

Vandals of the Stars

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A livid flame flares across Space—and over Manhattan hovers Teuxical, vassal of Malfero, Lord of the Universe, who comes with ten thousand warriors to ravage and subjugate one more planet for his master.

Illustration:

Many planes and Zeppelins were circling around the mysterious visitant

IT came suddenly, without warning, and it brought consternation to the people of the world.

A filament of flame darted down the dark skies one moonless night and those who saw it believed, at first, that it was a meteor. Instead of streaking away into

oblivion, however, it became larger and larger, until it seemed as though some vagrant, blazing star was about to plunge into the earth and annihilate the planet and every vestige of life upon it. But then it drew slowly to a stop high up in the atmosphere, where it remained motionless, glowing white and incandescent against the Stygian background of the overcast skies.

In shape it resembled a Zeppelin, but its dimensions very apparently exceeded by far those of any flying craft that ever had been fabricated by the hand of man.

As it hung poised high up in the air it gradually lost its dazzling glow and became scarlet instead of white. Then, as it continued to cool, the color swiftly drained from it and, in a few minutes, it shone only with the dull and ugly crimson of an expiring ember. In a half-hour after it first had appeared its effulgence had vanished completely and it was barely visible to the millions who were staring up toward it from the earth.

It seemed to be suspended directly above Manhattan, and the inhabitants of New York were thrown into a feverish excitement by the strange and unprecedented phenomenon.

For it scarcely had come to a stop, and certainly it had not been poised aloft for more than a few minutes, when most of those who had not actually witnessed its sensational appearance were apprised of the inexplicable occurrence by the radiovision, which were scattered throughout the vast metropolis. In theaters and restaurants and other gathering places, as well as in millions of homes, a voice from the Worldwide Broadcasting Tower announced the weird visitant. And its image, as it glowed in the night, was everywhere transmitted to the public.

Only a short time after it first had been observed people were thronging rooftops, terraces, and streets, and gazing with awe and wonder at the great luminous object that was floating high above them.

There were those who thought that the world was coming to an end, and they either were dumb with fright or strident with hysteria. People with more judgment, and a smattering of scientific knowledge, dismissed the thing as some harmless meteorological manifestation that, while interesting, was not necessarily dangerous. And there were many, inclined to incredulity and skepticism, who believed that they were witnessing a hoax or an advertising scheme of some new sort.

But as the moments went by the world commenced to become stirred and alarmed by the reports which came over the radiovisors.

For powerful planes and metal-shelled Zeppelins had climbed swiftly aloft to investigate the incomprehensible Thing that was poised high above Manhattan, and almost unbelievable reports were being sent earthward.

Dirk Vanderpool had been sitting alone on the broad terrace of his apartment that occupied the upper stories of the great Gotham Gardens Building when he saw that streak of fire slip down against the darkness of the night.

For a moment he, too, had believed that he was watching a meteor, but, when he saw it come to a slow stop and hang stationary in the heavens, he rose to his feet with an exclamation of surprise.

For a while he gazed upward with an expression of astonishment on his face and then he turned as he heard someone walking softly in his direction. It was Barstowe, his valet, and the eyes of the man were alive with fear.

"What is that thing, Mr. Vanderpool?" he asked in a voice that trembled with alarm. Barstowe was a man of middle age, diminutive in size, and he had the appearance of being nearly petrified with terror. "They are saying over the televisior that—"

"What are they saying about it?" asked Dirk somewhat impatiently.

"That no one can explain what it is," continued Barstowe. "It must be something terrible, Mr. Vanderpool."

"Wheel out the luciscope," ordered Dirk.

Barstowe disappeared into the apartment and returned with a cabinet that was mounted on small, rubber-tired wheels. The top of it was formed of a metallic frame in which a heavy, circular, concave glass was fitted. The frame was hinged in front so that it could be raised from the rear and adjusted to any angle necessary to catch the light rays from any distant object. Within the cabinet the rays passed through an electrical device that amplified them millions of times, thus giving a clear, telescopic vision of the object on which the luciscope was focused.

This instrument, years before, had supplanted entirely the old-fashioned telescopes which not only had been immense and unwieldy but which also had a very limited range of vision.

Dirk adjusted the light-converger so that it caught the rays that were being emanated by the weird and shimmering mass that was suspended almost directly above the lofty terrace on which he was standing.

Then he switched on the current and glanced into the eye-piece of the apparatus. For several moments he remained silent, studying the image that was etched so vividly on the ground-glass within the luciscope.

"It is a queer thing, there is no doubt about that," he confessed when finally he raised his head. "It resembles a gigantic Zeppelin in shape but it does not seem to have any undercarriage or, as far as I can see, any indication of propellers or portholes. I would say, though, Barstowe, that it might be a ship from some other planet if it wasn't for the fact that it seems to be in an almost molten state."

Dirk again looked into the luciscope and then he made a few adjustments with a thumb-screw that projected from the side of the apparatus.

"It is up about forty thousand feet," he told Barstowe, "and it must be more than a half-mile in length. Probably," he added, "it is a planetary fragment of some odd composition that is less responsive to gravitation than the materials with which we are familiar. You will find, Barstowe, that there is nothing about it that science will not be able to explain. That will be all now," he concluded.

Barstowe walked over the terrace and disappeared into the apartment. Dirk, left alone, wheeled the luciscope over by the chair in which he had been sitting and near which a radiovisor was standing.

He switched on the latter and listened to the low but very distinct voice of the news-dispatcher.

"—and planes and Zeppelins now are starting up to investigate the strange phenomenon—"

Again Dirk placed an eye to the lens of the luciscope and once more the Thing leaped into his vision. The powerful machine brought it so close to him that he could see the heat waves quiver up from it.

The light that it radiated illuminated the night for thousands of feet and Dirk could see, by means of that crimson glare, that many planes and Zeppelins were circling around the mysterious visitant. None of them, however, approached the alien freak, the heat apparently being too intense to permit close inspection.

Dirk himself was tempted for a moment to jump into a plane and go up and take a look at the fiery mass.

But, after a moment's consideration, he decided, that it would be far more interesting and comfortable to remain right where he was and listen to the reports which were being sent down from above.

"—thus far there seems to be no cause for alarm, and people are advised to remain calm—careful observations of the luminous monster are being made and further reports concerning it will be broadcast—"

Dirk Vanderpool rose to his feet, walked to the coping of the terrace and peered into the magnascope that was set into the wall.

He saw that the street, far below him, was jammed with struggling people and the device through which he was looking brought their faces before him in strong relief. Dirk was deeply interested and, at the same time, gravely concerned as he studied the upturned countenances in the mob.

Fear, despair, reckless abandon, mirth, doubt, religious ecstasy and all the other nuances in the gamut of human emotions and passions were reflected in those distorted visages which were gazing skyward.

The silvery humming of a bell diverted his attention from the scene of congestion below him and, turning away, he walked across the terrace and into the great living room of his luxurious abode.

Stepping to the televisor, he turned a tiny switch, and the face of a girl appeared in the glass panel that was framed above the sound-box. He smiled as he lifted the receiver and placed it to his ear.

"What is the matter, Inga?" he asked. "You look as if you were expecting—well, almost anything disastrous."

"Oh, Dirk, what is that thing?" the girl asked. "I really am frightened!"

He could see by the expression in her blue eyes that she, too, was becoming a victim of the hysteria that was taking possession of many people.

"I wouldn't be alarmed, Inga," he replied reassuringly. "I don't know what it is, and no one else seems to be able to explain it."

"But it is frightful and uncanny, Dirk," the girl insisted, "and I am sure that something terrible is going to happen. I wish," she pleaded, "that you would come over and stay with me for a little while. I am all alone and—"

"All right, Inga," he told her. "I will be with you in a few minutes."

He hung up the receiver of the televisor and clicked off the switch. The image of the golden-haired girl to whom he had been speaking slowly faded from the glass.

Attiring himself for a short sixty-mile hop down Long Island, Dirk passed out to the landing stage and, stepping into the cabin of his plane, he threw in the helicopter lever. The machine rose straight into the air for a couple of hundred feet and then Dirk headed it westward to where the nearest ascension beam sent its red light towering toward the stars. It marked a vertical air-lane that led upward to the horizontal lanes of flight.

Northbound ships flew between two and four thousand feet; southbound planes between five and seven thousand feet; those eastbound confined themselves to the level between nine and eleven thousand feet, while the westbound flyers monopolized the air between twelve and fourteen thousand feet.

All planes flying parallel to the earth were careful to avoid those red beacons which marked ascension routes, and the shafts of green light down which descending planes dropped to the earth or into lower levels of travel.

When Dirk's altimeter indicated seventy-five hundred feet he turned the nose of his ship eastward and adjusted his rheostat until his motors, fed by wireless current, were revolving at top speed.

The great canyons of Manhattan, linked by arches and highways which joined and passed through various levels of the stupendous structures of steelite and quartzite, passed swiftly beneath him; and, after passing for a few minutes over the deserted surface of Long Island, he completed his sixty-mile flight and brought his ship to a rest on a landing stage that was far up on the side of a vast pile that rose up close to the shore of the Sound.

As soon as he stepped from the door of the cabin he was joined by a girl who, apparently, had been lingering there, awaiting his arrival.

She was perhaps twenty years old, and she had the golden hair, the light complexion, and the blue eyes which still were characteristic of the women of northern Europe.

The slender lines of her exquisite figure and the supple grace which she displayed when she moved toward Dirk were evidence, however, of the Latin blood which was in her veins.

For Inga Fragoni, the daughter and heiress of Orlando Fragoni, seemed to be a culmination of all of the desirable qualities of the women of the south and those of the north.

The terrace on which Dirk had landed was illuminated by lights which simulated sunshine, and their soft bright glow revealed the violet hue of her eyes and the shimmering gloss of her silken hair. She wore a sleeveless, light blue tunic which was gathered around her waist with a bejeweled girdle.

On her tiny feet she wore sandals which were spun of webby filaments of gold and platinum.

"Dirk, I am so glad that you are here!" she exclaimed. "I felt so much alone when I called you up. Dad is locked in the observatory with Professor Nachbarn and three or four other men and the servants—well, they all are so terrified that it simply alarms me to have them around."

"But that is Stanton's plane there, isn't it?" asked Dirk, indicating a powerful looking machine that stood on the terrace.

"Yes, Dirk," the girl replied. "He arrived here three or four minutes before you did. I thought, at first, that it was you coming. And Dirk," she continued, with a note of excitement in her voice, "he flew up to look at that thing, and I know that he is as frightened about it as I am."

Dirk grunted, but he gave no expression of the dislike and distrust that Stanton aroused in him. The latter, he knew, was very much inclined to look with favor on Inga, and his presumption annoyed Dirk because, while he and the girl had not

declared their intention of living together, they were very much in love with each other.

"You will want to hear him tell about it, I know, Dirk," the girl said. "I left Stanton up on the garden terrace when I saw you coming down. Come; we will go and join him."

Dirk and Inga strolled slowly along paths which were lined with exotic shrubbery and plants. Here and there a fountain tossed its glittering spray high into the air while birds, invisible in the feathery foliage, warbled and thrilled entrancingly. Soft music, transmitted from the auditoriums below, blended so harmoniously with the atmosphere of the terraces that it seemed to mingle with and be a part of the drifting, subtle scents of the abundant flowers which bloomed on every side.

For these upper terraces of Fragoni's palace were enclosed, during inclement weather, with great glass plates which, at the touch of a button, automatically appeared or disappeared.

Winding their way easily upward, Dirk and Inga came finally to a secluded terrace which overlooked the Sound. Here they saw Stanton, who was unaware of their approach, looking skyward at the dim and sinister shape which was outlined against the sky. Stanton's brow was contracted and his expression was filled with apprehension. He started suddenly when he became conscious of the presence of Dirk and the lovely daughter of Fragoni.

He rose to his feet, a short man in his forties, stocky in build and somewhat swarthy in complexion. He contrasted very unfavorably with Dirk, who was tall and well-built and who had abundant blond hair and steady steel-blue eyes.

"What do you make of that thing, Vanderpool?" he asked, almost ignoring the presence of Inga.

"I don't know enough about it yet to be able to express an opinion," Dirk replied. "We will find out about it soon enough," he added, "so why worry about it in the meantime?"

"It is well enough to affect such an attitude," said Stanton, with a touch of sarcasm in his voice, "but let me tell you, Vanderpool, that there is good reason to worry about it."

Dirk frowned at the statement as he saw a shadow pass over the fair face of Inga.

"That thing up there," continued Stanton, with conviction in his voice, "is not a natural phenomenon. I flew fairly close to it in my plane and I know what I am speaking about. That thing is some sort of a monster, Vanderpool, that is made of metal or of some composition that is an unearthly equivalent of metal. It is a diabolical creation of some sort that has come from out of the fathomless depths of the universe." He shuddered at the fantasy that his feverish imagination was creating. "It is metal, I tell you," he continued, "but it is metal that is endowed with some sort of intelligence. I was up there," he breathed swiftly, "and I saw it hanging there in the sky, quivering with heat and life."

"You are nervous, Stanton," said Vanderpool coolly. "Get a grip on yourself, man, and look at the thing reasonably. If that thing has intelligence," he added, "we will find some way to slay it."

"Slay it!" exclaimed Stanton. "How can you expect to slay a mad creation that can leap through space, from world to world, like a wasp goes darting from flower to flower? How can you kill a thing which not only defies absolute zero but also the immeasurable heat which its friction with the atmosphere generated when it plunged toward the earth? How can you kill a thing that seems to have brains and nerves and bones and flesh of some strange substance that is harder and tougher than any earthly compound we have discovered?"

He stopped speaking for a moment. They listened to the voice that was broadcasting from the Worldwide Tower.

"—our planes have approached to within a few thousand feet of it and are playing their searchlights over the surface of the leviathan. It is not a meteorite of any kind that scientists have heretofore examined—its surface is smooth and unpitted and shows no apparent effect of the tremendous heat to which it was subjected during its drop through the atmosphere. It seems to be immune to gravity—its weight must be tremendous, and it is fully three-quarters of a mile long and between seven and eight hundred feet in diameter at its widest part, but it lies motionless—motionless—at about forty thousand feet."

"It doesn't appear now as if it would prove very dangerous," remarked Dirk.

"—and people are warned again to maintain their composure and to go to their homes and remain there for their own protection and the protection of others. Riots and serious disturbances are reported from cities in all parts of the world—mobs are swarming the streets of Manhattan and the other boroughs of New York, and the police are finding it difficult to restrain the frenzied populations in other centers..."

There was a pause, then, of some moments, and then the voice of the broadcaster, vibrant with excitement, was heard again.

"—a plane has made a landing on the surface of the monstrosity, which, it seems, has not only lost its heat but is becoming decidedly cold—"

A servant appeared from among the shrubbery and paused before Dirk.

"There is a call for you, Mr. Vanderpool," he said respectfully.

Dirk excused himself and, entering the sumptuous apartment that opened from the terrace, went to the televisor. He saw the face of Sears, the chief secretary of Fragoni, in the glass panel.

"There will be a meeting of the council at nine o'clock in the morning, Mr. Vanderpool," came the voice over the wire.

"Thank you, Sears," replied Dirk. "It happens that Stanton is here at the present time. Shall I notify him of the conclave?"

"If you will, please," Sears responded. "By the way, Mr. Vanderpool, is there anything wrong at your apartment? I tried to call you there before I located you here and I failed to get any response."

"I guess that all of my servants have run out from under cover because of their fear of that thing in the sky," Dirk responded. "Do you know anything about it, Sears?" he asked.

"It will be discussed at the meeting to-morrow morning," replied Sears shortly. "Good night, Mr. Vanderpool."

Dirk, upon returning to the terrace, saw that both Stanton and Inga were silently and fearfully looking up into the night.

"A meeting of the council at nine o'clock in the morning, Stanton," Dirk said abruptly. "I told Sears I would notify you."

"I thought that we would be called together very soon," said Stanton. "It's concerning that damn thing up there."

"Perhaps," agreed Dirk carelessly. "Well," he added, "I believe that I will hop home and get some sleep."

"Sleep!" exclaimed Stanton. "Sleep? On a night like this?"

"Oh, Dirk," pleaded Inga, "stay here with me, won't you? I am not going to bed because I just know that I wouldn't be able to close my eyes."

"Let him go, Inga, if he wants to sleep," urged Stanton. "I will stay here and keep watch with you."

"—and if order is not restored in the streets of Manhattan within the course of a short time, the authorities will resort to morphite gas to quell the turbulence and rioting—"

"The streets must be frightfully congested," said Inga. "It is the first occasion in a long time that the police have had to threaten the use of morphite."

"—we do not want to alarm people unnecessarily but we have to report," came the hurried voice of the broadcaster, *"that the monstrous mass that has been hanging above the city just made a sudden drop of five thousand feet and again came to a stop. It is now a little more than six miles over Manhattan and—again it has dropped. This time it fell like a plummet for twelve thousand feet. It is now about twenty thousand feet, some four miles, above Manhattan and—"*

A cry of alarm came from the lips of Inga as she gazed upward and saw that gigantic, ominous-appearing object loom dim and vast in the darkness above them.

She went to Dirk and threw her arms around him, as if she were clinging to him for protection.

"Don't leave me, Dirk," she whispered. "I can just feel that something terrible is going to happen, and I want you with me!"

"I'll stay with you, of course," whispered Dirk. Something of that feeling of dread and apprehension which so fully possessed his two companions entered into his mind. "Don't tremble so, Inga," he pleaded. "It is a strange thing, but we will know more about it in the morning. Be calm until then, my dear, if you can."

He looked over the shoulder of the girl, whose face was buried against his breast, and he saw a hundred great red and green shafts of light shooting up into the air. Fleeting shadows seemed to pass swiftly up and down them, and he knew that thousands of planes were abroad, some of them seeking the heights and others dropping down.

The great towers of Long Island were all aglow, and it was apparent that few people were sleeping that night. The scarlet sky over Manhattan indicated that the center of the metropolis, too, was alive to the menace of the weird visitant that now was so plainly visible.

All night long they remained on the terrace. Dirk and Inga seated close together and Stanton, at a distance, brooding alone over the disaster which he felt was impending.

The illuminated dial of the great clock that was a part of the beacon-tower on the Metropole Landing Field told of the slow passing of the hours.

All night long they listened to the reports that came through the radiovisor and watched that immobile, threatening monster of metal.

But it remained static during the rest of the night. And, with the coming of a gray and sunless dawn, it still hung there, motionless, silent and sinister.

The next morning the President of the United States of the World, from the capitol at The Hague, issued a proclamation of martial law, to become effective at once in all parts of the world.

The edict forbade people to leave their homes, and it was vigorously executed, wherever the police themselves were not in a state of demoralization.

At about the same time a special meeting of the Supreme Congress was called, the body to remain in session until some solution of the mystery had been arrived at.

At the same time that martial law was declared, however, and the special assemblage of lawmakers convened, a statement was issued in which an attempt was made to eliminate from the minds of the people the idea that the undefinable object above the metropolis was at all dangerous.

It was, indeed, suggested that it very probably was some sort of new device which had been constructed on the earth and which was being introduced to the people of the world in a somewhat sensational manner by the person or persons who were responsible for it.

The fears of the populace were, to some extent, allayed by this means, and some degree of order restored.

At nine o'clock Dirk Vanderpool was shown into the council chamber in the palace of Orlando Fragoni, and he was closely followed by Stanton. Fragoni was already there, and he greeted the two men with a countenance that was serene but that, nevertheless, revealed indications of concern. He was a man past middle age, tall and strikingly handsome in appearance. His eyes were dark and penetrating and his forehead, high and wide, was crowned by an abundance of snow-white hair. His voice, while pleasing to the ear, was vibrant with life and energy, and he spoke with the incisive directness of one accustomed to command.

For Orlando Fragoni, as nearly as any one man might be, was the ruler of the world.

It was in the early part of the twentieth century that wealth had commenced to concentrate into a relatively few hands. This was followed by a period in which vast mergers and consolidations had been effected as a result of the financial power and genius for organization which a few men possessed. A confederation of the countries of the world was brought about by industrial kings who had learned, in one devastating war, that militarism, while it might bring riches to a few, was, in the final analysis, destructive and wasteful.

Mankind the world over, relieved of the menace of war, made more progress in a decade than they had made in any previous century, but all the time the invisible concentration of power and money continued.

And, in 1975, the affairs of the world were controlled by five men, of whom Orlando Fragoni was the most powerful and most important.

His grandfather had been a small banker, and out of his obscure transactions the great House of Fragoni had arisen. The money power of the world was now controlled by Orlando Fragoni. Dirk Vanderpool, partly as a result of a vast

inheritance and partly through his own ability and untiring industry, dominated the transportation facilities of the world. Planes and Zeppelins, railroad equipment and ships, were built in his plants and operated by the many organizations which he controlled.

Stanton had inherited the agricultural activities of the world and, in addition to this, he was the sovereign of distribution. He owned immense acreages in all of the continents; he not only cultivated every known variety of produce, but also handled the sale of his products through his own great chains of stores. His father had been one of the great geniuses of the preceding generation, but Stanton, while inheriting the commercial empire which he had ruled, had not inherited much of the ability which had gone into the establishment of it.

There were two other members of that invisible council of Five, the very existence of which was not even suspected by the general populace of the world.

Sigmund Lazarre was the world's mightiest builder, and millions of great structures, which were built of material from his own mines, were under his control. It was Lazarre, too, who owned the theaters and other amusement centers in which millions upon millions of people sought relaxation every day. The creation and application of electrical power made up the domain of Wilhelm Steinholt, who also owned the factories that made the machinery of the world.

Absolute control of all of the necessities and luxuries of life, in fact, were in the hands of the five men, who used their vast power wisely and beneficently.

Ostensibly the peoples of the world ruled themselves by means of a democratic form of government.

In reality their lives were directed by a few men whose power and wealth were entirely unsuspected by any but those who were close to them.

The council room in which Fragoni had received Dirk and Stanton was lofty and sumptuously appointed.

The rugs which covered the floor were soft to the tread, and the walls and ceiling were adorned with a series of murals which represented the various heavenly constellations.

At the far end of the chamber there was a staircase, and Dirk was among those who knew that it led up to the great observatory in which Fragoni and certain of his scientific associates spent so much of their time at night.

For men had commenced to talk about the conquest of the stars, and it was generally believed that it would not be many years more before a way would be found to traverse the interplanetary spaces.

"We are rather fortunate, my friends," Fragoni said to his two associates, "to have been the witnesses of the event that transpired last night."

"Fortunate!" exclaimed Stanton. "Then you know that the thing is harmless?"

A little smile lit the benign and scholarly countenance of Fragoni as he calmly regarded Stanton.

"We know very little about it," he replied after a brief pause, "and, if our surmises are correct, it may be very far from harmless. It is intensely interesting, nevertheless," he continued, "because that thing, as you term it, unquestionably is directed by intelligence. Without the slightest doubt the people of the earth are about to behold a form of life from some far-away planet. What that form will be,"

he added, with an almost imperceptible shrug of his shoulders, "it is impossible to forecast."

"But it was so hot," commenced Stanton, "that—"

"True," agreed Fragoni, "but it also is large and it may be that only the outer shell of it was effected by friction with the atmosphere that surrounds the earth. Nachbaren," he continued, "is certain that there is intelligent life within it; and Nachbaren," he added dryly, "is usually right."

While Fragoni had been speaking, two more men had quietly joined them.

"Good morning, Lazarre," Fragoni said, addressing a short, swarthy man who, very apparently, was of Jewish extraction.

"Good morning," the other replied in a soft and mellifluous voice. "It seems," he continued, with a twinkle in his eyes, "as if some of my pretty buildings may be toppled over soon."

"Maybe," agreed Fragoni. "And maybe," he added more seriously, "much more than your buildings will be toppled over, Lazarre."

"That thing, then, is...?" questioned the heavy-set, slow-speaking, blue-eyed Teuton who had come into the room with Lazarre.

"We do not know, Steinholt," admitted Fragoni, "but our knowledge undoubtedly will be increased considerably within the next few hours. And now," he said, "we will consider the problem at hand."

"—*the object which has created such unrest is slowly rising. It is now some twenty-five thousand feet above Manhattan. It is—*"

The voice from the radiovisor attracted the attention of the five men, and, with one accord, they rushed to the terrace and looked toward Manhattan. They saw the great leviathan high in the air for a moment, and then, suddenly, it seemed to vanish from sight.

"It's gone!" exclaimed Stanton, with a sigh of relief. "It must have been some odd atmospheric freak, that's all."

They searched the skies through the luciscope that was on the terrace, but failed to detect any trace of the monster.

"That seems to simplify matters," remarked Fragoni as they again walked back into the great conference room. But here, once more, they heard the voice from the Worldwide Tower.

"—*we are advised by Chicago that the thing, dull-red with heat, is hovering only a couple of thousand feet over the city. Thousands in the streets are being killed by the heat it is radiating—panic reigns, despite a rigorous enforcement of martial law. The strange object just rose suddenly to a high altitude and disappeared—*"

"It's another one of those damned things," asserted Stanton. "That couldn't go a thousand miles a minute!"

"It can go faster than that, if I am not mistaken," said Fragoni. And it presently appeared that he was right, for in a couple of minutes the radiovisor transmitted the news that it was over San Francisco, where it remained for only a few seconds. It was not more than a minute later that word came from Shanghai that it had passed slowly over that city. Then again it was poised high over Manhattan, crimson with heat.

"Is there any possible defense against it, Steinholt?" Fragoni asked. The Teuton shook his head with an air of finality.

"None," he said, "as far as I can determine now. We can create and direct artificial lightning that would reduce this building to a mass of powdered stone and fused metal in a fraction of a second. But I am certain that it wouldn't leave as much as a scratch on that monster up there. We might try the Z-Rays on it, but an intelligence that could devise such a craft would undoubtedly have the wisdom to protect it against such an elementary menace as rays. Even the mightiest explosives that we have wouldn't send a tremor through that mighty mass."

"Why not await developments?" asked Dirk. "We do not even know the nature of the thing we are trying to combat."

"It's solid metal," insisted Stanton tenaciously. "It's a metal body with a metal brain."

"Don't be ridiculous," said Steinholt. "It seems quite apparent that the craft has come from another planet, and, if I am not greatly mistaken, there are intelligent creatures inside it."

"In any event," said Dirk, "it seems impractical to make any plans until we know more about it. I suggest that we empower Fragoni to act for the rest of us in this matter."

"That is very agreeable to me," said Steinholt. "A crisis very possibly may arise in which the quick judgment of one man may be necessary to avert the danger that always is inherent in delay."

"You hold my proxy," Lazarre said to Fragoni, "and I assume that Stanton is agreeable to this procedure."

"—the thing is moving very slowly eastward in the direction of Long Island Sound. It is, at the same time, losing altitude. Its movements are being carefully watched. As yet we see no cause for immediate alarm—people are advised to remain calm—"

"Yes, I am agreeable," said Stanton nervously and hastily. "If there are things in it with which we can compromise, I would suggest that we do not offend them."

"I am, then, empowered to act for all of you," said Fragoni, ignoring the suggestion of Stanton.

He rose from his chair and walked out on the terrace. The others followed after him.

Looking westward, they saw the mammoth craft descending slowly in their direction.

Its vast dimensions became more and more apparent as, spellbound, they watched it approach closer and closer to them.

The thing in the sky was now not more than three thousand feet above them and only a few miles to the westward.

The observers on the terrace regarded it for a moment in silence as it drifted forward and downward.

"It's colossal!" Steinholt then exclaimed, lost in scientific admiration of the mammoth craft. "Magnificent! Superb!"

"But it's coming right toward us!" cried Stanton.

"What makes it move, I wonder?" asked Dirk. "And how in the world is it controlled?"

"It surely is not of this world," said Fragoni quietly. "That gigantic thing has come to us from somewhere out of the infinite and terrible depths of space."

Another minute elapsed while they watched it, speechless with wonder.

"Do you know," Lazarre then said calmly, "I believe that it is going to land in the waters of the Sound. It appears so to me, anyway."

It was nearly opposite them by this time, and not more than a thousand feet above the water. A few planes which, very apparently, were being flown by intrepid and fearless flyers, were hovering close around it.

Then finally it came to rest, as Lazarre had predicted, in the water some two miles off shore, and it was obscured by a great cloud of vapor for several minutes.

"Steam," asserted Steinholt. "That trip around the world, which it made in a few minutes, generated considerable frictional heat in the shell."

"Come," said Fragoni, "we'll fly out and look the thing over."

Around the corner of the building, on the level of the terrace, there was a landing stage which was occupied by a number of planes of various sizes.

Dirk entered the door of a small twenty passenger speedster, and the others filed in after him.

"Ready?" he asked, after he had seated himself at the controls.

"Ready!" replied Fragoni.

The plane rose straight up into the air and then darted gracefully out over the Sound.

Dirk swooped straight down at the leviathan which lay so quietly on the surface of the Sound and then slowly circled around it. No sign of an aperture of any sort could be seen in the craft. Then he dropped the plane lightly on the water, close to the metallic monster, which towered fully four hundred feet above them, despite the fact that more than half of it was submerged.

"It must be hollow," remarked Steinholt, "or it wouldn't be so far out of the water. In fact, it most certainly would sink, if it was solid."

At the touch of a lever which lay under one of Dirk's hands the plane rose straight out of the water, and he maneuvered it directly over the top of the strange enigma. Then he touched a button and the pontoons were drawn up into the undercarriage of the craft.

"Shall I make a landing on it?" he asked, turning his head and addressing Fragoni.

The latter nodded his head, and Dirk dropped the ship gently onto the smooth surface of the monster, the pneumatic gearing completely absorbing the shock of the landing.

Dirk relinquished the controls and, opening the door of the cabin, he stepped out onto the rough and pitted substance of which the leviathan was compounded. He stood there while the others came out after him.

A large area on the top of the monster was perfectly flat and, within a very few moments, Dirk discovered that it was decidedly warm. He had brought the plane down close to the middle of the length of the strange craft in the belief that there, if anywhere, some indication of an entrance might be found.

The voice of Steinholt, tense with suppressed excitement, appraised him that his surmise had been correct.

"There is a manhole of some sort," the electrical wizard exclaimed. "And look, it is turning!"

They saw, not far ahead of them, a circular twelve-foot section of the deck slowly revolving, and, even as they watched, it commenced to rise slowly upward as the threads with which it was provided turned gradually around.

Almost involuntarily they retreated a few feet and stood there, spellbound, as they stared at the massive, revolving section of the deck.

It continued to turn until fully ten feet of the mobile cylinder had been exposed. Then the bottom of it appeared. Even then it continued to revolve and rise on a comparatively small shaft which supported it and, at the same time, thrust it upward. Dirk and his companions kept their eyes on the rim of the well which had been exposed, and awaited the appearance of something, they knew not what. When the top of the great cylinder was fully twelve feet above the deck of the craft it slowly ceased to revolve.

Moment succeeded moment as the members of the little group rigidly and almost breathlessly awaited developments.

Then Dirk, with an impatient ejaculation, stepped forward toward the yawning hole and cautiously peered over the edge of it.

He stood there for a moment, as if transfixed, and then, with an exclamation of horror, retreated swiftly to where his friends were standing.

"What is it?" gasped Steinholt. "What did you see when—"

But the words died on his lips for, swarming swiftly over every side of the well, there poured an array of erect, piercing-eyed beings, who had all the characteristics of humans. They were clad in tight-fitting attire of thin and pliant metal which, with the exception of their faces, shielded them from head to foot. On their heads they wore close-fitting helmets, apparently equipped with visors which could be drawn down to cover their unprepossessing features.

Each one of them carried a tube which bore a striking resemblance to a portable electric flashlight.

Swiftly they advanced, in ranks of eight, toward Dirk and his companions who, gripped with amazement, held their positions.

The first line came to a halt not more than four feet from the little group on the deck. The other lines halted, too, and formed a great platoon. Then a shrill whistle sounded and the formation parted in the middle, leaving an open path that led backward to the entrance, to the well.

A moment later the watchers saw the regal figure of a man emerge from the orifice and, after a moment's pause, advance slowly in their direction with a stately stride.

He was tall and muscular and blond and his attire, golden in texture, glittered with sparkling gems.

As he approached them he raised his right hand and, inasmuch as his countenance was calm and benign, his gesture appeared to be one of peace and good-will.

Following close behind him there was a younger man who, very apparently, was of the same lineage. His expression, however, was petulant and haughty and it contained more than a suggestion of rapacity and evil.

Behind him there were others of the same fair type, all of them sumptuously and ornately attired.

Fragoni stepped forward, himself a dignified and striking figure, as the leader of the strange adventurers came forth from the lane that had been formed by his immobile guard of warriors.

The two men confronted each other, one whose power and wealth gave him a dominate position on earth, and the other a personage from some domain that was remote in the abyss of space.

Fragoni bowed and spoke a few friendly words of welcome and the stranger, to the utter amazement of the banker and his associates, responded in an English that was rather peculiar in accent but that they could understand without any difficulty.

"From what part of the world do you come," asked the astounded Fragoni, "that you speak our language?"

"We come from no part of this world," replied the stranger. "The empire of my ruler is infinitely far away. But language, my friend, is not a thing of accident. Life grows out of the substance of the universe and language comes out of life. The speech of mankind, in your state of development, varies but little throughout all space and I have heard your English, as you call it, spoken among those who dwell in many, many worlds."

"And your world?" asked Steinholt with avid curiosity. "Tell us of the planet from which you come."

But Fragoni, smiling at the eagerness of Steinholt, interposed with a kindly but arresting gesture.

"My name is Fragoni," he said to the stranger, "and I would have you partake, of my hospitality and refresh yourself after your long journey. These," he added, "are my friends, Steinholt, Vanderpool and Lazarre."

"I am Teuxical, vassal of his Supreme Highness, Malfero of Lodore," the other replied. "This is my son, Zitlan," he continued, indicating the young man behind him, "and the others are my high captains, Anteucan, Orzitza and Huazibar. More of my officers are below together with ten thousand armed and armored men such as you see before you."

If the last part of the statement was intended as a threat or a warning, the expression on Fragoni's face gave no indication that he was aware of it.

"You carry a large crew, sir," Fragoni replied, "but we gladly will make provisions for all of your men. As for yourself, your son, and your captains, if you will come with me...."

He nodded in the direction of the plane which rested on the great interplanetary vessel and started to walk slowly in the direction of it. The leader of the skymen walked by his side and the other men from Lodore followed close after them.

Dirk, Steinholt and Lazarre brought up the rear, while the soldiers remained motionless in their serried array.

Innumerable planes were circling overhead and hundreds of them had landed on the water in the vicinity. Dirk saw that the wanderers from the stars regarded them curiously as if they never before had seen aircraft of that particular type.

When the cabin door of the plane was thrown open, Teuxical turned to one of his captains.

"Remain here, Anteucan, with the soldiers," he commanded, "and await our return."

Teuxical then entered the plane with his men and Fragoni, Steinholt and Lazarre followed after them. Then Dirk took his seat at the controls.

"These are strange craft you use," he heard Teuxical say. "I have seen them in only one of the multitude of other worlds on which I have set my feet, worlds which all pay tribute to Malfero of Lodore. It is safer and swifter to ride the magnetic currents than it is to ride the unstable currents of the air."

Dirk caught the significance of the reference to tribute and he admired the clever diplomacy of Teuxical while, at the same time, he wondered if the earth and all of those who dwelt upon it were doomed to fall under the sway of some remote and unseen despot.

He also realized that the Lodorians had, in some way, devised a craft that rode the great magnetic streams which flowed through the universe in much the same way that men, in ships, navigated the streams of the earth.

He threw on the helicopter switch and the plane rose swiftly into the air, the myriad other flying craft which were circling nearby keeping at a safe distance from it.

"Land on the grand terrace," Fragoni directed. The flight was short and rapid and it was only a matter of seconds before Dirk brought the plane down on the landing stage which they had left only a scant half-hour before.

He opened the cabin door and stepped out of the plane and the others filed out after him.

Fragoni led the way along the stage, walking and chatting with Teuxical, and Dirk, following after the others, was the last to turn a corner that brought him a sweeping view of the magnificent terrace that fronted the private apartments of the banker and his daughter.

And, when he did, he saw that Inga was standing there, superbly beautiful, with Stanton a few paces behind her.

Her lovely eyes were alive with awe and wonder and her slender white hands were crossed over her heart.

And Dirk saw, too, that Zitlan, son of Teuxical, had paused and was standing quite still, with his unwavering and insolent eyes fixed on the girl. Resentment, and a touch of apprehension, agitated Dirk when he saw the expression on the face of the young Lodian.

There was admiration in that disagreeable countenance, but it was blended with arrogance, haughtiness and ill-concealed desire.

Dirk went quickly to Inga, standing between the girl and the one from Lodore who was staring at her so brazenly.

"What does it all mean, Dirk?" she asked in a low voice. "Those strange people, where are they from?"

Stanton had come quickly forward and had joined Inga and Dirk.

"They are from some far-off world, Inga," he explained, "that we know nothing about as yet."

"But what do they want?" she persisted. "What do they intend to do? I saw those horrible creatures through the magnascope when they came swarming out of the inside of that thing on the water and I thought, at first, that they were going to kill you all."

"No, they seem to come in peace," Dirk replied. "Teuxical, their leader, seems to be gracious and kindly."

"We are all doomed," asserted Stanton, "unless something happens. They can crumble our cities with heat and bury us under the ruins of them."

"Keep your silence!" breathed Dirk, quietly but tensely. "We will find a way to destroy those creatures if it becomes necessary."

"That man who keeps staring at me, who is he?" asked Inga in a voice that betrayed her nervousness.

Dirk turned and saw that Zitlan was still standing where he had paused and that he still was looking with searching eyes in the direction of the girl.

He returned the insolent gaze of the young Lodian with an impatient and threatening stare and the countenance of Zitlan at once became stern and menacing. He came striding in the direction of Inga, Dirk and Stanton and paused within a few feet of them, his rapacious eyes still fixed on the girl.

"My lady," he said, "your beauty pleases me. I have walked on many worlds but never before have I seen one as lovely as yourself. Of the spoils of this world, all that I crave possession of is you. When we return to Lodore," he added with an air of finality, "I will take you with me and place you with my other women in the Seraglio of the Stars."

Dirk swiftly stepped close to Zitlan and the latter quickly clasped a tube that hung at his side, a tube of the sort that the soldiers had carried.

"Your words and your manner are insolent," asserted Dirk angrily, "and I warn you now to cease making yourself offensive."

"Dog!" exclaimed Zitlan fiercely, leveling the metal tube, "I'll—"

But the left fist of Dirk cut short his threat as it made a sudden impact with his chin, and the Lodian went crashing backward into some exotic shrubbery with a look of surprise on his countenance.

Then Dirk heard an odd hissing and crackling sound, and he felt himself becoming dizzy and weak.

Darkness seemed to sweep in upon him; he felt that he was dropping swiftly through space, and then he lost consciousness.

A vague and shadowy figure was standing close by his side and peering down into his face. After a while he realized that it was Steinholt.

"Steinholt!" he gasped. "Why—why am I here—in Fragoni's? I must have had a dream—and yet..."

He furrowed his brow in thought and, gradually, he commenced to remember what had happened.

"It was no dream," said the scientist softly. "Do you remember the trouble that you had with Zitlan?"

"Yes," replied Dirk. "I remember that he was insolent to Inga and that I lost my temper and struck him. But what happened to me? I don't recall that anybody hit me. I did hear sort of a peculiar sound just before I started to pass out, but—"

"Teuxical took a shot at you," said Steinholt, "and you have been unconscious for over thirty-six hours."

"Took a shot at me!" exclaimed Dirk. "What did he shoot me with?"

"That is what we all would like to know," said Steinholt. "He leveled one of those damn tubes at you and pressed a button on it. There was a hissing sound, a flash

of light, and you got groggy, and went out. He potted Zitlan, too," continued Steinholt, "and he apologized for the trouble that his son was responsible for. Do you know," he added, "I sort of like the old man."

Lazarre, with a sympathetic smile on his face, entered the room at that moment and overheard the conversation.

"Old man is right," he remarked, with a little note of awe in his voice. "Teuxical admits that he is three thousand years old and that he has at least two thousand more ahead of him. That Lodore must be a queer world," he commented, shaking his grizzly head.

"It is not so queer when you take everything into consideration," said Steinholt. "It seems quite natural when Teuxical explains it. Lodore it seems, is something like a hundred thousand times as big as this miniature world we live on. It took Lodore infinitely longer to solidify from a gaseous state than it took this world, and its entire evolution has been relatively slower than ours. Therefore, according to Teuxical, the people up there live longer and, incidentally, know infinitely more than we do."

"What time is it now?" asked Dirk, after a moment of thought.

"It is just about twelve o'clock at night," Steinholt informed him.

"Have these Lodorians made any demands yet?" Dirk asked. "Does anybody know what they are going to do or what they want?"

"They are liable to do almost anything," said Lazarre, "and it looks as though they will be able to get anything that they want. Teuxical, as I understand it, just gave you a slight shock with his death-ray device. If he had pulled the trigger all the way you would have become just a little pile of dust that the first breeze would have blown away."

"Our own death-rays are somewhat similar," said Steinholt, "but they are not a hundredth as powerful. And they won't work on the Lodorians, either," he added, "because those metal sheaths that they wear make them immune to all kinds of destructive rays."

"It appears," remarked Lazarre morosely, "as if this little world of ours is going to be taken for a ride. And it's too bad, considering that it's the only world we've got. There has been no formal presentation of demands yet, but it seems to be sort of understood that the earth is going to become a tributary of Lodore. It is a good thing," he added, "that Teuxical, and not Zitlan, is the boss of that outfit. I don't like the looks of that young fellow. He's only twelve hundred years old and he is sort of hot-blooded, I guess."

"I was talking with Anteucaan," said Steinholt, "and he told me that the Lodorians usually make heavy levies on worlds which they discover and dominate. As soon as Teuxical returns to Lodore and announces a new discovery a fleet of those damned monsters is sent out to mop up the new planet. That Malfero, who is the emperor of Lodore, is considerable of a monarch, and it seems that he has a passion for piling up wealth. Gold and platinum are as precious on Lodore as they are here and he also likes pretty stones."

"And what is worse," added Steinholt, "is his practice of enslaving entire populations and making toilers or warriors out of them. Those soldiers on the ship are not Lodorians. Millions of them were seized on some planet and converted into troops. It was a strange conversion, too," said Steinholt with a shudder. "Their

brains were operated on and most of their faculties removed. They have no sense of fear, no consciences, no power of reasoning. They respond only to certain signals on a whistle and their only definite and active impulse is that of murder and destruction."

"There is nothing to do," said Dirk positively, "but to kill all of these interlopers, if we hope to save our world from being desolated."

The three men looked at each other in silence for a moment and then Dirk, somewhat weakly, rose into a sitting position in the bed which he had been occupying.

"But how," asked Steinholt, "can we kill them? We might, of course, get rid of a few of them, but that simply would lead to our destruction by those who were left."

"There must be some way," asserted Dirk, "and it is up to us to think of it without delay. If we let those Lodorians get a foothold on the world all will be lost."

"The old man seems to be reasonable enough," said Lazarre. "He doesn't seem inclined to be destructive."

"We must not trust him or any of the others," said Dirk imperatively. "We must rid the earth of every one of them. And the sooner we strike the better!"

"It had best be soon if it is to be at all," said Steinholt. "Fragoni has arranged to have Teuxical appear before the Congress, and the meeting has been called for tonight when, I imagine, certain specific demands will be made upon us. We all will go to The Hague together on the ship of the Lodorians."

"And we leave?" questioned Dirk.

"The meeting is set for ten P. M., New York time," said Lazarre. "We will start east at about four o'clock in the morning, I guess, because it will only take a minute or so to arrive at our destination."

"Is Fragoni going?" asked Dirk.

"Naturally," replied Lazarre.

"And Inga?"

"I believe so," Lazarre told him. "Fragoni was both afraid to take her and to leave her behind, but finally he decided that he wanted her with him in case of trouble."

"And are they—the Lodorians—still here?" queried Dirk.

"Yes," responded Lazarre. "Teuxical returned to his ship last night with Zitlan and his other followers, but they came back late this afternoon, and they are still here. Zitlan seemed to be all right this afternoon, too. They must have used some means of bringing him out of the daze that he was in. We did everything we could to revive you, but none of our measures were effective."

"I'm all right now," asserted Dirk, as he finished attiring himself. "I want to see Fragoni at once."

"We'll go out on the terrace then," said Steinholt. "They are all out there."

Dirk, with his two companions, strolled out through the maze of rooms and corridors that led to the garden which hung so high above the city and the Sound below it.

The first thing that Dirk saw, when he passed out onto the terrace, was the white tunic of Inga, who was leaning against a coping and talking with Zitlan.

The latter was pointing skyward and, very apparently, he was telling her of worlds which circled high among the stars.

As if she were suddenly aware of his presence, Inga turned and saw Dirk and he realized, by the expression on her face, that she was distraught and nervous. She came toward him quickly, after a few words to Zitlan, and the face of the latter darkened. There was hatred in his expression as he stared malevolently at Dirk.

Steinholt and Lazarre passed along and joined Fragoni and Teuxical, who were the center of a group that had formed in another part of the terrace.

"Oh, Dirk," said Inga, "I am so afraid of that frightful Zitlan. He has been telling me again that he is going to take me back to his own world with him and it makes me shudder to think of it. He is so strange and queer and his eyes are so terrible. He can't be as young as he looks, because he speaks of years like we speak of minutes. I will die if I ever find myself in that monster's power! He has been telling me of all the creatures he has slain on the worlds on which he has landed, and I tell you, Dirk, that he is cruel and ruthless and horrible."

"He will never have you!" swore Dirk. "And if I hear of any more of his insolence, I will throw him headlong from this terrace."

"Please, Dirk," she begged, "don't do anything—not yet. He is utterly unscrupulous, Dirk. He told me that, even now, he is plotting against some Malfero who rules Lodore like a god, and that he is planning to seize the throne of the planet. He wants to make me the queen of that fearful world when he becomes king. He boasted that, if I were on the throne, millions of people from other worlds would be sacrificed in my honor in the temples of Lodore." Her voice trembled and her eyes were terror-stricken as she continued. "They tear out the hearts of living victims," she whispered, "and burn them on their high and mammoth pyramids."

Rage took possession of Dirk and, casting a glance at Zitlan, he saw that the Lodorian was smiling insolently at him.

"I'll kill that beast, if it's the last thing that I do!" he exclaimed to Inga.

"Dirk, Dirk," she implored, "don't even look at him. He is proud and impetuous, and he will kill you in defiance of his own father."

"We will find some way to rid the world of the scourge that has descended upon it," asserted Dirk confidently, "and he will die with the rest of that monstrous crew."

"I am going in, Dirk," Inga said. "Please," she begged, "don't do anything rash. If—something—should happen to you, I would lose all the hope that I have and I would, I think, kill myself."

"Don't lose hope, my dear," said Dirk reassuringly. "I believe that I know of a way to destroy the plague that menaces us."

He pressed her hand and, after she left him, he walked over and joined the other men on the terrace. Zitlan, coming from the terrace wall, stretched out in a chair not far from Dirk.

Teuxical regarded the latter with a countenance that was calm and amicable. "I am sorry, my young friend," he apologized, "that I had to intervene between you and my son." He paused a moment and sat in silence, a thoughtful expression on his face. "Ah," he then said, "what disasters have arisen out of the desire of men for women. In my wanderings over the starlit worlds, I have seen..." He ceased speaking, brooded for a moment, and then shook his head slowly. "But you cannot say that I was not just," he continued, addressing Dirk. "I punished Zitlan for his

presumption. Fragoni tells me that the woman has pledged herself to you. Let her pledge be kept!" he exclaimed sternly, looking straight at Zitlan.

"We are the conquerors," asserted the latter boldly, "and to us should belong the spoils of our daring!"

"Silence!" thundered Teuxical. "My own son, above all others, shall be obedient to my commands! Or, like others have done, he shall die because of insubordination!"

Zitlan, a defiant expression on his face, ceased to speak, but Dirk could see that he was livid with suppressed rage.

"As I was saying," Teuxical remarked, turning to Fragoni, "I am getting old and long have I been weary of conquest. I have seen your world and it pleases me. It is a tiny and peaceful place, far removed from the strife and turbulence of the restless centers of the universe. So it is my will to leave you unscathed and return to Lodore for a brief time to ask of the mighty Malfero the grant of this little provincial land. And then, with his permission, I will return here and rule it with wisdom and benevolence.

"I will bring to you much knowledge, and peace will be to the people of this earth and peace will be to me."

"It is well," replied Fragoni. "No world, I am certain, could hope for a wiser and more just ruler than yourself, and our Congress surely will receive you with acclaim."

Teuxical bowed in recognition of the compliment, and his countenance indicated that he was gratified.

"We will go, now, back to our vessel," he said, addressing the other Lodorians. "We will return for you at the appointed hour and conduct you to our ship," he added, speaking to Fragoni.

"We will be ready," Fragoni replied.

Zitlan had arisen with the rest of them and Dirk, with a look of contempt and amusement in his eyes, regarded him casually.

"May I have the honor of conducting our guests back to their ship in a plane?" Stanton requested of Fragoni.

The latter nodded and Stanton walked across the terrace in the direction of the landing stage.

Zitlan, as he followed after the others, passed close to Dirk and, pausing for a moment, fixed his hateful eyes on him.

"You dog," he whispered malignantly, "remember what I tell you! The time will come when I will cast you to the carnaphlocti in the dark and icy caverns of sunless Tiganda. You will die," he swore, "the death of a million agonies!"

For a moment Dirk felt an almost irresistible impulse to hurl himself on the Lodian and slay him.

He managed to maintain his control, however, and only regarded Zitlan with disdain as the latter turned and went on his way.

In another moment the plane, containing Stanton and the Lodorians, was high up in the darkness.

Dirk glanced at the great clock that gleamed atop of the beacon-tower on the Metropole Landing Field.

The hour was close to twelve-thirty A.M.

A moment of silence on the terrace followed the departure of the plane that bore the Lodorians back to their craft.

For an hour the clouds had been gathering in the sky and now a fine, cold rain commenced to fall.

A peal of thunder echoed above them after a sharp flash of lightning had streaked across the black night above them.

A servant appeared from the entrance to the apartment and pressed a button close to the door.

Protective plates of glass noiselessly enveloped the terrace, sheltering those upon it from the inclement weather.

"It is well," remarked Fragoni, breaking the silence, "that we were found by a leader like Teuxical. Our tribute will not be unbearable, and he will bestow many benefits upon us."

"But surely," protested Dirk, "you do not intend to surrender without a struggle! Nothing but disaster," he asserted earnestly, "will come upon the earth if you do. Teuxical may be honest and just but, after all, he neither is immortal nor all-powerful, and something may happen to him at any moment. And there are those like Zitlan who would turn the world over to ravage and rape, and then convert it into a blazing pyre, if they had their way. These vandals," he insisted, "must be slain one and all, or, mark my words, our world will be laid waste."

Dirk spoke with such a sense of conviction that his words held his listeners spellbound.

"Who is Teuxical," he asked, "but the vassal of a monarch whose corsairs, very apparently, are carrying on a war of conquest in the universe? It will be disastrous, I say, to place any dependence in the good will of this one Lodian. If he, or any of his men, return to that far-off planet where they dwell word will be carried there of the existence of our world. But who can say that Teuxical ever will return here again? It may be the whim of his ruler to refuse his request, or any one of a thousand other events might arise to thwart his desire to live among us. No," concluded Dirk passionately, "it never will do to let that great engine of destruction rise into the skies again!"

"He is right!" asserted Steinholt positively. "It will be far better to annihilate these raiders, if such a thing can be accomplished!"

Lazarre was rather inclined to take sides with Fragoni.

"But how," he demanded, "can such destruction be brought about? We know nothing of the capabilities of that monster that is lying down there in the Sound. It is undoubtedly equipped with the deadliest of devices and they all will be turned upon us if we fail in an effort to destroy the thing and those who have come from space upon it. If there was a way to smite them suddenly, to bring death to the Lodorians and to those swarming, mindless, murderous minions who act in obedience to them, I would favor doing it.

"But, as it is," he concluded, "it seems like inviting disaster even to think of such an attempt, much less to try it."

"It can be done, though," asserted Dirk, "or there is at least a fighting chance of accomplishing it. The electroscotan—" He paused, and looked questioningly at Steinholt. "The top of that monster is open and..."

The Teuton furrowed his brow and considered the proposition for a moment.

"Yes," he said, nodding his head, "it might be done." Again he silently gave the subject his thought. "It is well worth trying," he asserted with an air of decision. "But we will have to make haste," he warned, "if the thing is to be done before the flight to The Hague."

"So be it," said Fragoni. "We will apply ourselves to the task at hand. I, too," he confessed, "had rather see these vandals destroyed like so much vermin rather than have them carry the news of the existence of this earth back into those strange worlds in the depth of space. I will only regret the passing of Teuxical, who could have taught us much wisdom. And now," he continued briskly, "I will place myself under your orders, Dirk. You are the one who suggested this plan and upon you will fall the responsibility of executing it. And, if it succeeds," he added, "the glory will be yours."

"I care little for the glory," replied Dirk, "but I gladly accept the duties and the responsibilities. These," he said to Fragoni, "are my instructions to you. Inasmuch as Teuxical and his captains will return here at about four o'clock in the morning to convey us back to their craft, it will be necessary to have this building emptied of its inhabitants by that time. Let all of those who dwell here depart from it, a few at a time, so as not to excite suspicion. Inga, above all others, must leave and retreat to a place of safety. Then, as the hour approaches for the arrival of the Lodorians, we will escape by plane from one of the rear terraces. They will land in search of us and—well, then they will feel the force of our power."

"I will follow your orders explicitly," promised Fragoni. "I wonder," he added, "where Stanton is? He should be advised of what we are going to attempt."

"He will return in due time," replied Dirk. "And, if not, it will be the worse for him. Lazarre will remain here with you," he then told Fragoni, "and Steinholt and I will now go about our part of the task at hand."

Dirk, followed by Steinholt, hurried across the terrace and, leaving the shelter of its quartzite plates, sought the landing stage.

The rain still was falling and the heavens were congested with dark and heavy clouds.

Dirk, selecting one of the smaller planes, entered the cabin and Steinholt, following after him, closed the door and threw on the lights.

Swiftly they shot straight up into the air, Dirk ignoring all of the rules of flight in his haste to be under way. Once in the westbound lane, he headed his plane toward Manhattan and threw his rheostat wide open. In a few minutes they were skimming over the great city and past the three-thousand-foot steel tower of the Worldwide Broadcasting Station.

For fifteen minutes more he kept the plane on a straight course and then, bringing it to a quick stop, he let it drop like a plummet toward the earth.

It landed, among many other planes, on the transparent, quartzite roof of a vast building and, looking down into the interior, they could see several rows of great dynamos. Some of them were turning, and the humming that they made could be heard plainly.

Dirk and Steinholt ran rapidly across the roof until they came to a superstructure, which they entered. There was a shaft inside. Dirk pressed a button, and an elevator shot up and stopped at the door, which automatically flashed open.

He closed it after he and his companion had entered the cage and, dropping rapidly downward, they came to a stop in a lighted chamber that was far below the surface of the ground.

A stoop-shouldered old man greeted them, an expression of surprise on his face. "Gentlemen!" he exclaimed. "What is—"

"Power, Gaeble!" commanded Steinholt tensely. "Power! Let every dynamo run its swiftest. To-night we have to use for the electroscotan!"

"But I thought it was peace that those from the stars desired," said the old electrician. "Through my radiovisor I heard—"

"That was sent out," explained Steinholt, "to relieve the fears of the people and to keep them in order."

Swiftly the distorted figure of the old man sped to a great switchboard, where he pressed button after button.

The very ground commenced to vibrate around them and the massive structure seemed to be alive with straining power.

Then Steinholt, going to a corner of the intricate board, adjusted a few levers, while his gnomelike companion watched him carefully.

"And now, Gaeble," the scientist said impressively, "these are your orders. At precisely the hour of four o'clock in the morning make one connection with this switch."

He indicated, with a stubby finger, the lever to be operated.

"Keep the circuit closed for just four seconds," he added slowly, "and then break it. Do you understand, Gaeble?" he demanded.

"I do," replied the old man.

"Then," continued Steinholt, "after you break that connection you quickly will close this next circuit. Keep it closed for four seconds and then, after opening it for one second, close it again for four seconds. Repeat the procedure twice more, Gaeble, after that, and then await my further instructions. Is everything clear?" he asked.

"It is, sir," the old man replied. "I will follow your orders implicitly."

"There is one thing more," Steinholt said. "Get the Worldwide Tower on the televisor and warn them of what is to happen."

"I will do that immediately," Gaeble replied.

Dirk and Steinholt shot up to the roof again and the building over which they walked seemed to be quivering with life.

They could see that all of the mammoth dynamos beneath them were revolving and the humming which they had heard before had changed into an ugly, vibrant roar.

Again they took flight and, reaching Manhattan, they continued north and east to the shore of Long Island Sound.

Long before the old East River had been filled in and the space which it had occupied reclaimed for building purposes. All indications of its former bed had been obliterated by mammoth terraced structures.

When they reached their destination on the shore of the Sound a small submarine, which Dirk had ordered by radio, was awaiting them.

"Submerge and proceed up the Sound," Dirk ordered the officer, "and take us directly under the craft of the Lodorians."

In a few minutes they were skimming over the surface of the water and, when a sufficient depth had been gained, the tiny boat disappeared beneath the rain-rippled sea.

Dirk sat at a port and watched the aquatic life as it was illuminated by the powerful aquamarine searchlights.

Progress under the water was comparatively slow, as mankind had made but little progress in underwater navigation. Air liners long before had almost superseded travel by land and sea and the abolition of warfare had swept all of the old navies from the ocean.

It was more than an hour before the officer in charge of the boat announced that the mammoth hull of the monster that was lying on the Sound was visible directly above them.

Both Dirk and Steinholt donned diving apparatus, and the former carefully adjusted the mechanism that was contained in a metallic box about two feet square.

Then they stepped up into a chamber in the conning tower of the boat and, after a door slipped shut beneath them, water slowly commenced to pour into the compartment.

When it was full a sliding door that was in front of them slowly opened and they passed out onto the deck of the underwater craft.

Steinholt had been provided with some welding apparatus and, in a few minutes, the box which Dirk had carried was attached securely to the bottom of the craft of the Lodorians.

They then reentered the submarine by reversing the process which had attended their exit. Very soon they were in the cabin of the boat again.

"If everything goes well," said Dirk, "those damned Lodorians will never know what struck them."

"I only hope," said Steinholt, "that we don't destroy that leviathan altogether. We might solve the secret of it and then we, too, could ride out into the heart of the universe."

"It is impossible to imagine what will happen," Dirk replied, "until after we launch our attack."

Both of the men were silent during the return trip of the small undersea craft, which emerged at its dock a little before three-thirty in the morning.

"We'll have to hurry," urged Dirk nervously, "because we will need a little time to make preparations after we get back to Fragoni's."

They entered their plane and Dirk shot it swiftly up into the night, following the red shaft of light that rose almost directly from the point at which they had made their landing.

Then, having reached the eastbound level, he headed straight in the direction of the palace of Fragoni.

Dirk cast a glance at the great city that lay far beneath him. High up into the heavens it tossed the fulgurant fires that betokened its wealth and power. And, down among those myriad lights, millions and millions of people were restless under the danger that menaced them. It was only a matter of moments now before their fate, and the fate of their great metropolis, would be decided. By dawn they

would be free forever from the threat of subjugation and slavery or else they, and all that they had toiled and striven for, would be the veriest dust of dying embers.

And whatever befell them likewise would befall the rest of the world and every living thing that moved upon it.

Dirk was high above Fragoni's when he stopped the forward flight of the plane and, dropping it rapidly through the misty night, brought up easily on the landing stage. The other planes which had been there when he and Steinholt had taken their departure were gone and Dirk felt a sense of relief when he observed this. Inga, then, must have departed with the other occupants of the colossal structure. Things were going according to the plan that he had conceived. He stepped out of the cabin, followed by Steinholt, and proceeded hastily along the terrace and turned the corner into the garden.

Then he came to an abrupt halt because there, before him, was Zitlan, with one of the deadly ray-tubes of the Lodorians in his hand.

Dirk knew immediately that something unexpected had happened and that he was in the power of one who not only hated him but who had an unholy desire for Inga.

He realized, too, that any show of resistance would be nothing short of suicide, for he was well aware of the deadliness of the strange weapon with which he and Steinholt were being menaced by the gloating Lodian.

"One false move and you die!" warned Zitlan. "Come forward, now, and join those two others over whom Anteucan and Huazibar are watching."

Dirk and Steinholt promptly obeyed the command of Zitlan and walked over to where Fragoni and Lazarre were being guarded by two of the conquerors.

The rain had ceased to fall, but the skies were dark and overcast with heavy clouds. There was an occasional flash of lightning, and thunder rolled and echoed through the night.

The terrace, however, was brightly illuminated and every detail of the scene around him was visible to Dirk.

He saw Stanton, on another part of the terrace, standing among some Lodorians he had not seen before. Stanton, apparently, was not being treated as a prisoner and Dirk wondered, rather vaguely, why this was.

"What happened?" Dirk asked Fragoni quietly.

"According to what I have heard," the latter replied, "Zitlan murdered his father in a fit of rage, and has taken over the command of the ship. Many of the Lodorians are his adherents and even those who do not favor him are so terrified that they will be obedient to his wishes."

"And Inga?" questioned Dirk.

"She is inside the apartment," said Fragoni, a note of desperation in his voice. "Zitlan surprised us completely and he and his men had us covered before we realized that Teuxical was not among them."

Zitlan, in the meantime, had entered the suite of Fragoni and he now came out, Inga walking before him.

She was silent and proudly erect but there was a pallor in her face that indicated her realization of the danger that she was threatened with.

When Dirk saw her she gave him a brave smile, which he answered with a glance of reassurance.

He could see the great clock in the Metropole Tower, and he noticed, with a feeling of grave apprehension, that it was twenty minutes to four o'clock.

There were only a few minutes more in which to make a desperate and apparently a hopeless effort to save Inga, his friends and himself from a catastrophe which he had been instrumental in contriving.

Then Zitlan stood before him, haughty and arrogant, his lowering countenance ugly with hatred.

"So, dog," he said, "you who dared to defy Zitlan now stand before him a captive!"

Neither Dirk nor any one of the three others who were guarded with him replied to the utterance.

"You and that woman of yours," continued the Lodian insolently, "both are my prisoners to do with as I please. Your fate," he continued, "I already have planned for you and I assure you that it will not be as pleasurable as the one to which she is destined. You will find that Tigana, on which you and those with you will be cast, is a world of terror such as you never could dream of. Even the monsters which crawl through the deliriums of the mind are not as horrible as those which infest the mad and haunted world of which I speak."

He paused a moment, a cruel smile on his face, as if he wished the full import of his words to sear themselves into the minds of the doomed men.

"But the woman," he added, "will return to Lodore with me and be the queen of all women. And soon," he said savagely, "she may be queen of all Lodore, of the worlds which pay tribute to Lodore, and of other worlds which I will conquer and ravage. My father stood in my way and he died at my own hands. So will others perish who thwart my ambition, and I will become supreme in the universe!"

A feeling of reckless fury possessed Dirk as he listened to the words of Zitlan and he felt an almost irresistible desire to drive a fist square between the mad, glittering eyes of the Lodian.

He glanced at the great clock, however, and he saw that the time to act had not yet come. At the last moment he would make one desperate attempt to frustrate the evil designs of Zitlan. If it failed—well, all would be lost. But it was a far better thing to die resisting the despicable Zitlan and his minions than it would be to live and to know that, without a struggle, he had abandoned to degradation the girl he loved.

"This world of yours will be my world," he heard Zitlan boast, "and the spoils from it will add to my riches. This one here," he continued, indicating Stanton, "has offered to show me where all of the treasures of the earth may be found. And, as a reward, he will return to Lodore with me and there be elevated to a high position."

That, then, was why Stanton was not under guard like the rest of them.

"Our good friend, Stanton," said Lazarre, "seems to have become something of a Judas."

"And let his name be forever cursed, like the name of Judas," said Dirk.

"Silence!" thundered the Lodian. "I, Zitlan, am speaking." He paused a moment. "When I garner up the treasures of this world in the way of precious stones and metals I also shall gather more priceless loot in the way of women. And then, having taken all that I desire, I will lay waste to this earth so that those who

survive will fear the name of Zitlan and will grovel before him like a god when once again he appears to them."

While Zitlan had been speaking, Dirk had been studying the opponents with whom he soon had to clash.

The two Lodorians who were standing guard over himself and his companions were close to his left side. Zitlan was directly in front of him, and there were seven of his minions clustered behind him.

Again Dirk glanced at the great dial of the clock, and he saw that it was seven minutes of four.

The moment had come to act if action was to prove of any avail.

"I will—"

But the words of Zitlan were interrupted by Dirk, who suddenly made a mighty sweep with his left arm and knocked the deadly tubes from the hands of Anteucan and Huazibar. Startled by the assault, they went reeling backward. At almost the same instant Dirk leaped forward and, seizing Zitlan, hurled him among those Lodorians who had been massed behind him. Then he threw himself violently into the tangled mass, his fists driving in and out with deadly strength!

Out of the corner of one eye he saw Inga pass the melee and dart swiftly to the corner of the terrace. Instead of passing around to the landing stage, however, she lingered there and watched the combat.

Dirk, as he fought, became conscious that Steinholt and Fragoni were at his side, battling with him against his enemies. He saw, too, that Stanton had retired to the far end of the terrace and that he was watching the struggle with frightened eyes.

"We must reach the plane and get away," gasped Dirk. "In another three minutes—"

He felled a Lodian who, having lost his tube, was about to grapple with him. He saw Steinholt send another one of their opponents reeling backward.

"Fragoni!" he exclaimed. "The plane! Get in with Inga! We will come!"

Even as he spoke his fists were flailing back and forth between each one of his staccato commands.

He saw beneath him a hand reaching toward a tube, and he kicked the instrument of death. It hurtled over in the direction of Stanton and landed close to his feet. Stanton might have picked it up and been in possession of the means of aiding his old friends or his new allies. But he shrunk away, panic-stricken, from the thing that lay so close to his reach.

A Lodian leaped upon Dirk's back in an effort to bring him to the ground, but he stooped swiftly forward and his assailant was catapulted over his head into those who were in front of him.

He caught a flash of the contorted face of Zitlan flying through the air, and saw him land with a crash on the terrace, and lie there writhing in pain.

"Steinholt, Lazarre!" he said convulsively. "We've got to strike once more! And then—run!"

He plunged into their enemies with every bit of energy that he had left, and saw two of them toppling down. Then, like a flash, he turned to Lazarre, who was trying to fight off three of the Lodorians. Seizing one of them by the waist, Dirk

hurled him backward and he disposed of another one in the same manner. His sheer desperation seemed to have given him unbounded strength and power.

Lazarre sent his third opponent down with a blow under the chin and then, with Dirk at his side, they turned to the assistance of Steinholt.

With one mad rush they crashed into a group of Lodorians and sent them reeling away like so many nine-pins.

"Now! To the plane!" exclaimed Dirk, taking to his heels across the terrace. Steinholt and Lazarre followed after him and, turning the corner, they saw that the ship was in place and that Fragoni was anxiously waiting by the door of the cabin. Inga, Dirk knew, already was inside and safe. He stood aside while Steinholt and Lazarre leaped in. During the momentary wait he caught a glimpse of the great clock. It was one minute to four. Dirk jumping into the plane and switched on the helicopter without even waiting to close the cabin door.

The ship shot skyward like a rocket. When it reached an altitude of thirty-five hundred feet, he turned it north and raced at top speed in that direction.

It was miles away from the palace of Fragoni in less than thirty seconds. Dirk then stopped the plane and held it poised in the air with the helicopter.

The skies were turgid and black and the massed clouds, reflecting the lights of the great city below them, were permeated with an ugly, feverish, red glow.

From where they were hanging in midair, the occupants of the plane could plainly see the sparkling palace of Fragoni towering high up into the darkness of the night.

The lights of the magnificent mansion were reflected far out into the Sound where, looming in the golden ripples, lay the sinister monster from the terrible depths of unfathomable space.

Dirk took a watch from his pocket and, after glancing at it, he hastily replaced it.

"Two seconds more," he said, "and—"

A sharp and dazzling bolt of greenish fire came hurling suddenly out of the west and, with a thunderous concussion, seemed to fasten itself on the crest of Fragoni's palace.

It trembled and quivered, as if endowed with some uncanny life and power, as it remained there against the darkness, throwing a weird, green tinge over the water and up into the skies.

Blue waves of light could be seen pulsing and racing along the terrible beam and there, where it had fastened itself, they seemed to disappear in the vast and crumbling structure.

For four seconds that destructive streak of light, one end of which was lost back in the mists that concealed Manhattan, tore at the proud pile.

And, as the stone crumbled and the steelite fused under the mighty assault, an ominous roar swept through the night. The air was so violently agitated that the plane, miles away, tossed up and down like a tiny boat on a stormy sea.

Then suddenly the bolt was gone, but its livid image still burned in the eyes of those who had been watching it.

Once more, it came hurling out of the west and, like the fang of some great and deadly serpent, darted into the monster that lay in the waters of the Sound.

Dirk and his companions could see plainly, by the light of the bolt itself, that it had crashed into the well from which the Lodorians first had appeared, and that it was beating and hammering its way into the very vitals of the craft.

Dazzling, blinding fire seemed to pour from the aperture through which the bolt had passed. The clamor that arose was deafening.

Then again the streak of fires was withdrawn, leaving the night intensely black until, in a moment more, it came thundering out of the west again and, with an impact that made the land and the sea and the very heavens tremble, hurled its way into the depths of the doomed leviathan.

Twice again it fell, a fiery scimitar out of the darkness, and twice again it careened at the vitals of the stricken monster.

Then, after the assault was over, the ship still floated on the surface of the Sound and its shell, as far as Dirk and the others could judge, still was unscathed.

"We will soon know our fate," remarked Steinholt calmly. "If that didn't kill those beasts we might as well give up our ghosts."

"I'll drop the plane a little lower and a little nearer to the ship," said Dirk. "I don't believe that any life is surviving in that thing."

"My beautiful palace is nothing but dust," sighed Fragoni, mournfully. "And all my beautiful treasures, too."

"And that beautiful Zitlan," Lazarre reminded him, "and his beautiful boy friends, they are all dust too, thank God!"

"It was a queer fate that Stanton met," suggested Dirk. "He thought that he would save his life by going over to our enemies, and, instead of that, he lost it."

"Poor Stanton," said Steinholt. "He was born that way, I suppose, and I, for one, am ready to forgive and forget him. And now," continued the Teuton, "I hope that we didn't do too much damage to that little boat of the Lodorians. If we could get just a little peep at the inside of it we might learn the secret of its contrivance. And then, my friends, we could do a little journeying ourselves."

"Have you any theory regarding it?" asked Fragoni.

"Teuxical intimated that it rode the magnetic currents which, of course, flow through all the suns and planets in the universe," replied Steinholt. "We have been working along that line ourselves, of course, and it probably won't be very long anyway before we have the solution of interplanetary travel."

"Those Lodorians would have solved it for us if it hadn't been for that artificial lightning," said Lazarre. "That's powerful stuff, Steinholt."

"Yes, with that three-thousand-foot Worldwide Tower to hurl it from," agreed Steinholt, "we can get fair range with it. If the Lodorians hadn't left the well of their ship open, though, the lightning wouldn't have done us much good. I was afraid, too, for a time, that we might have trouble in welding that automatic wireless circuit box to the bottom of the ship."

Dirk, in the meantime, had brought the plane down to within a half-mile of the leviathan, and he was holding it poised there.

"It seems to me," he said, after scrutinizing the monster for a couple of minutes, "that it is moving in the water. It is!" he exclaimed. "Steinholt! Look!"

Only a comparatively short time had elapsed since the last bolt of lightning had vanished back into the darkness.

"It is still rocking with the force of the shock that we gave it," asserted Steinholt. "You would be rocking, too, if you had been tickled by a bolt like that one."

"It is rising, I tell you!" said Dirk. "The front end of it is slowly getting higher in the water!"

"You're right, Dirk," said Fragoni, excitement straining his voice. "Look! It just dropped back into the water!"

Then, as they watched, the movements of the leviathan became more and more agitated, until it was churning up the waves around it like a wounded and agonized monster of the sea.

Suddenly the front end tilted upward and the monster rose clear of the water. It shot straight up into the air at a speed so terrific that they could scarcely follow it.

"It's gone!" gasped Fragoni. "Those brainless, mindless automatons must have survived!"

"No," remarked Steinholt thoughtfully. "I don't believe that there is any life left on that thing. No one had closed the well when it rose, and it would mean death to go out into space with the ship in that condition."

"Then what made it go up?" demanded Lazarre. "Can the damn thing run itself, Steinholt?"

"I imagine," recalled the Teuton, "that our bolts killed every living thing that was on the craft but that, at the same time, they set the mechanism of the monster into action. Ah," he moaned, "but that is too bad. We could have learned much by an examination of the interior of that liner of the air."

A cry from Inga startled them and they saw that she was looking skyward, with terror in her eyes.

They followed her gaze and there, streaking through the black clouds, they saw a long trail of white fire.

"It's that thing!" exclaimed Fragoni. "I tell you that those upon it still live and that they are about to wreak vengeance upon us."

"No," said Steinholt positively. "You are wrong, Fragoni. What is happening may be almost as disastrous, though," he admitted. "That leviathan is in its death agonies; it is a metal monster gone mad, and none can say what will happen before it expires."

"The place for us," asserted Dirk hurriedly, "is in the Worldwide Tower. There we can keep track of what is transpiring and try to decide what to do."

The others agreed with him and, seeking the westward level of flight, he sped the plane in the direction of the mammoth pyramid from which the news of the world was broadcast.

They reached the vast structure in a few minutes, and, after dropping the plane on a landing stage, they went into the operating room.

Here they learned quickly that the craft of the Lodorians was doing incalculable damage, and that it was throwing the population of the world into an unprecedented panic.

It was, apparently, following an erratic, uncertain orbit that took it far out into space and then back quite close to the surface of the earth again.

It had passed through the very heart of Chicago within a few yards of the ground, and it had cut and burned a swath more than a mile wide through the buildings of that metropolis.

Other cities in America had felt the devastating effects of its irresistible and molten heat and, within a short time, thousands of people had been slain by it.

Time and again, from the terrace of the great tower, Dirk and his companions saw the skies above them light up as that terrible, blazing, projectile which, uncontrolled, went hurtling on its way through the night.

For three hours it careened on its mad course and hysteria reigned throughout the cities of the whole civilized world.

But then a report came from a rocket-liner that had left Berlin en route for San Francisco.

"Either a great meteor or that leviathan of the Lodorians just swept down past us in mid-Atlantic and plunged into the sea. Apparently it has exploded, for it has thrown a great column of water for miles up into the air. We are stopping and standing by, although the heat is intense and clouds of steam are rising from the sea."

As the minutes passed by after the report from the rocket-ship had been received, the disappearance from the sky of the flaming craft from space seemed to confirm the belief that it had been swallowed by the ocean. This was accepted as a certainty by eight o'clock in the morning.

"Ah," sighed Steinholt, "if only it had crashed on land somewhere. If there only was enough of it left for us to—"

"Enough of any damn contraption of that kind," swore Lazarre fervently, "is altogether too much. I hope, for one, that its fragments are scattered so far that we never can put them together again."

Dirk and Inga leaned against one of the parapets that evening on a gardened terrace of his own great mansion in Manhattan.

Their little party had gone there after leaving the Worldwide Tower in the morning.

After resting during the day, Lazarre and Fragoni were somewhere together, discussing the plans for a new palace to take the place of the one that was destroyed so that Zitlan and his minions might die in its ruins.

Steinholt, elsewhere, was delving into oceanography and submarine engineering, in an attempt to learn whether or not it would be feasible to fish for the remains of the lost ship of Lodore.

"It seems like a dream, doesn't it, Dirk?" the girl remarked. "It is difficult to believe that we actually have seen and talked with people from some far-away world."

Together they looked up into the crystalline skies, where mazes of shining stars gave testimony to the countless worlds which were wheeling around them.

"And just to think, Dirk," Inga continued proudly, "that it was you who saved this world and all of its people from that horrible Zitlan and his horde."

"I saved you," he told her gravely and tenderly, "and that somehow means more to me than saving all of this world and all of the other worlds which are rolling through the uncharted ways of time and space."

