughts.

There were steps to mount—many, as in a nightmare. They were climbing the structure built by the builders of Furos, to the high, open place where rested the Bird of Space. His feet lagged heavily in his doubt and uncertainty. His mind centered on one thing—the deadly coldness of the little hand he had held so long. The chill of the dark waters, or the chill of death?

It was the top at last. And straight ahead, more indistinct than on the top of Castle Rock, where the light of a starlit night of Earth made its graceful outline clearly visible, loomed the gigantic shape of the great Bird of Space. At rest, as it had rested—on what other stars?—between the periods of its far voyaging. For a moment, Alison forgot all other feeling in a wave of awe and wonder.

Whatever happened now, this was doubtless the end of his life. And, at the end, he was in the presence of mystery.

Gorlog's voice: "If you use this on one of us, the others are here!" And his revolver was pressed into his hand.

Awkwardly, clinging to the soft, remembered plumage, he mounted the great Bird that suffered him trustingly. He moved slowly, to give Irene time. If, indeed, she still lived.

As he reached the back of the Bird, he let the bottle in his pocket roll to the ground, and heard an exclamation of interest. He smiled grimly in the darkness.

"Hurry! Climb to his head! And shoot."

For the last time, his eyes searched

desperately. No! There was no slight figure struggling toward him and the Bird. Only the seven.

ALISON took firm hold of the Bird's plumage and fired—toward, but not at, the great, graceful head that loomed against the dim-lit vapors. There was the flash of a great, glowing eye like a beautiful star, at the sound of the report.

And it happened as he had hoped. With a great swoop, the giant Bird that knew the distances of space but not the crack of a near revolver shot, rose swiftly, beating frantic wings. Probably the Wise Men of Fuiros were not sure that the Bird had not risen in a death agony, before it was out of sight beyond the canopy of clouds.

Through a heavy, choking fog, like a long dive in deep water—and the murk thinned. Lights, blurred and dim, clearing to the baleful fires of the stars as Alison had seen them when he left the Earth.

But even in the anguish that was the beginning of death, his heart turned to Irene.

Irene!

He flung his arms out in a gesture of despair—and touched again her hand.

He was fainting—but he could see what he had not seen before—the two great snake skins stretched near him. He could understand, and fold and fasten correctly the one that only half covered the girl he loved, who had dragged them the long distance through the water, and reached the summit with them before the boat was moored and the others made the climb. And even then, with his last strength, but with hope in his heart, he could creep within the other.

His breath came easily, his dim eyes cleared, his heart beat naturally once more. And for a time he could

not measure, he watched the small stars grow to burning suns and fall away behind, as the Bird soared on.

And in the night, not now the eternal night of space, but a silvery moon-flooded night, the Bird glided slowly near a planet on which stretched great seas and continents.

"Africa, by George!" Alison murmured softly to himself.

A shimmer of blue and rose; a play of opal shadow; a vast expanse of brightening gold—morning, on Earth. Sand, and far mountains, and, in the distance, a cluster of palm trees and a feather of smoke.

TWO huge, hideous snake skins lay upon the sands. But the Bird had flown as he came—in the night; into the southern skies, where was his home.

Irene's eyes shone with a joy that exactly measured the anguish through which she had passed.

"So the Bird stops in Africa on his return voyage. But who cares?—we are on Earth."

"On Earth. And if Gorlog and his friends try the milk powder I dropped, we've seen our last of Fuiros, for without them the interstellar ship will never sail. Not for those devils, the first knowledge of the secret of conquering space.

"And, somehow, I feel that the Bird of Space will fly no more to Fuiros. I believe—he understood what that shot meant—treachery, death—"

"The milk powder——?" Irene interrupted.

"I had mixed it with the cyanide. It is certain death if they eat it."

For awhile they watched the miracle of morning. Then they made their way toward the distant palm trees.

Note—The previous adventures of Alison, Irene and Gorlog were told in "The Bird of Space," in the September issue.