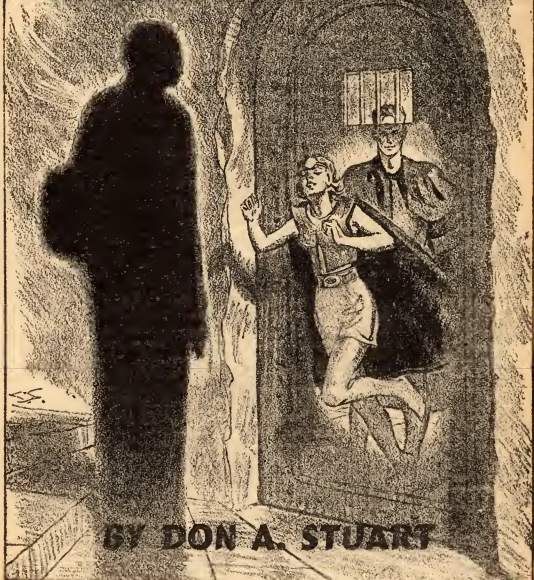


CLOAK OF BESIR



BY DON A. STUART

THE Sarn-Mother's tiny, almost human face was lined with the fatigue of forty hours of continued strain. Now, she feared greatly, a new and greater tension was ahead. For the eight City-Mothers, taking their

places about the Conference Hall of the Sarn, were not going to be sympathetic to the Mother's story.

To them, the ancient Sarn-Mother well knew, the humans of Earth were slaves. Slaves bred for work, of little

mentality and no importance. Earth was the planet of the Sarn, the planet the Sarn had taken, some four thousand years before, from the race of small-bodied, small-minded weaklings called Man that had originally inhabited it.

And that idea was going to be extremely hard to change. Particularly, it would be hard for the Sarn-Mother to change that idea, for she was somewhat—not of them. The Sarn-Mother was the Immortal. She was, therefore, disliked.

These eight, these Mothers of Cities, were the matriarchic governors of Earth under the Sarn. Each had risen to overlordship of a continent, or near-continental area, by competitive brilliance among all their people. They had won their places, merited them, they felt.

But the Sarn-Mother? The ultimate ruler of all Earth, all Sarn and humans alike? She had not *inherited* her position exactly—she had simply been there forever. Her winning of it was forgotten in the mists of antiquity. The Sarn were a long-lived people—some lived a thousand years—but the Sarn-Mother was immortal; she had lived in the mythical days of the Forgotten Planet, before the home world of the Sarn had disrupted in cosmic catastrophe, forcing the race to seek new worlds.

The Sarn-Mother had won this world for them, but that—and all others who had fought mankind in that four-thousand-years-gone time—was forgotten. The Sarn-Mother was simply a hang-over from an era that should have died. So felt the Mothers of Cities, ambitious Sarn who saw a place above them that—because of the Mother's cursed immortality—they could never hope to reach.

The old Sarn-Mother knew that, and knew, too, that only her own possession of secret science those millenniums of her life had given her, made her place safe. The City-Mothers feared two things: that well-held secret science, and

the jealousy of their sisters.

The old Sarn was tired with mental struggle, and she knew, as soundly as she knew the City-Mothers hated her, that she was facing another struggle. The humans of Earth were rising in a slow, half-understood revolt. She and these eight City-Mothers knew that.

But the City-Mothers did not, and would not, admit that those humans were capable of revolt. For all their lives humans have been slaves, pets, a sort of domesticated animal. That they or the similarly domesticated cows might attempt to set up a civilization—

For the Sarn-Mother alone had been alive the four thousand years that had passed since Mankind's defense of Earth all but succeeded in defeating the invading Sarn. The City-Mothers could not understand. Subconsciously they had no intention of understanding anything so unpleasant.

THE SARN-MOTHER'S pointed, elfin face smiled weary greeting. Her fluting, many-toned speech betrayed her fatigue as she spoke to them. "I called you together, Daughters, because something of grave importance has arisen. You have heard, perhaps of the judging of Grayth and Bartell in the Hall of Judgment this morning?"

"Rumors," said the Mother of Tarplan, the city perched high in the crystal clarity of the mighty Himlya Mountains. "You reversed your judgment, I heard." Her voice was silky smooth—and bitter.

The Sarn-Mother's small, pointed face did not change. The trouble, definitely, was beginning. "I told you at the last Council that the human stock was rebuilding, that the submerged intelligence and will that built, before our invasion of this planet, a high civilization, were mounting again. It is, I believe, equal in power to that before the Conquest. And, under our rule, it has been purified in some respects. There is less violence, and more determination.

"It is somewhat hard for you to appreciate that, for you do not remember human beings as other than slaves.

"I recognize a certain growing restlessness at restraint. The majority of those humans do not yet know—understand—the reason for a vague restlessness that they feel. Their leaders do. They are restless of government and restraint, and I hoped to use that vagueness of feeling to destroy the tendency toward rebellion. I thought the rebellion might be turned against their own, proxy government. Therefore, I caused the humans to revolt against their government under us, instead of against the Sarn.

"Even I had underestimated them. Grayth and Bartell, the leaders of Mankind, appeared before me accompanied by Darnell, the rival leader. I will not detail their quarrel, save to say that Darnell was my tool. I sentenced Grayth and Bartell.

"Then—Aesir, he called himself—appeared. He was a blackness—a three-dimensional shadow. He stood some four feet taller than I, nearly twelve feet tall, twice the height of humans. But he was shaped like a human in bulk, though the vague blackness made any feature impossible. He claimed that he was not made of any form of matter, but was the crystallization of the wills of all humans who have died in any age, while seeking freedom,

"Aesir spoke by telepathy. Mind to mind. We know the humans had been near that before the Conquest, and that our own minds are not so adapted to that as are the humans'. Aesir used that method.

"He stood before me, and made these statements that were clear to the minds of all humans and Sarn in the Hall of Judgment. His hand of blackness reached out and touched Darnell, and the man fell to the floor and broke apart like a fragile vase. The corpse was frozen glass-hard in an instant of time.

"Therefore, I released Grayth and Bartell. But I turned on Aesir's blackness the forces of certain protective devices I have built. There is an atomic blast of one-sixteenth aperture. It is, at maximum, capable of disintegrating half a cubic mile of matter per minute. There was also a focused atomic flame of two-inch aperture, sufficient to fuse about twenty-two tons of steel per second.

"These were my first tests. At maximum aperture the blackness absorbed both without sound or static discharge, or any lightening of that three-dimensional shadow."

The Sarn-Mother's mouth moved in a faint, ironic smile. "There are," she went on softly, "certain other weapons there. The Death of the Mother, which I employed once on a rebellious City-Mother, some thirteen hundred years gone. Tathan Shoal, she was, of Bish-Waln." The Sarn-Mother's slitted eyes lit amusedly on the present Mother of Bish-Waln, capital city of the continent of Africa.

"Tathan Shoal had the mistaken idea that she might gain by attacking me. She came with many devices, including a screen capable of turning all the weapons she knew. It cost me the South Wall of the Hall of Judgment and an effective and efficient administrator to convince her. For she had been effective and efficient.

"Daughter of Targlan, it is best for the Race that we share knowledge. Tell your Sister of Bish-Waln the remarkable progress your physicist has made with the field she knows as R-439-K."

THE Mother of Targlan's face remained unchanged, save for a faint golden flush that spread over it, and the sudden angry fire of her eyes. Field R-439-K—her most treasured secret—

"It is a field," she said in a pleasant, friendly tone, "which causes the collapse of atoms within it, bringing about a

spreading disruption that continues so long as the generator is activated. It is necessarily spherical in shape, destroying the generator very quickly, however. It would be excellent as a sort of bomb." She added that last as a sort of after-thought, a hazy, bitter dream in her voice.

The Sarn-Mother smiled and nodded toward the Mother of Bish-Waln. That City Ruler's eyes were angry as had been her predecessor's as she responded to the unspoken command. But her voice betrayed no emotion.

"No, Sister, it can be projected to some extent. The generator need not be destroyed, though the projector is, if you employ a field of ellipsoidal form."

The Mother of Uhrnol smiled, but her smile was only half amusement. "The projector can be saved, too. It is too bad I could not have known of your efforts. I could have saved you considerable work."

The three smiled at each other in seeming friendliness. Each felt slightly relieved; she stood alone neither in her chastisement nor in the loss of treasured secrets.

"The point of interest," the Sarn-Mother pointed out softly, "is that none of you can stop that field. There is no protection. Some twenty-two centuries ago I discovered that interesting modification of the atomic-blast field, and within a century I had projected it. Ten centuries ago I had it tamed to the extent of a cylindrical tube of force of controllable dimensions. If Tathan Shoal had waited another five centuries before attacking me, she would not have cost me the South Wall. It still does not match perfectly the other three. But I cannot screen that force."

"Nor I," admitted the three City-Mothers, in turn. There was a hint of bitter defeat in their tones, for each had hoped that field that could not be screened might make them safe in disposing of the old harridan, the Immor-

tal Sarn-Mother, who ruled them from a forgotten generation. She was a bitter, anachronistic hang-over from a forgotten time, from even the Forgotten Planet, and should have been forgotten with it.

"Aesir," said the Sarn-Mother softly, "took the Death of the Mother into his blackness, and seemingly drew strength from it. At any rate, both the apparatus and the atomic generator which fed it were blown out from sudden overload.

"It might be wise to coöperate more closely than in the past. Once, remember, our race had a very bitter struggle with this race. What do you Mothers of Cities believe this Aesir to be?"

The Mother of Targlan stirred angrily. "There are clowns among the humans of my district who amuse their fellows by trickery. Humans have stiff legs, bending only in certain, few joints. That lack of flexibility gives them amusing powers. They can, for instance, advance the stiffness by the use of poles of light metal, representing longer, artificial bones. I have seven such clowns walk on legs that made them not twelve, but seventeen feet high."

"Yes," said the Sarn-Mother sweetly, "the clowns of my North America are of a very inferior brand. They can appear but twelve feet tall. But—"

"Many," said the Mother of Bish-Waln, "of my humans have shown they can talk mind to mind among themselves. If it is new among your people here, it is—"

"Yes," said the Sarn-Mother sweetly, "the humans of my North America are of an inferior brand, evidently. But—I am curious of these clowns and mind-talkers. Do they, perhaps, absorb atomic-blast beams for nourishment, and warm themselves at a focused flame? Do they so overload your atomic-collapse field generators as to burn them in molten rubbish?"

"Or do they, perhaps, unlike yourselves, remember that the Sarn-Mother has watched humans, and the minds

and tricks of humans, for some eight times your not-inconsequential five hundred years?

"There were, in the Hall, humans, Sarn, and myself. By telepathy, Aesir spoke to us all, telling a myth of his origin among immaterial wills. He was, in his way, quite noisy, and quite conspicuous. Also, he was an excellent psychologist. Had I been warned—had I known beforehand and had time to think—I would not have turned the blast, the focused flame, nor, certainly, the Death of the Mother against him.

"Now do any of you, who see so clearly through the trickery of my poor little, twelve-foot clown, and the trickery of my slow-developing telepathist—do any of you see through to the message Aesir meant for my intellect, and not my mind? A message he did not speak, but acted?" The Sarn-Mother's elfin face looked down the Council table, and there was nothing of laughter in it.

THE City-Mothers moved uneasily under the lash of biting scorn. The Sarn-Mother's voice dropped, softer still, till the tinklings of the atom flame above muffled her words.

"Mummery for fools, my Daughters. I am interested that you are so attracted by the mummery as to forget the purpose, and so pleased with your cleverness that saw the human behind it.

"But I am—irritated that you underestimate, not merely of the mind of a human of deady, blazingly brilliant intellect, but, even more, my own mind.

"Humans are a smaller people, better adapted to this somewhat heavier planet than we are. But we are no longer on the Forgotten World. The humans have learned to respect height; the ruling Race is tall.

"Is Aesir a fool, then, to make himself yet taller, and to fill out his slenderness with vague blackness?

"We have no hair on our skulls, as have humans, but the more useful *ster-*

than which seems, to humans, practical telepathy, since we can talk among ourselves by what they know only through microwave radio sets.

"Is Aesir a fool, then, to use telepathy himself, talking truly mind to mind? Men know the limitations of microwave radio, that it ends at the horizon. But they do not know what vague limits telepathy may or may not have, and it is very wonderful, therefore.

"That mummery, my Daughters, was intended only for humans, that mass of restless humans who do not know what they want. That was not meant for me—save that he wanted me to know what others heard.

"I am proud of my humans, Daughters. But I am afraid, for you. You have not shown the intelligence that that Man expected. That mind telepathy he used was not the message he meant for me. To me he said: 'Mother, a new balance must be reached. You are the ruler of Earth—but for me. I challenge you to try your weapons—which I know, as does everyone on Earth, you have in your throne—and see if you can destroy me.' And when I, not thinking, but reacting spontaneously to the evident menace of his blackness, did just this, he said more. He touched Darnell, and Darnell fell dead. 'I have an impregnable shield,' his actions spoke, 'and it is more; a weapon. You cannot destroy me, Mother of the Sarn—but I can destroy you.

"Therefore, we seek a new balance. You could destroy all my people—but not destroy me. And I could destroy you, or any of your people.

"Release these two, Grayth and Bartell, and we will think again. This is not the time for hasty action.'

"Aesir, Daughters, is no fool. He is no trickster—save for his own sound purposes—but a mind of astounding brilliance. He has discovered a principle, a weapon, unknown to us and of immense power.

"And, my Daughters, I respect him. I released Grayth and Bartell, since they are, evidently, pawns in this game. Or, at least, they are two of the few humans on Earth I know are not—Aesir.

"And I have more liking"—the Sarn-Mother's voice was bitter and ironic—"for one who expects my mind to see beyond mummery to a deep and important sincerity, than for those who explain trickery and point out the inferiority of my humans."

"You are reading words that are not written," said the Mother of Targlan flatly.

For an instant the eyes of the Sarn-Mother burned with a white anger, a blazing intolerance of such sheer stupidity. Then it faded to a look of deep concern.

THE SARN-MOTHER was unhuman, unhuman in the same way her elfin face was. It was very wrong, taken as a human face, with its pointed chin and tiny mouth, the slit-pupiled, golden eyes, and peaked hair line that was not hair. But there was the fundamental parallelism of two eyes, a mouth, a high, rounded forehead. Her body was grotesquely unhuman, but again there was a parallelism of articulated arms carried high on a strong torso and legs, though her arms were like four powerful snakes.

And—she was un-Sarn. The Mother was immortal, an unchanging intellect in a world that waxed and waned and changed about her. She had living memories of a world crushed in cosmic dust. She had memories of great Sarn who had dared and won a world, of a human civilization of magnitude near equal to this present Sarn world.

And the process that had made her immortal, had made her unable to have descendants. There was no direct link from her to this newer generation. Her only link was through a planet wiped from the face of Time.

Four thousand years she had ruled

this planet. Two thousand more she'd lived on the Forgotten World before the desperate colonization attempt had been conceived. These creatures—these Sarn—were ephemeral things about her, for all their five hundred years.

Sixty centuries are long, for any intellect. All things exhaust themselves in that long time, save one: the curiosity of the mind, the play and counterplay of intellect. The Mother was the perfect seeker after knowledge, for no other thoughts could ponderably intrude. Those others she had met long ago.

She was un-Sarn by her immortality, by her separation of six thousand years from all direct contact with her equals.

She was unhuman only by a difference in body. And the body is wearied and forgotten in that time. Only the intellect, the mind, remains of interest, expanding and changing forever.

The intellect behind Aesir's cloak of blackness was the keenest, the finest, this planet had ever seen. And—that human appreciated that she, the Sarn-Mother, was a keen intelligence.

The City-Mothers did not.

The Sarn-Mother turned her eyes slowly from the Mother of Targlan. "The words that spell the secret of that blackness are not written," she said mildly. (*These were the daughters of her race. These were the descendants of Sarn she had known and worked with and liked during six thousand years. These were—*)

"I must see more of that cloak, and investigate it more adequately." She sighed. "And you, my Daughters, must not underestimate an enemy. And the humans are, I fear—or will be soon.

"They have been slaves for many generations—very short generations—and they have evolved. They evolve more swiftly than we, because of that short life span. And, remember this: at least one of them is sufficiently brilliant, of sufficient mental caliber, to develop a

screen weapon superior to anything we know of. That alone makes him, potentially, extremely dangerous."

II.

THE City-Mothers sat silent for long seconds. The thought was, as the Mother had known, extremely upsetting. Their matriarchic minds rebelled at the thought that there was a human—and a *male* human, at that—who was capable of developing something scientifically superior to anything in their possession.

"If," said the Mother of Targlan, "he has this remarkable weapon—proof against all ours, and deadly to us—I am extremely thankful that he has shown such kindness toward our race." Her fluting voice was sugary. "He has not equipped any of his compatriots nor attacked us in any way."

The seven other City-Mothers twined slightly straighter in their chairs and looked with pleased smiles at the Sarn-Mother's fine, small face.

The Mother smiled bitterly. "Undoubtedly that would be your own reaction were you possessed of such a weapon," she admitted. The Mother of Targlan stolidly continued to look into the Mother's half-angry, half-annoyed eyes.

"But you," the Mother explained, "have never done more than to say 'a thousand pounds of tungsten' when you had need of it. Or order fifty No. 27-R-29 oscillator tubes, when you hoped to make a satisfactory lie detector. Incidentally, Daughter, I have an effective invisibility generator. And your lie detector will not operate. You'd do far better to use common sense and simplicity instead of outrageously expensive mummery that doesn't work. That spy you sent to—one of the other cities—last week had a very slipshod invisibility. I watched her a whole afternoon from here. She set off seven different alarms, and finally was caught in a delightful

booby trap. Your sister believes in simplicity instead of gadgets."

The Mother of Targlan sat silent and stony. Her slitted eyes contracted slowly in flaming hatred. The old harridan was becoming cattish.

The old harridan was tired. She was wearied to death of the bickerings and annoyances of these City-Mothers with too little to do to occupy their time. Furthermore, she hadn't slept in forty hours, and knew it. And the Mother of Targlan was being unbearably stupid.

The Mother of Bish-Waln was interested. So—that was the source of that spy. And the old Mother, for all her foolishness about these humans, had some sense. The secret of success is simplicity. Though that Targlan spy *had* had a fearful and wonderful array of apparatus strapped about her, it also had made her—even when dead—remarkably hard to see. She'd sounded like a collapse in a glass factory when she fell, though.

"TO GET back to my remarks," said the Sarn-Mother abruptly, "you have never had to want something without getting it. Except," she added with a flash of tiny, pointed, green-white teeth, "understanding. If you want materials, they are brought.

"If a human wants materials, he steals them. And I will say this for you: you have all been remarkable organizers. The antitheft measures you have developed are outstanding. But I should think that the fact that humans still succeed in thieving would convince you they are clever."

"So," snapped the Mother of Targlan, "are rats. But they aren't intelligent."

"Quite true," admitted the Mother. The Mother of Targlan was becoming annoyed, which vaguely pleased the old Sarn-Mother, who was very annoyed. "But humans are both. It took me twelve years to find exactly how it was approximately thirty ounces of platinum

disappeared each month, despite my electro-static balance detectors. Now I make all workers clip their fingernails and hair. It was truly startling how much dust they could carry that way.

"To acquire materials, humans must steal them. And they must find it extremely difficult to gather such things as metallic caesium, gaseous fluorine, and rare gases like helium and neon. Unfortunately, I believe a considerable quantity of material is obtained from ingeniously acquired atom-flame lamps." The Mother nodded toward the softly rustling lamps overhead.

"So your workers secrete complete atom-flame lamps under their nails?" said the Mother of Targlan. "Your theft measures are indeed remarkable. The atom destructor of one atom lamp would power a dangerous weapon; They will stand a load of nearly ten thousand horsepower."

The Sarn-Mother smiled. "How many atom-flame lamps have you lost through theft, Daughter?"

"None. Not one!" snapped the Mother of Targlan.

"And what," asked the Mother kindly, "of lamps destroyed in burning human homes?"

"Perhaps ten a year."

"I'd say five a year, then, are acquired by humans. I've proven two homes were burned to the ground to secure the atom lamps the occupants wanted."

"We," said the City-Mother loftily, "require that the wreckage be produced."

"Excellent," sighed the Mother. "An excellent provision. Do you have a chemist analyze the molten waste? The humans generally find it very difficult to obtain scandium, and the analyses usually skim badly on that. But the other elements you'll find. They smelt up a careful mixture of all the proper elements, with the exception of gallium. But they can always claim that boiled away."

The Mother of Targlan looked star-

tled. The Sarn-Mother's eyes twinkled slightly in satisfaction. She had discovered *that* trick only four days before, herself.

"As I said, the humans find it hard to get materials and apparatus. But they are really ingenious, and I rather respect them for it. If you wish to assure yourselves of your cities," she added, looking about the table, "I'd advise you to acknowledge the power of your opponents."

"That is the reason this human, Aesir, has not done more. He has a weapon and a protection—for one. So long as he cannot obtain material, he cannot do more.

"But he will obtain materials." The Mother's annoyed air was dropped now. This, she knew, meant the safety of the Sarn race. "If he obtains sufficient materials before we learn the secret of that cloak, *the Sarn will not rule this planet.*"



THE MOTHER of Bish-Waln looked at the Immortal steadily. Suddenly she spoke. "I have always considered the humans stupid. That they had the cleverness of other lower animals, in greater degree, I realized. But we, Mother, have no memories of their civilization before we came. How far advanced was it, actually?"

The Sarn-Mother looked at the City-Mother keenly for a moment. It was anomalous; this City-Mother, less than one twentieth the Immortal's age, looked far older. Her face, pointed in the manner typical of her race, was graven with fine lines. There was a power and strength of purpose in its deeply tanned, leathery molding. Ruler of a tropical continent, her city centered in the warmth and cloudless air of the Sahara, she was one of the most active of the City-Mothers.

The old Sarn-Mother smiled slightly and nodded. "I can tell you very little now. But call in your archeologist. She is a brilliant and learned Sarn. Briefly, when we landed, the humans had had civilization for some fifteen thousand years. It was, by their calendar, 1947. They had recently developed atomic power of the first order, involving vapor turbines heated by atomic combustion, driving electro-magnetic generators. They mined the world, their transportation systems were heavily interlinked and efficient.

"And—of our fifty-two ships, we lost thirty-nine during the Conquest. They were intelligent, efficient and deadly fighters. We captured and enslaved only the scum of the race; the best of humankind died fighting with a grim tenacity that appalled us. They were a fighting breed, slightly given to attack, but utterly and insanely given to defense.

"It is worth noting in this case. If they once attack us, then we will, of course, attack, in reply. Whereupon their inherited defensiveness will come

into play. If it does, I seriously assure you that, whether they have weapons or not, even if they fight with their bare hands, you will find the human race a perfectly deadly thing to tangle with. They have no conception of when to stop. It is good military tactics to stop, if any reasonably equitable settlement can be reached, after losing ten percent of your forces. The human race does not know that, and never will. They stop when, and only when, they are convinced they have won their point. They simply do not show good sense.

"But they are extremely deadly.

"That is true of the mass of humanity. They have leaders now, and Aesir is the principal leader. We can, and must, control them through him. He knows, instinctively, the attitude of his people, and will try, therefore, to prevent suicidal war.

"Wherefore, if we obtain the secret of his cloak of blackness, we can proceed."

"I will ask my archeologist, Mother," said the Mother of Bish-Waln.

"Whatever you may say of the dreadful, deadly, human race," said the Mother of Targlan ironically, "it would be interesting to know the mechanism of that shield. But—maybe he will not explain. And it would be extremely difficult to force him to, if what you say of it is true."

"We shall have to analyze it, of course," said the Mother wearily. There were many more hours of work and sleeplessness ahead. "Some hours ago I instructed my physicists to set up all the instruments they thought might be useful in the House of the Rocks."

The Mother of Targlan stared blankly; then, acidly, commented: "Of all places in the Sarn City here, I should say that that would show the absolute minimum of probability for an appearance of Aesir."

"And," continued the Mother, wearied of interruptions, "they will be ready for

him in about an hour and a half. It is evident that Aesir will come to the aid of Grayth, if we capture him. To make assurance doubly sure—since Grayth is not, actually, absolutely necessary to them—we will take also Deya, Spokeswoman of Human Women. Grayth plans to marry her, and I am sure that Aesir will aid in releasing her."

The Mother of Bish-Waln frowned slightly. "Is it not bad policy, Mother, to arrest, and then release this man again? And—again at the insistence of Aesir."

"Therefore, the House of the Rocks. No human can approach. No human will know of the actual escape—save those humans already closely associated with Grayth, and, therefore, Aesir. Those humans already know what powers Aesir has, even better than we, and they will recognize this maneuver not as an arrest that failed, but as a test that did not fail. Our policy will be good, not bad, to those who know. The mass of humans simply will not know."

"They will not, I suppose," said the Mother of Drulon, at the far, stormy tip of South America, "notice that Grayth, their Spokesman, is being taken in Sarn custody—and returns?"

"They will not," smiled the Mother. With an uncoiled finger, she pressed a tiny button.

AT THE FAR end of the long Council room, a silver door opened in the jet black of the wall. The heavy metal portal swung aside, and a Guard snapped to attention in its opening, a giant Sarn standing over eight feet tall. Her powerful, supple arms were corded with the smooth-flowing muscles of a boa constrictor. Vaguely, her trappings indicated the rank of a Decalon—a commander of a Ten. Her cloak, though, was a deep, rich maroon, and in the center the gold, silver, and bright-purple metal threads wove a pattern that was the Mother's personal symbol.

And her face—to one who knew Sarn physiognomy—was not that of a mere Decalon. The slitted eyes were deep-set and widely separated. Her mouth was firm, and the face, small and pointed to human experience, was square and powerful in a Sarn. The golden skin had been tanned to a leathery, weather-beaten brown, crossed by a myriad of fine lines of character. This was no mere commander over ten guards.

"Decalon," said the Mother softly, "bring the Cloaks of the Mother, and your command. There is an errand."

The Decalon turned sharply, noiselessly, closing the metal door.

"Once," explained the Mother, "Darath Toplar was Commander-in-chief of the Guard of the Sarn City. She is now a Decalon. That is because there are but ten in my personal Guard.

"Now this is a time of emergency. I have revealed to each of you something of the things each thought a secret, and some of the things that I held secret. I am showing you the Cloaks of the Mother. That they existed, rumors have stated. They do. They have the properties the rumors suggest. Because it is necessary, they will be used."

The Decalon was back, behind her ten guards dressed in the same type of maroon uniform. Ten powerful, eight-foot Sarn warriors. On the face of each was stamped a keen, loyal intelligence. In the arms of the Decalon was a case of dark hardwood, inlaid with heavy, silvery metal straps. She put it down at the end of the great Council table, and the Mother's hand flicked out as her supple arm uncoiled to shoot a scrap of carefully cut metal the length of the polished table. The Decalon fitted it into a concealed lock with a motion of familiar dexterity.

The case, opened, revealed a space two by three by one-half foot. In it, racked neatly along one side, were twenty little battery cases, with coiled, flexible cables attached, and twenty

headsets, bearing curiously complex goggles. The case was practically empty.

The Decalon reached in, and with practiced movements passed to her command the goggles and battery cases. Then she reached more carefully into the body of the case. The reaching hand vanished. Presently, queerly section by section, the Decalon was wiped out, till only a pair of feet remained, dwindling off into space. These vanished as some unseen boots were pulled over them.

In a moment, only the City-Mothers and the Mother of the Sarn remained in the room—seemingly. The City-Mothers stirred uneasily. The eyes of the Mother of Targlan were golden fires of anger and chagrin. These—these picked eleven of the Mother's personal guard and spy force—knew every secret of her laboratories.

And the old immortal harridan knew them, too. Her crackling laughter must have been spurred a thousand times by the futile attempts and doomed plans the Mother of Targlan had made and thought over. The Mother of Targlan felt a rising pressure of helpless anger well up, an anger that was suppressed by its very helplessness. Even the satisfaction that the Mother was old, a cackling hag, was denied. For—salt on her wounded pride—the Mother had done, seemingly centuries ago, what the Mother of Targlan struggled with vainly! The Mother was a far better scientist.

III.

IT WAS a very different Council room, this chamber where the Spokesmen of Man had met—an inner office of the elected representative of Mankind on Earth, the Spokesman of Man. It was a warm room, mellowed by a thousand years of time; ancient woods, waxed and cared for for ten centuries and more, had taken on a fine, soft patina. Long-slanting fingers of afternoon sunlight did not glare on cold jet

stone here; it was softened by the richness of the panels. Each was of a different wood; one from each of the continents, and one for each Continental Spokesman.

The great table in the center was worn in soft hummocks and swales by the arms of forty generations of Spokesmen, the thick rubberlike floor carved by their feet.

But as in the great Council room of the Hall of the Sarn in nearby Sarn City, here, too, atom-flame lamps rustled softly with dying atoms, whitening the light of the setting sun. Four men only were at this Council table, four who sat motioning, gesturing with a curious alertness, their faces intent. Yet—utterly silent.

Grayth, tall, lean, keen-faced Spokesman of Mankind, an elected representative who had won his honor by a keen understanding of the practical psychology of the men he represented before the Sarn-Mother, political leader of Mankind. Bartell, shorter, more solidly built Spokesman of North America, close friend of Grayth, who had stood beside him before the Sarn-Mother, when—Aesir—had come.

And Carron, the gigantic Commander of the Legion of Peace, the only semblance of an army allowed humans. A police force armed with tiny gas throwers capable of a single, stupefying shot, and rubber truncheons.

Also, one more. Darak, Grayth's Sub-Spokesman. He sat silent now, making occasional pothooks on a pad of paper, his round, uninteresting face bored and boring. Darak's office was appointive, given him at Grayth's order, for the blankly unimpressive face and uninteresting character of the man made him few friends—as he had found by many years of careful study of the subject. Few friends, and few who paid him any attention whatever.

Darak had no need of the Cloak of the Mother; his own, based not on laws

of physics but of psychology, was nearly as effective. People did not see Darak. He wasn't worth seeing.

Four humans at the ancient Council table, four men as free as possible in this day of the Sarn, each wearing on his cloak the symbol of his rank in human society. Each wearing on a band round his forehead the medallion given every human at the age of eighteen. The band of Manhood or Womanhood, the Sarn informed them. The mark of Mankind's submission to the Sarn.

Or was, till Ware made certain slight alterations, alterations that hollowed out the solid three-inch disk of silver to contain a minute thing of spider-web coils and microseopic crystal oscillators. The first of the telepaths that rendered this soundless Council meaningful.

And rendered quite useless the listening devices that had followed every Council of Mankind for a thousand years. Grayth smiled upward to the swell of the atom-flame lamp. In the mechanism of that device, in a dozen other places in the room, the Sarn had long ago hidden radio transmitters. For a millennium, every Council of Mankind had been directly open to the strange radio-sense of the Mother and her advisers. For the hairlike growth on the Sarns' skulls were the sense organ of a type Man did not have, directly sensitive to radio.

"Four men in here," Grayth thought to his companions, "four men rustling papers. But the Sarn must be very curious as to the silence."

Carron's broad, tanned face broke into a wide grin. "After a thousand years, a bit of silence from this room is due. The Mother knows well enough we aren't minding her business. But I don't think she'll be anxious to investigate after—Aesir."

"The Sarn-Mother," the thought whispered in their minds from a more distant telepath, "is busy holding a conference of her own. I've been trying

for weeks to get the pattern of Sarn thoughts. I get annoying flashes, but no more. The Mother is tired, and the City-Mothers are being stubborn, I gather. But the thought patterns are just enough different from human thought to make the telepaths ineffective at more than about one hundred feet. And the most assiduous electro-technician can't spend *all* his time tracing conduits in the Sarn Palace."

"I'd suggest you do absolutely nothing that an ordinary electro-technician wouldn't do, Ware," Grayth hurriedly advised. "And for Aesir's sake, stay home when you're supposed to have off hours."

"HAVE YOU reached any conclusions? I've been sleeping, and woke only a few minutes ago." Ware's mental voice seemed to yawn. "I've been trying to think of some way to get more metal. Ye gods, if I could just get into one of the Sarn electrical plants for a day, I'd have a dozen things I need fixed up. The math was none too simple, but I've gotten it, I think." He chuckled. "Thanks, in fact, to very wise old Sarn.

"Just below conscious level, a thought came to him, a bothersome equation. While a certain electro-technician fussed with conduits fifty feet away, he fussed with the equation. The Sarn have some mathematical methods our ancestors never developed, and that I haven't had a chance to learn. Carron, if you ever feel urged to crack the skull of old Rath Largun, spare him for that."

"Can you use him again?" asked Carron amusedly.

"Oh, I have. He's old, and his mind wanders. Nearly a thousand years old, I think, which is exceptionally old for even a Sarn male. Since he is a male, he gets less credit among his people than he deserves, but he's the most brilliant mathematician the Sarn have. Because his mind wanders—he believes

he thinks up the equations."

"Might they give him a clue later?" asked Grayth sharply.

"T . . . P . . ." said Ware easily. "What word am I spelling? When you have correctly answered that, the Sarn may get that clue."

"Good." Grayth nodded silently. "Ware, Carron has seven technicians in his Legion of Peace who will procure some of those things you need. They have volunteered."

"I have not said what I wanted, nor will I," Ware answered instantly. "Every technician caught stealing metal now will be destroyed by the Sarn instantly. No man is going to lose his life on something I wouldn't attempt myself. Further, we need two classes of men now more vitally than ever before: technicians and fighters. Humans haven't fought and are not fighters. Carron's Legionnaires are the only trained, experienced fighters—with the will and emotion needed for fighting—that we have. And when they are also technicians, we can't spare 'em.

"Have you told Darak—what's to be done, and given him the disks?" Ware changed the subject abruptly, with an air of "that's that." It was because Carron didn't know what metals Ware wanted; had he, he would have gotten them somehow, anyway.

Darak replied softly: "I have been told, and I have the disks. Twenty-five telepaths, each equipped with destroying apparatus reacting to one key thought. I know how the destroying mechanism is to be disconnected if successful delivery is made. Grayth has supplied me with sufficient official dispatches for both Durban City and Targlan. I am starting in twenty-two minutes."

"Then—good luck, Darak."

"Thank you. The wish is, perhaps, the luck of the gods?"

"Yes. The luck of Aesir—very ap-

propriate." Ware chuckled. "You will lose contact with me, except when I use the large telepath here in the laboratory. You know the schedule hours for that?"

"Yes, thanks."

"We will be going, too, I think." Carron rose ponderously. His huge form dwarfed even the great Council table. And, since he spoke for the first time, his heavy voice seemed to explode in the room. "I'll see you to the Sarn City gates, Darak."

HE GLANCED down at the Sub-Spokesman's busy fingers. They were chubby, soft-looking fingers, rather thick and clumsy. An ink bottle flickered and wavered in and out of existence under the flicking, incredibly deft fingers. Then it flickered, without seeming to move under his caressing, chubby hand, from a round, red ink bottle to a square black one. "Thank you, Carron. The dispatches, Grayth?" Darak's voice was rather high for a man, quite undistinguished. Darak was, next to Ware, the cleverest human on Earth in that era. But his mentality was as utterly different as was Grayth's. Grayth was a practical psychologist, the only living man capable of unifying and moving the masses of Mankind. Ware was the scientist, the epitomization of centuries of the Sarn efforts to develop capable human technicians. And Darak?

Darak had the curiosity of the scientist in Ware, the psychological sense of Grayth, and the love of action that made giant Carron what he was.

Grayth tossed a mass of papers toward the Sub-Spokesman, a mass that bulged and crinkled. Darak leafed them swiftly into a brief case that he carried. "One thing I will have to remedy," he telepathed silently. "The metal gleams." Twenty-five silvery disks flickered momentarily among the rapidly leafed papers, and vanished as his thick fingers passed them. "All

here," he said aloud. "Good-by. I should be back in about four days."

His feet made no noticeable noise on the floor—an accomplishment far more difficult than a soundless tread. An unnoticeable step involves exactly sufficient sound to satisfy the ear, without enough to attract it. A soundless tread is very startling, particularly in a rather stout, heavily built man.

He walked through the outer office, past a battery of secretaries and clerks working over statistics from all the human world, correlating and arranging them for Grayth and the Human Government. Two looked up as he passed, but neither saw him. They missed him as completely as they missed the passing of eleven eight-foot Sarn Guards walking past in the opposite direction on the soundless toe pads Nature had given them. For neither party wished to be seen, and each had its own unseen cloak wrapping it.

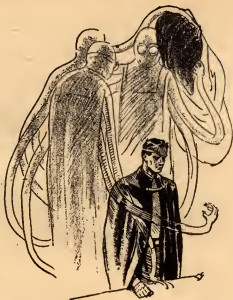
The door stood open a moment as giant Carron and Grayth spoke a few last words. Bartell stepped out, and then Carron, holding the door wide for his own exit, lingered a moment longer. Soundless feet carried the three Sarn, larger even than Carron's six feet six, through the door.

The door closed behind the Commander of the Legion of Peace, and Grayth stood alone, silent. "Aesir—Aesir—Aesir—" his telepath was sending out.

"Yes?" snapped Ware.

"Three Sarn are standing in the room, invisible to me. Eight more are in the outer office. Both Carron and Bartell are trying to call you—they stood in the door delaying the entrance of the invisible three. All are invisible. Their thoughts I can detect, but not decipher."

"I know. I've learned to 'hear' their thoughts. I takes a little adjusting, due to the different patterns. I'm trying to get them now. Too distant. I don't like it."



"Grayth, Spokesman of Man." The Decalon spoke from the air in the curious accents of the Sarn, speaking the tongue common to humans and Sarn.

Grayth started, looked about him, shook his head violently, and reached for a call button with a look of unhappy doubt.

"Stop," snapped the Sarn. Grayth's hand halted in midair. "The Sarn-Mother sent us for you. Stand up."

"Wh-where are you? Are you—"

GRAYTH stopped abruptly. A Sarn's powerful, muscle-corded arms gripped him suddenly, and simultaneously an intense blackness fell over him. A blackness more utterly complete than could have been produced by any substance thin enough and flexible enough to give the clothlike sensations that accompanied it. A very faint, rubbery rustling sound came to his ears, and simultaneously the jerking and pulling of the Sarn Guard adjusting the cloak.

"We wear the Cloak of the Mother," the Guard fluted sharply. "You will be quiet. You will make no sound, say no word. It is understood?"

"Yes," sighed Grayth. Then silently: "You've caught my impressions, Ware?"

"Yes." It whispered in his mind, the reassuring solidity of another human in close contact. The blackness, the utter blackness, baffled and brought a welling of panic. The huge, corded arms of the Sarn, the secrecy of this invisible arrest, all brought a feeling of irrepressible panic.

Then Ware's calm mind obtruded powerfully, silently. "The blackness is not related to mine. It is caused, I suspect, by the complete refraction of light about your body. To be invisible, you must be rendered blind to visible light, since any organ capable of seeing must, by its nature, intercept light. Struggle slightly. Strike the face of one of the Guard."

Grayth shuddered. A Guard was working swiftly at his feet. A tremor passed through him, and for a moment he fought off the powerful arms, surprising their grip by a sudden thrust and a gasp as of panic. His arm flailed out gropingly. Then with a second gasp, half sob, he quieted at the soft, tensely sharp command of the Decalon.

"Goggles," said Ware softly. "Transformers, probably, operating on ultra-visible light, thus making vision possible with invisibility."

Tensely, in Grayth's mind came the impression of half a hundred other human minds attending this exchange, half a hundred humans throughout this central city, the Sarn City, capital alike of human and Sarn affairs.

"You must stop them," Grayth felt a mind whisper urgently. "Ware—you must release him. Secret capture—they hope to lose him where Aesir cannot find him to release him." Deya's mind, turbulent and fearful, now. Leader of Human Women, determined and ready to defy the age-long, mind-burdening hold of the Sarn, this sudden, half-magic descent of the invisible Guards terrified

her for the sake of the man she loved.

"Stay where you are, Ware," Grayth rapped out mentally. "They're moving me now—leading—no, carrying me out through my office. In thirty seconds, I'll be lost utterly; the darkness is totally blinding and bewildering." Grayth felt solid ground under his feet suddenly, then he was standing, and spinning in the four cable arms of the giant Sarn. The darkness spun madly about him for a moment, then he stood waveringly on his feet, without the faintest idea of position as powerful arms urged him forward. "Stay where you are. I don't know where I am, anyway, and I'm convinced this is intended as a trap to bring you where the Mother's prepared weapons can destroy you and all hope of the revolution. She wants me only as bait for you. Stay!"

Softly in Grayth's mind came Ware's easy chuckle. "If I knew where you were, my friend, I would come. I will know soon enough. In good time, the Mother will see that you—and hence I—know. She realizes you have telepathic communication with me. Never, to my knowledge, has she revealed these invisible cloaks—"

"There have been other unexplained disappearances; this is the first time a telepath has been available to carry word," Deya snapped out.

"No matter. In good time, for no force, no power, nor weapon or ray, no bomb or any other thing can serve to disrupt the—Cloak of Aesir. No energy, however great, can break down that shield. That is not the Mother's hope, for this morning in the Hall of Judgment she tested that cloak to all her powers—and one or two, Grayth, no other Sarn of all Earth knows, save the Mother alone. It did not fail then, nor can it. She makes no further trial of it, but wants an analysis of its forces." Ware's easy jubilation rode through to Grayth, lessening the tension.

"She will not learn one iota of that,

Grayth. No, she wants a demonstration, a demonstration on her own terms, at her own time, in her chosen place. By Aesir and all the gods of Earth, Grayth, we'll give her the demonstration she seeks. By every god from Mithra to Thor, we'll give her one. I'll chill her prized palace there on the Sarn Hill till her old bones ache. No Sarn yet ever had rheumatism, but, by Earth and Man, we'll find out this night whether a Sarn's thousand bones can't breed a mighty case!"

"YOU'LL stay where you are, you braggart fool," Grayth howled through his telepath. "You are the revolution, not I. Bartell's an abler man, if he does lack a bit in fine words and simple phrases. The Sarn-Mother's lived five centuries to your year; she has studied space and time and all of energy with tools and instruments you never guessed, or will guess. You are a child, a prattling fool of a child, to her, Ware. Stay where you are! You may not know of any way to analyze or defeat that shield of yours, but what do you know of the Sarn's ten-thousand-year-old science?"

Ware's bubbling laughter echoed queerly in telepathy. "All Sarn science, Grayth, that has been published. The telepath, my friend, is not without its powers as an educator, tuned inward to catch, amplify and reflect each thought to a solid impression. And all human science, Grayth. Under my house—when I was trying to make a lab the Sarn wouldn't find—I found an ancient subway and a buried lab some striving humans had contrived in the last days before explosives and gas killed them. Books and periodicals, tons of them, heaped clumsily. A forgotten legacy."

Grayth groaned. The skin of his back seemed suddenly oppressed in the queer manner a telepath contrives when absolute rapport is established between two powerful minds. A heavy pack strapped on Ware's back. The screaming hiss

of an atom-flamp lamp unit readjusted, rebuilt to carry a million times the load its had been designed for, a scream that vanished in inaudible shrillness. Sketchily, waveringly, the rock-walled, hidden laboratory of Ware's contriving stood out before Grayth's eyes, lighted against the utter blackness that shrouded him. Then that, too, became a blackness, a stranger, straining blackness and chill as Ware pressed a contact at his belt.

"Ware," pleaded Grayth, "I don't know where I am. If you don't promise now to stop this expedition at least until I give further intelligent information, I'll grind the Mother's medallion under my heel, and by the gods, you'll never know."

"I'll wait," sighed Ware.

"But—you'll go later, Ware—you'll go?" demanded Deya.

"I'll promise that, too, Deya." Ware's mind smiled to her.

"Grayth, I shall continue." Darak's thoughts, faint with distance, came in.

"Right," replied Grayth. "Bartell!"

"Yes."

"And Carron and Oburn, Tharnot, Barlmew, Todd—all of you, continue your duties, without any change or shift. Do not hint you know of my disappearance till the appropriate time. Todd, you take charge of that outer office; you did a good job, apparently, when you knew I was being carried by, invisible, ten feet from you. You are in charge there. Keep the girls out of my inner office, for any reason, until I can give some idea of what is to take place. Got it?"

"Right."

"Deya," said Ware, "has stopped sending. Further, she does not answer; she's blanked her mind."

"We've been walking—stopped now!" Grayth's mind raced. "Deya . . . Deya, answer me!"

THERE WAS a tense silence of mind; only the low, multitudinous mut-

ter of a thousand human minds in normal thought about him.

"Oburn, where are you?" snapped Ware.

"At home."

"Stroll out in front; you live within three doors of Deya. Grayth, stumble in the dust—do you feel dust under your feet?"

"Yes." Grayth stumbled awkwardly against a giant Sarn Guard, dragging his foot sharply across a dusty walk, unseen.

"Dust rose," said Oburn softly.

"Deya, will you answer me?"

"Yes." Her telepath thoughts were half-angry, half-miserable. "We're moving again, though, so—they spun me. I don't know which way."

"You will stop dragging your foot."

A Sarn voice low and tense in Grayth's ear warned him.

"Ware, I . . . I don't like this." Grayth's thought was tense and very worried.

Deya's was bitter. "It was well enough when you were the one; now you are not so anxious Ware stay back, I take it. Ware, you stay right where you are, because if that was wise for Grayth, the only one of us who can really move the men of his following, it is a hundred times wiser so far as I am concerned."

"I think," said Ware, annoyed, "that I had better start designing a telepath locating device. It should be relatively simple, and if this continues, we'll need one. I'll join you as soon as I know where you are. In the meantime, I have a little work to do preparing. Please stop ordering and counterordering. We need you both; the Mother wants to study this apparatus, and she won't stop taking people until she gets the chance. It won't do her any good whatever, so she'll get that chance."

"I fear you're right," Grayth agreed. "It should be getting dark now."

"It is. The moon rises at 1:45, so

we have plenty of time. I think . . . I think it is going to be heavily overcast," predicted Ware suddenly. A chaos of thoughts raced suddenly through his mind, thoughts too lightly touched for others to follow.

IV.

UTTER JET, and the sound of people moving, voices and low laughter. Hasty side-steps to avoid unseen passers that brushed by, feet sounding softly on the dusty walks or grassy lanes. Then rough cobbles under their feet, rounded by the tread of more than a hundred generations of Mankind, and behind them, the low murmur of the Square fading away.

The rough cobbles gave way, suddenly, to the smooth, glassy pavement of the roads of the Sarn City. They had passed the low, ancient wall that marked the boundaries where men might walk unchallenged. Only low, sleepy cheeps of birds in nearby park-like gardens now, and the shrill notes of crickets and night insects tuning up.

The pace of the Sarn Guards accelerated, their long legs, and the curious manner in which they retracted them with each step, making a pace swift for the humans to match. Grayth heard Deya's soft breathing accelerate as they moved at a near trot up the slow rise that led to the Sarn Palace.

Then steps under his feet, strong Sarn arms guiding him upward, steadying stumbling feet. The echo of corridors answered to his tread, and for an instant he knew where he was; this was no unfamiliar walk to him now, and he was mentally readjusted. To the right, then, and a half dozen turns, and he was beyond any area of the vast, sprawling Sarn Palace that he knew.

An arm detained him; he stood motionless in utter darkness, while, beyond, something hummed for an instant, then a soft shuffling of a sliding door, two

steps forward, and the soft clang of the door's return. The sensation of a sudden drop in a swift elevator was nerve-tearing in this darkness, this total unknowingness of place, time or intent of captors. Grayth stiffened, heard Deya's soft gasps as the floor seemed cut from beneath her. Then the steadiness of the floor returned, and only the soft humming of the gravity controls told of their movement downward. Time became confused, there was no clue to their speed, yet Grayth was certain that they dropped many thousands of feet. The air pressure mounted till swallowing had relieved it so many times he lost track of that crude barometric method. More than five thousand feet, though—

More than a mile! No human had ever guessed at the depths of the Sarn Palace. Only once had humans ever been permitted to see those depths, and then it was the upper caverns only, when Drunnell and his men had been given a few feeble weapons by the Mother's orders. Weapons to overcome Grayth and Ware.

"More than a mile—we're slowing, Ware. The air is thick; it must be nearly two miles down. The air itself seems denser and richer in my lungs. Unless we are brought upward again—"

"I'll come down to you," Ware's calm mind replied. "Can you receive there clearly?"

"Perfectly," Grayth acknowledged.

"Two facts I wanted; antigravity units of the cars do not disturb the reception. Two miles of solid rock do not disturb it. Thought waves are a level below all known radiations, a force unto themselves. The Cloak of Aesir stops all other things."

"We are walking down a corridor, wide, rock-floored and walled, low-ceilinged. There are columns," said Deya. "Ahead, I hear Sarn."

THEY HALTED, and the echoes of their feet died away slowly, the curious

zing-zing-zing of sound reflected from rows of columns disappeared in unknown, unseeing distances.

"Mother of Sarn! Decalon Toplar reports with her Ten, and the two humans for whom she was sent," the Decalon's fluting voice called out.

"Remove the Cloak of the Mother, Decalon. Place all of the Cloaks in this case, and with them the visors."

A giant Sarn tugged at Grayth, the curious rustle of the cloak rose about him, then abruptly he was blinded by a flood of intolerably brilliant light. Gradually his eyes adjusted themselves; it was no more than normal illumination from a score of giant atom-flame lamps set high above in the arched and groined stone of the ceiling. Black, glittering, granitic rock, studded with two huge plaques on opposite sides. A twenty-foot disk of gold mapping Earth, a twenty-foot golden disk mapping the Forgotten Planet. From a concealed atom-flame lamp in the lofty dome, two projectors shot stabbing rays against the golden disks. On Earth's, a ray of brilliant yellow-white; on the other, a ray of dim, chill blue.

The Mother sat on a Chair of State, about her the eight Mothers of the Cities and a score of giant Sarn Guards. From air, eleven more were emerging, as Deya emerged piecemeal, while goggled Sarn packed into the silver and hardwood case on the long table something unseen and tenderly treated. The Decalon stood by the case, tucking unseen folds carefully into its corners, taking goggles and batteries from the Guards to place on tiny pins.

"It is the Given Law that no being, human or Sarn, shall twice be accused of a single thing," said Grayth. "This morning in the Hall of Judging I was tried and acquitted. It is the Given Law that no being, human or Sarn, shall be brought for judging without an opportunity of defense, and twenty-four

hours of thought, save he waive that right.

"Neither I nor this woman, Deya, has committed any offense against any being, human or Sarn. As is our right, we ask our accuser to appear and explain before us and the Mother the reason for this arrest."

The Mother's slitted eyes closed slowly and opened sleepily. Her powerful body remained as motionless as the stone of the Hall; the Mothers of the Cities neither moved nor seemed so much as to breathe.

The Mother spoke in the fluting tongue of the Sarn. "The Given Law is the Law of the Mother; by it I have promised to abide, save in time of emergency. This, Grayth, is such a time. You, this woman, and perhaps certain others have sought to plot against the Sarn and the Sarn-Mother. That is the accusation; I am the accuser. What answer do you make?"

"If one be brought before the Mother, and faced with his accuser, he has then twenty-four hours to consider his reply. The accusation must have evidence enough to make it seem just in the Mother's eyes that an answer be made, and complete enough that the accused know why this thing is charged.

"The Mother is the accuser, but I may ask—by the Given Law—what reasoned facts bring forth this accusation."

THE MOTHER'S eyes sparkled. Almost, a smile touched her tiny lips as she looked at Grayth's keen, gray eyes. The Sarn were proud that never in the millenniums of Man's enslavement had cruelty been applied, nor intentional injustice. Where the law of the Sarn could apply logically to humans, both races worked under the same law; where—as in the nature of two races such things must be—the laws could not apply identically, justice had been applied.

The Sarn were just; no human could

say otherwise. The Sarn-Mother's age covered sixscore generations of Mankind, and to some extent her immortality removed her alike from human and Sarn. Wherefore, it was easier for her, who had known Man's greatness, to appreciate the keenness and strength that lay in Grayth's stubborn face. And, knowing Mankind, to appreciate the steadfastness with which he would fight by every law or trick of law to win freedom back for Deya.

And—she appreciated the searching quickness with which Grayth had forced her once again on the defensive. Her case was true and solid—but made of ten thousand thousand little things, of things that had not happened as well as of things that had. Of subtle, reasoned psychology—and not half a dozen solid facts. Of those few, three were ruled out of this consideration, because they had been dealt with in that earlier trial, when Grayth was released.

She had no time to argue now with a mind that she knew was fully as keen as that of her own City-Mothers. There were other, more important things afoot, as that gray-eyed man well knew. And he knew as well as she that her case was not a thing to be stated in a dozen sentences. And also that it was a perfectly just, though unprovable, accusation.

"This is a time of emergency, Grayth," said the Mother softly. "I will give you the twenty-four hours you demand, however. And your companion, Deya.

"Decalon, let these two be taken to the fifteenth cell in the House of the Rocks."

The Decalon and her squad of ten moved forward. Grayth turned to Deya, a slight smile on his lips, as the Ten surrounded them. Back toward the great pillared corridor leading off into unseen distances, lighted by dwindling atom flames, the Guards led them.

"The House of the Rocks. This, then is the rumored prison of the Sarn.

Ware . . . Ware—" Grayth called mentally.

"I am coming, Grayth. I will join you in an hour. You need not call continuously as I have made rapport with you and can follow your normal thoughts. The sky, as I suggested, is becoming overcast. It will be a very dark night."

"We would not leave unaided," sighed Deya.

"I do not believe it would be probable." Grayth laughed uneasily.

GRAYTH MOVED about the cell restlessly. The Decalon and her squadron were gone, down that tube that had brought them. The single huge old Sarn that served as warden, turnkey and guard had set the tumblers on the steel door, and left with soft, shuffling toe pads.

Grayth stopped in the center of the room, his head high and tense, furrows of concentration on his forehead. Deya, in her chair, sat motionless, her deep-blue eyes clouded in sudden thought. She rose slowly, a magnificent throwback to a race five thousand years forgotten, a viking's daughter, bearing a golden tan of the more southern sun of this region, but golden-haired and blue-eyed, tall and powerful.

Slowly her eyes cleared, and a slight frown of understanding met Grayth's eyes. "At least a dozen. And if those Sarn are prisoners here, then all the Mother's laboratories have been stripped of talent," she said softly.

"Echoes," thought Grayth sharply. "Do not use voice."

Deya smiled. "They do, and yet no intelligible word is audible. The echoes do not carry words; they carry sounds, confusing, blended, intermingled sound. And concentration on telepaths might make impressions on instruments, where normal thought did not. Perhaps speech is better."

Grayth nodded. "There are a dozen

Sarn, at least, all scientists. They are in the cell above, the cell below, the cells on each side. And the only clear things of their thoughts that I can make is—Aesir—and instruments."

"I've found that shaft," came Ware's thoughts. "I haven't traced every circuit of the Palace for nothing, and as the Palace electro-technician, I've found many that were not on my charts. The sky is becoming heavily overcast. It will be very dark indeed. I will join you shortly."

V.

THE MOTHER pointed silently. Across the room, a section of rock had swung aside, and a broad signal board was revealed. A green light blinked irregularly, then went out. A blue bulb winked for a moment, and died in turn, as a yellow bulb glowed steadily. "By the shaft, then. The air is not open to him."

The Mothers of the Cities stirred restlessly. A second yellow light flashed. "If he goes below the sixth level—" suggested the Mother of Durban.

"The cage will remain down there, but probably he will not. He walked through a solid wall once; he may walk through solid rock." A third and fourth bulb flashed. The Mother watched quietly; the Mothers of Cities tensed as the fifth lighted. Abruptly it was out, and in sudden succession the blue and green bulbs winked.

"He knew," said the Mother, almost approvingly. "The car did not fall. Go."

A section of rock wall swung open. Silently the Mothers of Cities vanished behind it, and with them went the tall figures of the Guards. The rock swung to. The Mother, alone on her tall throne, saw a darkening of the farther lights of the long corridor.

Aesir stood again before the Mother, a blackness, a thing that was not black, but was blackness incarnate. A thing

some seven feet in height, vaguely man-like in form.

The Mother's thin lips smiled. "You have shrunk, Aesir. Have some of those billions of wills you mentioned left you, then?"

A voice stirred in her mind, a respectful, yet laughing voice. "Perhaps that may be it; a few wills more of cold metal than warm human flesh. But for the good of my race, two wills you hold captive must be freed. For this I have come again. And—perhaps that you and those who wait in five adjoining cells may know me somewhat better.

"I am the crystallization of a billion, and more than a billion wills, Mother of the Sarn."

"There are no humans here; the Sarn need no such tales." The Mother moved annoyedly.

"It is no tale; it is pure fact. This blackness is their product, not as, perhaps, I might explain to humans, but still their product." The voice that stirred soundless in the Mother's mind smiled.

THE MOTHER nodded slowly in comprehension. "Wills and knowledge. That may be. We seek a new balance, you and I."

"We seek a new balance, your race and mine," corrected that blackness. "You and I might reach a balance in this minute, if it were we two alone. The balance would be—that your pan went down to a depth that none, neither Sarn nor human, knows, while I remained."

"Yes," acknowledged the Mother. "I might be wiped out, and you remain. But your race would go, and mine remain, save that you alone continued."

"There is no need to exchange these thoughts; each knows the other to that extent. Man has one great advantage over Sarn; that, as a race, Man is more nearly developed to universal telepathy. A few of my people can already talk

among themselves; I have learned the different pattern that is Sarn telepathy. I can speak with you as Grayth cannot."

"Though he appears aware of Sarn thoughts when near us," sighed the Mother, "I had not thought of that."

"We make an exchange now," Aesir's thoughts laughed. "You wanted observations of my . . . my body stuff. I will give you that, and in exchange—"

Aesir stepped forward, and swept from the long table the silver case that contained the Cloaks of the Mother and the goggles. Simultaneously, the Mother's finger moved, and a carved bit of her high throne sank under it. From unseen projectors, a shrieking hell of flame screamed out, intolerable—blasting— The rocky floor of the great chamber screamed and puffed out in incandescent fury. The great table boomed dully in the corridors, a sudden, expanding blot of livid gas. The mad shrieking screamed and thundered down the corridors, the floor of the vast cavern slumped in annihilation that speared down through a hundred feet of rock in a single second of cosmic fury—

And died in silence. The Mother dropped three curled arms before her face, blinking tear-blurred eyes. Aesir stood, blackness against fiery incandescence of the cooling rocks, unsupported in the air. His form was altered, a clumsy thing with a strange, angular belly. An almost rectangular protuberance. But the thing was not rectangular; one corner was twisted and bitten away.

"I never knew," said Aesir softly, "but I am certain now; the world of the Sarn was not so heavy as Earth. You move slowly, Mother."

Silently the blackness glided down the corridor, dwindling from the Mother's sight. Furious golden eyes glittered after the hunched, disfigured mass. Slowly the glitter faded from her eyes, and a concentration of thought appeared,

perhaps even a mischievous twinkle of approbation.

The Mother's finger touched another button, and instantly a score of tense-faced Guards leaped through the door, clumsy-seeming, funnel-mouthed, hand weapons ready. They stopped at the door, staring at the fiery incandescence in the floor.

The Mothers of Cities crowded through their ranks, a slow, dawning smile of satisfaction on their thin lips as they looked into the glow. The Mother of Targlan took her seat slowly. "Then the revolution is ended," she said with soft satisfaction.

The Mother turned angry eyes on her. "Daughter," she asked bitterly, "do you think I mount here weapons of the power I have in the Hall of Judgment? I did not turn that weapon on him—but on the Cloaks. No more than a corner of them did I get; he moved too swiftly. My thoughts have been disturbed in this emergency, and I have not rested in fifty hours, or I would never have left that case where he might reach it.

"Aesir must win on this exchange, for he will know what makes the Cloak of the Mother, while I may know what makes the Cloak of Aesir." The Mother looked calmly down the long corridor, where a figure of hunched blackness turned into a narrow cleft in the great wall of the rocky tunnel.

VI.

THE OLD Sarn Warder of the House of Rocks had been instructed. The Sarn-Mother had no desire to lose Sarn lives—and she wanted Aesir in that grim citadel. The Warder, as Aesir appeared, turned away and left the passages open to him. The invisible Guards at the narrow cleft that led into the impregnable citadel remained inactive, wrapped in invisibility.

Up the stairways carved in the glint-

ing rock the Blackness strode. Down the corridor to the gray steel door behind which Grayth's and Deya's minds acted as directive calls.

And—between ranks and files of recording instruments let in every wall, in every doorway he passed. Tiny atom flames finer than the slimmest wire reached out to touch and feel at the black texture of his cloak. Unseen force fields caressed delicately at the fringes of blackness. Bolometers and thermometers felt and sampled the chill that poured from the blackness. Frigid air, like chilled puddles, flowed from that blackness and trickled across the stone floor behind him. White of frost coated the corridor pavement as he, in his dead blackness, passed.

"Grayth—Deya—stand back from the door. The door will fade to a vague transparency. Step through it instantly." Through the impenetrable blackness, the subtle mystery of thought reached out to contact and explain to the imprisoned humans.

The formless blackness of Aesir's hand waved stubbily over the gray metal of the door. As though that hand were a wet cloth, the door a chalked picture on slate, it vanished. Where the hand had passed in quick circles, the grim metal roiled and twisted—and vanished.

Deya's hand reached out uncertainly, touched the space where the door had been to feel a vague opposition, as though a thick and incredibly viscous gassy stuff remained. It was utterly without temperature sensation. She lunged through it sharply, overcome by an instant's strangling suffocation, then stood beside Aesir in the corridor. Grayth joined them silently.

"The Cloaks?" he asked.

"They are useless save for information. The Mother's rays cut through the corner of the case, and cut strange patterns in them, no doubt. You could not use them. We'll have to go out as we are. Now come, and stay close be-

hind me. We must put walls behind us, and that won't be easy."

"Can we go into the rock—or would that be impossible?" Deya asked.

Aesir's misshapen hand pointed. Behind them, the door of the cell was blackness similar to Aesir's own, a blackness rapidly congealing about two bent shadows overlapping on the surface. Two shadows where Deya and Grayth had passed through. A deadly chill was radiating from the door, a growing chill that sucked the light of the atom-flame lamps in the ceiling, and ice from the air.

"You felt that momentary suffocation. You can't breathe inside that steel, or inside rock. And that condition of interpenetrability is both temporary and frightfully treacherous. We'll have to go."

Ware went ahead, and now, as he passed the hair-fine atom flames that had probed for his cloak, a finger pointed and sharp cracklings of lightning snapped where the jet beam of blackness struck the probing beams. Harmless to Aesir's blackness, they were hairlines of death to unshielded humans.

The flames ahead on their course abruptly sputtered and went out. The Sarn saw no reason to lose good instruments.

Down the stair, and out into the glare of the great atom flames lighting the House of the Rocks. "There are invisible Guards," said Aesir. "The Mother, I take it, warned them to let me pass in unhindered. They may seek to stop you—"

IT WAS against the Mother's orders. But those Sarn Guards, in their eight-foot power, in their contempt for humans, in the pride they held that never had any being imprisoned in the House of the Rocks escaped, raised unseen weapons toward Grayth and Deya.

A long, stretching finger of jet shot out from Aesir's stubby hand. Something crackled in the air, darting light-

nings and a wild, many-toned shriek of agony chopped off abruptly. A Sarn figure black as Aesir's jet stumbled from nothingness and faded behind a swiftly formed white curtain of frost crystals. The black finger swept around, and the Sarn Guards died in blue lightnings and blackness.

"Run," commanded Ware. The three started down the straight narrow cleft that led to the outer corridor. Aesir turned right, then right again, into a low-roofed tunnel. Another elevator bank, the cars undamaged. The heavy, locked metal door faded under his hand to disclose a black shaft leading down and up in emptiness to unseen depths and heights. Another door—and another—

Then a car was found, and the three hastened through. Behind them in the main corridor a heavy pounding of running feet and clanking accouterments sounded. The blunt, dull-glossed nose of a war-blast swerved clumsily round the corridor with half a dozen giant Sarn tugging at it. Degravitized, it floated free, but its tons of mass were clumsy and hard to manage there in narrow rock corridors. Shouting, musical commands twisted it into place, settled it, and it thudded to the floor as the degravitizer was cut. Two Sarn swung the trajectory controls, and a third held the lanyard ready.

Aesir reached for the controls of the elevator cab as the blast roared in throaty fury at dissolving, flaming walls. The rock walls to the left and right flared into deadly flame of dying atoms. And the view was lost as the translucency of the metal door snapped instantly into blackness, a blackness that licked up the furious energy greedily and pulled with freezing fingers at the heat of the two human bodies within.

"That button, Grayth. Quickly. I cannot touch it through this cloak," Ware snapped.

Grayth pushed the thing, one among

a bank of hundreds. The floor of the cab pushed against them momentarily, then a sense of weightless falling gripped them as Ware's black finger pointed at something in the control mechanism. Blackness and frightful cold drained every trace of warmth from a resistor in the controls, and the full current drove through the degravitator control. The car shot madly upward.

"The Mother has many of these cars wired with power cut-offs. If this is one—as it probably is—and she learns in time which car we took, she may cut out our circuit. If so—we still have one chance, though I have never dared try it."

"Better cut that resistance back in," said Grayth quietly. "Listen to the howl of the air above."

The shriek was mounting. Far above in the closed tube, compressed by the upward plunge of the tube-fitting car, the air was howling through some vent. It was a vast organ pipe that changed its tune upward, upward—more and more swiftly as the tube length shortened and the pressure mounted—

"I can't." Ware's hidden head shook. "The air pressure must stop us. But not until we reach the top of the building and the automatic safeguards go into action. They'll cut the current in the car and apply brakes as we pass the topmost floor. If the Mother hasn't already—"

THE SHRIEK mounted. Abruptly the drive of the car vanished. Grayth, already firmly gripping the carved cage walls, flung a protecting arm about Deya and gripped more tightly. Aesir tumbled upward toward the roof of the cab, inverted himself somehow in mid-flight, and hung poised.

"Don't touch me," snapped Ware's thoughts in their minds. "It would be death—"

A new sibilant hiss cut through the roar of the air in the tube above, and

Ware sighed in relief. "The Mother was too late. She cut the power—but not before we had come so high, and so fast that the automatic safeguards tripped. The emergency brakes have gone on."

The deceleration died, and Ware floated back to the floor. The car was stopped, was sinking slowly. It clicked again, and a ratchet locked somewhere beneath their feet. The door of the car opened with a rumble, and an outer door slipped aside. The three stepped out into a corridor, a corridor lighted by the atom-flame lamps of the Sarn, lamps carved in alabaster and golden amber stone. They were in the uppermost floor of the Palace of the Sarn.

Far below, the Sarn-Mother looked thoughtfully at the little lighted column of signal lamps. The City-Mothers followed her gaze, furious as they saw the double red bulbs of the safety guard signals go on. "I am curious," said the Sarn-Mother softly. "He froze the resistor in the degravitator circuit with his blackness, surely, to get any such mad climb rate. But I have a thought that Aesir does nothing that he does not know some remedy for, nor attempt anything that he does not have some second, saving escape. What would he have done had I been able to cut his power before he could reach the safety trips?"

The City-Mothers were not curious. They waited impatiently as the Mother let seconds slip away without flinging a rank of Guards about that upper floor.

The Mother made no move. She saw no gain in throwing her Guards against the blackness, that, so far as she could see, had no weakness. She saw, rather, that her best policy was to wait the report of her scientists. Knowledge was the power she needed now. That, and the power she already had; control over all sources of the materials whose lack rendered Aesir harmless—so far as revolution went.

VII.

AESIR stood in the entranceway of the Hall of Judgment. Behind, through the ever-open doors, the Gardens of the Sarn were visible. Aesir—Ware—smiled. "I said it might be an overcast night," his thought whispered softly.

Grayth and Deya shivered. The Gardens knelt before a wind that howled in maniac fury. In the reflected light that shone against the low-pressed sky, a wrack of storm boiled overhead. And it was cold. The wind that shrieked across the Gardens was a breath of savage winter cutting through this summer night.

"I think," said Ware, "that it will rain."

As he spoke the sky burst into flame. Vast tongues of lightning ripped across the sky, stabbing down to Earth in a mighty network of electric fire. The air exploded with a blast of thunder that rattled the mighty fabric of the Sarn Palace to its bones. Instantly the flood-gates opened. The clouds split up and tumbled down in liquid streams. The shouting wind lashed the water droplets before it in a horizontal spray that was half falling water, half water slashed from the ground that was suddenly a pond. The twinkling lights of the Human City beyond the Sarn City walls were suddenly gone.

"Perhaps," said Ware pleasedly, "I used too much."

"You?" gasped Grayth. "You did this?"

"The Sarn hate cold, and they hate the wet more than ever any cat did. You'll find no Sarn loose in the Gardens tonight. Our way should be clear to the gates."

Deya shuddered and looked at Aesir's blackness. "That wind is cold; that rain must be near sleet. And I am dressed for June—not a February night."

"I used too much power," Ware shrugged. "I never did this thing be-

fore. Put it down to inexperience."

"Experimental error," Grayth sighed. "Gods, man, you've washed the city away. Come, let's start before we have to swim."

"Not yet," said Ware. "I've something else to do. The Mother wanted to study this blackness of mine. Well, by all the gods there are, I'll give her all she wants. I'll make her think again before she summons Aesir for her pleasure!"

He turned about and faced into the great Hall of Judgment. It was magnificent beneath the dim light of a few big lamps. It was jet stone and chrome, gold and sparkling, inlaid crystal. Aesir's arm became a funnel of blackness that pointed in slow circles around the room. Where that arm passed, the sparkle of polished stone and shining metal or gem vanished. It became a dead blackness. The walls ceased to have the appearance of walls, but became empty spaces that stretched off to some eternity of night.

The glint and whisper of the atom flames died away; their strong light dulled to something somber and depressing.

And cold—cold welled out of the place in a tangible flood. The humans shivered violently and fled from the doorway that dripped, suddenly, with frozen mist. Puddled air, chilled near its freezing point, it seemed, flowed down the walls and out the door. A breeze sprang up, a throaty gurgle of air rushing into the room at the top of the great door to rush out at the bottom in a freezing, unseen torrent.

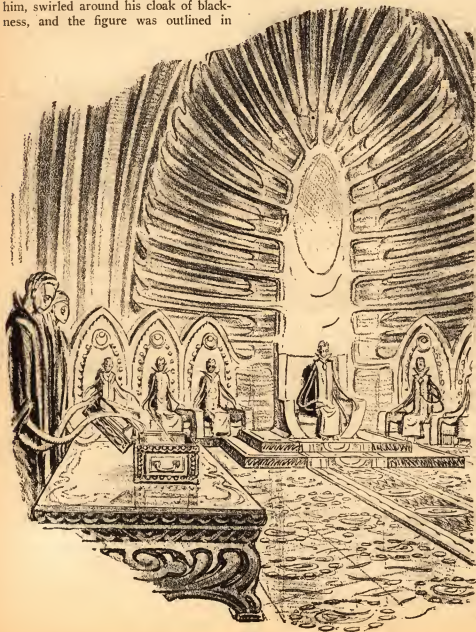
Grayth and Deya hurried aside, shivering in unbearable chill. The torrent of air poured out, across the vestibule to the entranceway of the Palace. It flowed down the steps, and as they watched, the howling rain turned to snow and froze as sleet on the stone.

"And," said Ware in satisfaction, "the

Sarn hate cold. It will be a month before that room is habitable again. Now come."

HE WALKED through the flood, and down the steps toward the wind-lashed Gardens. The wind howled by him, swirled around his cloak of blackness, and the figure was outlined in

white that swirled and glinted in the faint light radiated from the building. Behind him, Grayth and Deya made their way, white figures against the blackness. In a moment they were lost behind driving, glistening curtains of rain.



They were soaked and freezing in an instant. In his arms Grayth felt Deya shivering violently. "Ware," he called abruptly. "Ware—go on; we will meet you. We can follow that blackness only by the snow that forms around you, and on a night like this, may I be cursed if I follow a walking snowstorm. I'm

freezing now, and Deya, too."

"Frozen," the girl chattered.

"I can't cut off this shield," Ware answered. "The instruments aren't insulated well enough. If water touches them—there'll be neither Sarn nor Human City to squabble over. Meet me at my house. You can find your way?"

"I think so," nodded Grayth, shivering.

"Strike for the road. It will glow



The Sarn-Mother smiled inwardly. "You shall have the twenty-four hours for thought, man." Then to the giant Sarn Guards: "Place them in the House of the Rocks."

tonight, as usual. And there will be no Sarn upon it, with this liquid blizzard howling."

"Good." Grayth and Deya set out, half running. Black wind and water thundered through the Gardens. The sky exploded once more in blinding light, the waves of sound rocking the ground beneath their feet so that even half frozen as they were, they felt its shaking.

VIII.

IN THE RUCK of that wild night, no eyes saw Grayth and Deya reach their goal. Rain in solid, blinding sheets hid them as they slipped between wind-bowed trees to Ware's small stone cottage, into its unlighted doorway. Ware's hand found Grayth's, and led the shivering, dripping pair through the tiny room, abruptly brilliant in the explosion of another lightning flash. At the far wall, Ware fumbled at a stone that grated and moved. Silently he led them down to a yet smaller room lined with rough granite. The stone above them swung back, and a light sprang up. But again Ware was fumbling, and again he led them down, down to a musty cavernous place, walled with age-rusted steel, supported by rusted columns of steel hidden at the heart of thicker columns—stalagmites and stalactites formed about and buttressing the corroded metal.

"The old subway," Ware explained. "It goes for a quarter of a mile in that direction and nearly a mile in the other before cave-ins block it. All, you see, beneath the Human City—and most at a depth of more than one hundred and twenty feet. My lab's over here." It was set up on the concrete platform of a forgotten station.

"But here—strip off those wet things and stand before these heaters." Ware turned to a crude control panel, and a network of iron bars grew warm, hot,

then faintly red as a welcome heat poured out.

"Do we hide," asked Deya softly, "or frankly return?"

"If," said Ware sadly, "I knew how much longer this queer status of half-revealed-half-concealed revolt was going to continue before I could get somewhere, we might be in a better position to know what to do."

"Which makes me wonder, Ware. Half-concealed-half-revealed, I mean. The Mother's Cloaks have the goggles to make vision possible. I don't know what that blackness of yours is—beyond that it is infernally cold; I'm still congealed—but if no ray can pierce it, pray tell me how you see where you are going."

Ware looked up, laughing. "I don't. Yet I found my way across that swamp called the Garden of the Sarn more easily than you, tonight. The telepath is the answer—I see through others' eyes. The Mother told me where her cloaks were hidden." He nodded toward the truncated case. "Without her eyes—I'd never have seen to reach them."

"Perhaps," said Deya, "if we knew better what you have, and what you lack, we could help more efficiently."

"Perhaps," suggested Grayth grimly, "you can wash the blasted Sarn out of their city. Another such 'overcast night' and you may do it."

"The Sarn City's higher than we are." Ware smiled. "But our people do stand cold and wet better than theirs."

"But," said Deya, "it isn't practical—nor fast enough. What have you there? My slowly thawing bones give me a very personal interest in that cloak of yours."

WARE SIGHED gustily. "It's hard to explain. About ninety percent of it isn't in words, or explainable in words. It's a mathematical concept that has reality.

"Wherefore I will now give you a typical pre-Sarn analogy, because neither you nor Grayth can get pictures from mathematics. It's a language, you know—as much a language as the one we normally speak, or the Sarn language. Some terms you can translate, and some can't be. For instance, $x^2+y^2=c^2$ is mathematics language for 'circle.' I will give you analogies which I guarantee are not sound, and neatly conceal the truth. But I can't do any better.

"Dirac, a physicist of the pre-Sarn days, explained the positron as a hole in a continuum of electrons in negative energy states. Space, he said, was completely filled with electrons possessed of negative energies. It was full to the brim, and overflowed into the electrons we can detect—ordinary matter electrons.

"Shortly before the Sarn came, men were developing hints that there might be more to that. There was. Electrons in positive energy states, when vibrated, gave off radiation—light, heat, and so on. If you use energy concentrated enough, you can vibrate electrons in negative energy states. You might say they give off negative energy radiation. They produce photons of energy in negative energy states.

"As I said, it's an analogy that I can't honestly describe, but the effect is radiated negative energy. Radiant cold or radiant darkness or radiant lack-of-X-rays—whatever you want.

"Energy being conserved, of course, the result is that the source of that radiation, instead of consuming energy, gives it off. My pack does not radiate negative energy; it sets up a condition in the air about me that makes the air atoms radiate negative energy.

"The atomic flame the Mother turned on me satisfied, to some extent, the ravening demand for energy that negative energy setup caused. The force that makes the air atoms radiate in that

way makes them unstable—sort of splits them into two parts, two half-formed atoms of matter. In that state, neither half is real, but each has a terrible demand for sufficient mass—in the form of energy—to raise it to reality. In that median state, matter is interpenetrable. We walk through steel doors and stone floors, for instance. It will hang on that unstable point of half-and-half momentarily, before re-forming to matter. It's as dependable as a rattlesnake or a 'tame' tiger. While we're interpenetrating, it may fall off that delicate balance and consume our mass-energy in re-forming. When Sarn Guards send atomic flames after us, the unstable matter greedily drinks in the energy, and starts definitely toward re-forming with the air of that energy. If left alone, one half of the semiatoms absorb the other half, and it's normal again. In the meantime, it's black. And cold—like the Mother's Hall of Judgment right now.

"When the Mother's beams were tearing at me, the energy was actively making extra atoms of air. It didn't make any difference what kind of beam she used—the energy was consumed. Her atomic flame had lots of power—and made a lot of air. Her curious atom-disruption beam didn't carry much energy, but the particular form of the beam was most deadly. The form passed through my shield quite unchanged, theoretically. But the energy had been removed from it.

"Naturally, the Mother's physicists are badly puzzled now by a completely unanimous report of 'nothing' on the part of their instruments. None of them, of course, read below absolute zero. That shield has a temperature of $-55,000^\circ$. Absolute—or thereabouts.

"I could wipe out the Sarn very readily. But"—Ware shrugged his shoulders—"they'd wipe out all humans while I was at it."

"What do you need?"

"An hour," Ware sighed. "One hour—in the Sarn workshops. A few pounds of molybdenum, some wire-drawing apparatus, a few ounces of scandium and special glass-blowing machinery. Then I'd have a duplicate of this toy of mine that would protect this whole city for fifty miles about."

"In other words," said Grayth, smiling slightly, "if you could drive the Sarn out, you could drive them away."

"Precisely," acknowledged Ware. "Which is comforting, if useless."

DEYA RUBBED her left arm with her right hand thoughtfully, and turned sideways to the heater. "How far," she asked thoughtfully, "will your present apparatus reach?"

"That, too, is helpful." Ware grinned. "Just about far enough to blanket completely the Sarn City. I could protect that against any attack. But not, not by any means, the Human City."

"That might help, though." Deya nodded. "I have something in mind. My dress is dry, if somewhat crumpled. Could you get us something to eat, Ware? My chill has left me hungry."

"What's your thought?" asked Ware eagerly, half annoyedly. The telepaths did not carry thoughts the wearer wished to conceal.

"I . . . I'd rather talk with Grayth first." Deya shook her head slowly. "I may be wrong."

Resignedly, Ware went up the crude stairway, up to the kitchen of his cottage one hundred and fifty feet above. Deya looked at Grayth as each in turn pulled off the telepath.

Deya pulled on her dress, smoothing the still slightly damp crinkles down. "How is Simons, Grayth?"

Grayth looked at her in slight puzzlement, his shirt half on. "Hopeless, as you know—but why do you ask now? He could not help us, anyway."

Deya's lips set in a slight, tight smile, her eyes bright and thoughtful. "I'm

not so sure, Grayth. Not . . . so . . . sure. Ware has said that anything that he can run through an amplifier can be recorded, hasn't he? And if it can be recorded, it could be rebroadcast on a different wavelength, perhaps—"

Grayth started, went rigid. "By Aesir and all the gods of Earth! *Deya!* What fantastic idea have you now? That man is mad, horribly, loathsomely mad—"

"Negative energy," said Deya shortly, deft fingers arranging her hair. "If we could make the Sarn give up without fighting—in despair and hopelessness—And there are energies other than those purely physical ones that the Sarn are so thoroughly equipped to resist."

Grayth stood silent for a moment, his swift-working mind forgetting for the moment the task of driving his tired body. "You've talked with Dr. Wesson?" he asked intently.

Deya nodded slowly, "Yes—just this morning," then thought a moment before going on. "Or rather yesterday. It will be dawn in about three hours, if the storm has stopped. We should bring him here before then. You see what I have in mind?"

"Yes! I'll have Carron—"

Ware came down the steps, slowly, bearing two trays with bread and cheese and cold meat, some cups, cream and coffee. "If you will use those beakers for the water, the laboratory hot plates for a stove, Deya, I'd prefer your coffee to mine."

"Ware," asked Grayth tensely, "can you record a thought—a telepath thought?"

Ware stopped, brows suddenly furrowed. "Record it? Why? I've never tried—it's easier to think it again."

"Could it be done?"

"Hm-m-m . . . yes. I think so."

"How long to make the apparatus?" Grayth asked anxiously.

Ware hesitated. Shrugged. "A few

hours. I can make that. Telepath apparatus, because of its very nature, has to be tiny. A few grains of the hard-to-get elements go a long way when the whole apparatus is less than a cubic millimeter in volume. But it takes time. A recorder and reproducer—say, two days, once I get the design. I think . . . yes, I know I can do it.”

Grayth swept the telepath back to his head. Rapidly his thoughts drove out. —“Carron—Carron—”

“Yes?” Sleepily Carron responded to the call.

“It’s three hours to dawn. Carron—this must be done before the first people stir. Get Ohrman, the instrument maker, to Ware’s at once. There are telepaths to be made. Get Dr. Wesson and tell him to call at Ware’s. Then rouse one of the other men to receive and transmit my orders and get some sleep yourself.

“Now, Ware, draw out the plans for the parts you’ll need for that apparatus, so Ohrman can start while you get some sleep. Oh . . . you can, I assume, make some translator arrangement that will twist human thought to Sarn telepath levels?”

“Eh? Human to Sarn levels—I don’t know about that. I’ve been working on that problem on and off for weeks.”

“Good—it’ll be on, and no off, now. If you can do that, Ware, we win Earth again!”

IX.

THE THING was incredibly tiny. It lay in Ware’s palm, two small, inclosed reels connected by a bridge of bulging metal, the size, perhaps of a half peanut, between two slices of inch-thick steel rod. But the workmanship was wonderfully fine.

“This is only the reproducer,” Ware sighed. His eyes were red and weary. “The recorder is there. You said that needn’t be portable. And it records,

as you wanted, in Sarn-type bands from the human thoughts, on a silver ribbon. The ribbon is endless, and repeats as long as this little spring is wound.

“Now, may I ask what you want of it? I’ve concentrated so on this that no question could enter my mind, I think. How is recorded thought to dislodge the Sarn? By repeating, ‘Go away—go away,’ endlessly? Telepathic commands have no more force than words, you know.”

“Not if they are resisted,” Deya acknowledged. “But they can enter below conscious strength level. Do you want to see who—why—”

The stone above moved. Grayth and Deya and Ware looked up. Only the heavily sleeping, exhausted Ohrman remained unconscious of the intruder.

“Down, Simons,” said Dr. Wesson’s voice. There was a gentle urgency in it, a pitying yet firm tenderness. A pair of feet appeared, slowly, wearily, with an air of terrible, unending exhaustion—tired beyond all rest, misery and hopelessness subtly expressed in the dull, shambling descent of those heavy feet.

Loosely, miserably they came down the long flight, their mechanical, rhythmic drumming a muffled beat of defeat. The man came into view. His figure was lax, powerfully muscled arms and shoulders bent under a soul-deadening weight of overwhelming despair. Down—down—

“Down, Simons.” The doctor’s voice was weary with a queer despair caught somehow from that doom-weighted figure.

Ware turned slowly to look at Deya, at Grayth. “Who is he—Simons?”

THEY DID NOT answer, and he turned back to look at the figure that stood unmoving now beneath the powerful lights of this buried laboratory. His face was pale and lined, powerful with the strength drained from it, set

in a dead mask of uncaring despair. His eyes were black, black pits that looked without hope, or hope of hope, into the keen gray eyes of Aesir.

Ware felt something within him chill under the gaze of those eyes that no longer cared or hoped. The soul beyond them was not dead and longed for death. The lights of the bright room seemed cold and drear. Fatigue and hopelessness of the endless struggle against the overwhelming Sarn surged up in Ware, hopelessness and despair so deep he did not mind that the cause was lost before—

He tore his eyes away. "Deya—in the name of the gods, what—who—what is this thing!" he gasped.

"That is negative energy, Ware. That is the negative energy of the mind, the blackness of Aesir applied to all hope, all ambition. He is mad; he is a maniac depressive. He has no hope, no thought of escape from that negative hell of despair that is beyond despair. He is mad, for no sane mind could conceive that awful blackness, the hopelessness that is a positive, devouring force that infests his being.

"If ever his mind should start to mend, he will become a suicidal maniac, driven to kill himself in any way he can, at any horrible expense. He cannot think of that escape now. That is struggle, that is in itself a hope—and he has none. To conceive of death as an escape is to hope, to believe that something better can be.

"That is beyond him now, for hope—struggle—effort to escape—all involve a will that mind has lost.

"He is mad, Ware, because no mind can hold the terrible despair his thoughts now know and remain sane.

"Record his thoughts. Record them there on that silver ribbon. Record that hopelessness that knows no resistance, no will to struggle. Record it, and broadcast that through the Sarn City!"

X.

THE SARN-MOTHER sat motionless at the high window of her tower, dull eyes looking out over the Gardens of the Sarn. Rich cloaks and heavy blankets wrapped her—useless things. The cold seeped through to her bones and drank her warmth. The great chamber, windowed on every side, was darkened by a heavy gloom, chilled by a cold that had grown slowly through the hours and the days she had sat here, almost unmoving. The bleak, cold stone of the walls was damp with a cold sweat of moisture. Great heaters in the walls ran at red heat and the dark air drank their warmth. Magnificent atom-flame lamps rustled softly in the high ceiling; their faint, silken whisper mumbled meaningless in her ears, and their strong light had lost its sparkle. Some subtle change in the air made it seem gray and very cold.

The sun did not shine here. A cold, steady rain beat down on the Gardens below, ran endlessly over the clear windowpanes, stirring under vague, listless winds. The sun did not shine here. Through the fog of slowly dripping rain, beyond the limits of her gardens, the sun shone. It was brilliant there, she knew, a bright, hot sun sparkling in the bright clean air. It was June out there. The year was dead here, dead in a creeping, growing chill that burdened the land. The creeping, growing chill of—

That hellish thing of blackness. Almost, she felt angered at it, squatting there, dejected, black, unutterably woe-ful in the center of her Gardens. Or what had been her Gardens. It was a ravaged place now, plowed and harrowed by howling beams of atomic death, a shrieking incandescent effort to move that crouched thing of blackness. It had meant only the destruction of one slight spot of beauty in a dreary, cold world.

But that meant little, for there was

no beauty now, or ever would be again. Only the chill that stole the heat from the air, the walls, her tired old body and the subtle darkness that cut through the brilliance of the atom flames and left light without sparkle, colors that all tinged gray.

A finger stirred listlessly and pressed a control. No, it was over. Full heat. She had known that; what sense to try again what she had tried a thousand times before during these endless, sleepless days that changed only from one shade of gray to a deeper black.

Dull eyes looked at the sweating walls. Cold, stone walls. When had

then to learn that secret.

Time she had now; four thousand wheeling years. But now she could not learn; it eluded her dulled mind, and the weakened minds of the decadent race.

As Aesir eluded her, and squatted miserable in the midst of misery his works had brought.

She stirred. The cold worked through. Hot food, hot drinks—they warmed a moment, then added dead, cold mass to the chill within her. A deadness that, she knew now, had been within her before this glooming chill had made her more aware. Her Sarn



it ever been that she had ordered stone? Warm marbles of rose and green. Warm? The rose of dying day before night's chill. The green of endless arctic ice. It mocked her and drove its chill to her age-old body.

Age-old. Unending years that had wheeled and rolled while she waited, useless. Waited for the coming of her people, or when she might again seek in space. Useless years of fruitless attempts to learn that one, lost secret of speed bettering light's swift flight. Lost—lost with the ten trained Sarn that died those four thousand years gone in the blasting of this city once called New York. Too much else she'd had to do

were weak; the soft product of an easy world, too sanely organized to require of them sharp, sharpening competition in endeavor.

And she was old. Immortality she had, and everlasting youth of tissue. But the mind grew old and dull, the courses of its thoughts narrowed and chilled with years and millenniums that passed. She was never to recall that exact age—but what matter? A stupid thing. What mattered that she thought of it or not; the years had passed, they'd graved their mark and narrowing on her. And on her race.

They had weakened. Humankind had strengthened, grown with the years that

sapped the Sarn. Now, in her Gardens, that hunched figure of dejection squatted, chilling all her city, defying the minds of all the Sarn. It had been a matter of time, inevitable as the fated motion of the planets. And the time had come. The humans were the stronger.

THE DOOR behind her opened slowly, but her brooding eyes remained fixed on the far wall till the intruder moved before her gaze. Barken Thil. Once, the Mother had thought her brilliant, hoped this physicist might find the forgotten secret of the speed drive. Now her eight-foot figure was shrunken, dimmed by the fog and gloom that curled the air about them. "Yes?" The Mother spoke wearily.

"Nothing." The physicist shook her head. "It's useless, Mother of the Sarn. The blackness is there. No screen, no substance shuts it off. It registers no more than the cold we feel on our instruments; they tell us only what we know, that the air transmits less light, less heat. It is absorbed somehow, and yet does not warm thereby. A vacuum transmits energy as before—but we cannot live in vacua.

"Thard Nilo has gone mad. She sits on her stool and stares at the wall, saying: 'The sun is warm . . . the sun is bright. The sun is warm . . . the sun is bright!' She will not move save when we lead her. She does not resist—but she does not act."

"The sun—is warm," the Mother said softly. "The sun—is bright. The sun—never shines here now. But the sun is bright and hot and the air is clean and dry in Bish-Waln."

The tired eyes looked up slowly toward the lax figure of the physicist. "I . . . I think I will visit. Bish-Waln. Where the sun is hot and bright and the air—

"I have never been there; never in all the time Earth became ours, four

thousand years ago, have I left Sarn City. I have never seen Targlan of the ever-blue skies and the ever-white mountains. I have never seen Bish-Waln in the golden sands . . . the hot sands.

"I think that now, before humanity rises finally, I should like to see it. I think . . . yes, perhaps I will go."

TWO HOURS later, she roused herself to give orders, vaguely, and hours later to enter her ship. The chill leaked out of metal and crystal as from the cold, green stone. The stared blankly through the rain-washed windows as the gloom-crowned Gardens and the Sarn City dropped behind. One more ship rose slowly, listlessly behind her. Vaguely, she wondered that so few Sarn had been still there that these two ships could carry all.

For the first time in four thousand years she was leaving her city. For the first time in four thousand years no Sarn remained in Sarn City.

The clouds and gloom were suddenly below, a dull grayness that heaved and writhed like a living dome over Sarn City. June sunlight angled from the setting redness in the west across the Human City stirring vaguely there below. A warmth she had not known in six unending days shot through her ancient body, and a blissfulness of sleep lapped her as the ship accelerated strongly, confidently, toward the sparkling waters beyond, toward Bish-Waln, bright and hot in the golden Sahara.

Her eyes closed, and she did not see through the dissolving clouds to the black figure that slowly rose erect, nor to the ordered division of the Legion of Peace that marched toward the blank, silent windows of the Sarn Palace. Behind them came a loose group of work-clad men to disperse among the dead, lightless shops of this, the city that had marked the landing of the Sarn.