

Shadow of the Spider

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Illustration:

Clouds of tiny black spiders dropped out of the sky
and when a woman was bitten, she died.

THE big space freighter, U4, was tipped half over on its side in the slimy, stinking mud. At the bottom of the filth-covered ladder that climbed the space ship's flank, Bob Nolon wallowed knee-deep in the muddy scum of the pit.

Within the U4, every motor was straining. The mud-sucker puffed and sputtered eagerly under the hull of the ship. The tube attached to it sent a steady stream of mud and digested junk out the other side of the ship.

For the past twenty-four hours Nolon had been waiting for the rusted sides of the treasure ship, U30, to appear above the mud where it lay buried. Now, one side was revealed.

Good natured "Slim" Jarvis struggled from the hatch of the U4 and crossed the deck to where he could get a clear view of Nolon and the pit below.

"How's she look?" he shouted.

Nolon turned and his boots sucked out of the mud.

"Great," he admitted. "But I hope the next time they crack up a shipload of gold they pick a nice high hill with plenty of dry sand. Wish we had some of those mythical Spider Men supposed to be on this planet to help us."

He rubbed a sweaty hand across his chin. It left his face streaked with black. He climbed the ladder slowly.

"Oughta be able to open her up by morning." Slim observed the progress that had already been made.

Nolon looked back at the rusted, corroded side of the U30 with a satisfied grin. Then he stretched out on the deck, legs crossed and arms locked under his neck. Down below the mud-sucker went on about its filthy task.

"A foggy night, miscalculation and another ship's captain sent his boat into the slithering old mud pot, Venus."

"According to the treasure maps," Slim said, "looks like Nolon Enterprises will be in the money again when we take that old tub apart."

"Venus," Nolon groaned. "How those oldtimers could call this baked mud pie a 'twin' planet to Earth, I'll never know."

Slim Jarvis laughed. "You and I have brought treasure back from every hole between the Sargasso and the rings of Saturn. Let's finish this job up next week and head for Long Island and a Turkish bath."

Nolon didn't answer. His mind was already on the boardwalk, with a lovely little wheat-headed girl at his side.

Then abruptly, Loo Wung, the solemn-faced Martian cook poked his turnip-shaped head above the hatch. His voice was soft and toneless.

"Master come pronto—radio try make talk—can no understand."

NOLON got to his feet hurriedly, crossed the deck and dropped down the hatchway. Inside, fans hummed softly. It was much cooler. Why should New York be putting through an unscheduled call on the private wave?

Loo Wung stepped aside at the radio room door and Nolon ran in, flopping hurriedly into the chair before the telascreen. The incoming blinker was flashing wildly.

He flipped up the receiving lever and watched the worried image of Ward Lake, the New York manager, etch itself across the screen.

"Good God! Nolon!" Ward Lake's face was strained and white. "I've had an awful time reaching you. Something terrible has happened. You'll have to return home at once."

"Take it easy, Ward," Nolon cautioned. "It can't be as terrible as going slowly mad with the heat out here on this globe of mush."

"Listen, Bob." Lake only called Nolon by his first name when some crisis was close. "Yesterday a terrible epidemic hit Earth. It's killing every last one of our women. Spiders, clouds of them, in the air. Their bite is..."

His voice broke in anguish.

"My wife," he continued haltingly. "We buried her and a hundred others last night, here in New York alone."

"Good Lord, Lake, I can't believe..."

Ward Lake was talking swiftly again. Talking as though the words were there and came without his bidding.

"Earth scientists don't know where these killers are coming from. They are about the size of your little finger nail. Every city on Earth has suffered from the first attack. It seems as though someone is making a deliberate attempt to sterilize our race."

Loo Wung left the door and shuffled slowly away down the galley.

Nolon said slowly.

"You need me? How about Sylvia? Is she safe?"

Lake's lips quivered, his mind full of his own loved one dead but a few hours.

"Sylvia is safe for the time being at City Hospital. Doctors have taken command. All women have been barricaded within health centers and clean-up squads are trying to kill the pests. It's an impossible job!"

"Look for us at the field in forty hours," Nolon snapped. "We'll leave the coffer dam here and pull everything for a quick flight."

Ward Lake's face relaxed.

"Thanks, Chief," he said. "I don't know what you can do to help, but I'll feel better with you here. If anything happened to Sylvia I'd never forgive myself."

THE screen blanked. Nolon turned toward the door. Slim Jarvis was already gone. Nolon heard him in the distant deck housing, giving low, tense commands to the crew. Nolon went directly to the control cabin. The control crew were at their stations. A thin-faced rocket man approached him with a sharp salute. "We've all heard what happened," the rocket man said in a low voice. "We've got wives and kids at home. There'll be no time lost."

Nolon put a hand on his shoulder.

"Keep your nose clean," he said gruffly. "Everything is going to be all right."

FIVE hundred miles above the tiny strip of yellow and green that was Long Island a sleek black space ship leveled for a landing. Rain had washed the mud from the U4 and its sides glistened.

They were well within the gravity pull. Nolon stood by the main control board, watching Slim Jarvis closely.

"Ready for the descent." Jarvis lifted his tired eyes from the map. "We're on the beam."

His head dropped again. Nolon nodded slightly, tossed away a cigarette that had hung between his lips. The freighter dipped its nose and went plummeting downward.

"Spotlight on, Mister," Nolon said tersely. "Shock-gear down."

The crew worked swiftly. Great shock springs dropped under the ship's nose. The spotlight top-side broke into a powerful searching glare that outlined the dock now a scant five miles below.

A hiss of excitement went through the cabin. Nolon turned toward the observation glass, his face blanching white.

"My God!"

"A giant spider!" Slim caught his breath.

On the landing dock, full in the center of the beam of light, walked a huge black spider. It was at least five hundred feet from the fearful hairy head to the last grim, dragging leg. Then, slowly, a chagrined look of realization replaced the momentary look of horror on Bob Nolon's face.

"The spotlight!" His voice was relieved. "Must have picked up one of the little devils on the lens. It's magnified by the distance."

His deduction proved itself as they came in quickly for the landing. The shadow spider grew smaller, fading from sight entirely as they nosed into the dock.

The mystery had been good for the crew. When he dismissed his men, Nolon found them chuckling among themselves over the incident. This, he thought grimly, was better than having a group of discouraged, frightened husbands on his hands.

A single plasticoupe awaited him on the deserted field. He started to walk toward it. He hesitated as Slim Jarvis came toward him.

"I've asked the men to find out about their families, and then to report to the union room."

"Thanks," Nolon said quietly. Their hands met in a silent grip. "Good luck, Jarvis. If your wife is safe, meet me at City Hospital this afternoon. I've a hunch we'll be busy and the crew may as well work together. We're accustomed to each other."

Jarvis nodded, strode away through the darkness.

WARD LAKE, the slim sober-faced New York manager, was already waiting for Nolon, his foot balanced on the side of the coupe. They shook hands silently, and in spite of himself, Nolon felt that Ward Lake may have been more alarmed than there was any reason to be. Thus far there had been no spiders, except the one on the spotlight. The field was entirely normal, though deserted.

"I came as soon as I could," Nolon said simply. "Did Sylvia come with you?"

A heavy, masculine voice came from the darkened car.

"Are you crazy, young fellow, or don't you realize what you're up against?"

Nolon's face lighted.

"Doc Franklin! So damned dark, I didn't see you, sir."

The doctor, a middle-aged man with silvered hair and carefully trimmed vandyke climbed stiffly from the car. He shook Nolon's hand with both of his and lectured at the same time.

"I assure you, Bob, things are even worse than Ward told you. But, come. I'll be needed at City Hospital. Sylvia is waiting for you there."

They climbed into the car hurriedly. The coupe flashed over the smooth field and up the turnpike that led toward glowing skyscrapers.

"Where are these damned spiders?" Nolon asked impatiently. "What's the story?"

"You'll see soon enough," Doctor Franklin said bitterly. "It will be clear to you that all Earth faces a crisis. Much too clear for your peace of mind."

Then, as they passed the last space ship dock and entered the three-lane traffic highway, all the utter terror of Ward Lake's telascreen message made itself evident. At first Nolon saw only the thick carpet of crawling, hairy things on the road. The coupe hit them as it would hit a snowdrift, plowing ahead slowly. The air was full of weird, white clouds. They drifted down slowly and Nolon saw they were giant spider webs, covered with thousands of the small wriggling death spiders.

They floated down in great masses, obscuring the moon with a silvery shining blanket of death. Spiders swarmed across the highway in waves, covering the fields, climbing eagerly over every man-made object they met.

Nolon shuddered.

"You say these things can kill a woman with a single bite and yet are harmless to men?"

Doc Franklin nodded helplessly.

"Sylvia, or any woman for that matter, isn't safe outside the established protection zones. Thus far the invasion has confined itself to highly populated sections only. We've rushed the female population into safety spots and protected them as best we could. I tell you, Bob, this thing has to be stopped before we have no more women. No power to live, fight, or reproduce."

His head dropped forward wearily, a man trying to fight odds that had already overcome him.

Ward Lake swung around in his seat, his mouth bitter and frightened by all he had seen during the past terrible two days.

"We haven't been able to stop it," he muttered. "They'll never stop this invasion. It was planned by the devil himself. It's killed my wife and it will kill all the others before it stops."

DOCTOR FRANKLIN made no attempt to answer. His head had dropped forward, motionless, and he slept from sheer exhaustion.

They were in the outskirts of New York now. Here, the spider army was even worse. Webs hung like growths of Spanish moss from every building, every immovable object. The streets were crawling with the things.

They plowed steadily ahead, at times reaching almost open sections of pavement where clean-up squads were at work. The men of the city were equipped with gas-masks, insect-killers of every known type, and shovels. With these pitiful instruments, Earth was attempting to protect itself against an invading army so ghastly that even now few realized what they really fought. Nolon realized and his heart sank within him at the size of the task ahead.

The plasticoupe halted before the door of City Hosiptal.

"Ten thousand women inside that building," Franklin said, and climbed stiffly out of the coupe. "Already spiders are finding their way through unprotected crevices. Dozens of women have died in this building alone, since last night. Every hour the slaughter grows worse."

Nolon's boots crunched into the swarming mass as they climbed the steps to the main entrance. He kicked his way through them.

They entered the main lobby, followed Doctor Franklin toward a wide shower of liquid stuff that shot from makeshift pipes against the ceiling.

"Emergency showers have been constructed," Ward Lake explained. "After we've been sprayed by insect killer we'll get into the hospital proper. Not before.

SYLVIA FRANKLIN was a fragile-seeming, small-boned girl. Neatly arrayed in a starched nurse's uniform she caught Nolon's eye at once. She ran toward him. "Bob!"

In three long steps he met her, and she was in his arms. Her smooth, cool cheek pressed to his.

"I'm so glad you've come." Her voice was low and sincere.

"I left Venus as soon as Ward called," he said, releasing her. "I'm glad you're safe."

For the first time, tears welled into her eyes. She brushed them away impatiently, put her small hand in his big, brown fingers.

"Bob," Sylvia said, "I don't know what we'll do. The thing is here and we'll have to go on fighting, until..."

Her voice broke into a little sob and again she was in his arms.

"I'm frightened—horribly."

A shudder coursed through her slim body. Nolon swore softly under his breath. A slow, forced smile covered his face.

"Wait a minute, fella," he put a finger under her chin and tipped her head back until his eyes looked straight into her own. "Where's that Franklin chin? There are a lot of brains working on this thing. Keep your chin out for a few hours until science has the answer. This thing is going to work out all right."

The sun broke through and her face lightened.

"And what will you be doing?" she asked.

For an instant Nolon was stumped. What should he do? He remembered with some misgivings, Lake's words when they talked on the telascreen.

"I don't know what you can do to help."

Then he remembered the clean-up squads that were working in every city street.

"I'm going to organize a clean-up squad from my crew," he explained. "At least we'll be doing something to help."

She smiled bravely.

"Then you'd better get started," she suggested. "I'm supposed to be on duty in the sick ward. We can't tell when those horrible creatures may find their way in. Some of the patients are unable to give warning."

He bent over and, holding her shoulders firmly, planted a kiss on her chin. Then her shoes clicked firmly on the stone corridor and she was out of sight behind the white swinging doors. Nolon turned on his heel and started for the lobby. He wondered dully if he would ever see the girl alive again.

THE clean-up job wasn't a pleasant one. Nolon had his men spread across the pavement, moving slowly ahead. The insect spray guns came first,

and behind them the shovels and carts that carried away wriggling death by the hundred pounds. The job was a hopeless one. As soon as one shovelful of dazed and dying insects were scooped up, another horde swept in to take its place. Nolon swore, and slapped at his body as they swarmed over him, biting and clawing at his flesh.

The spiders dropped about them from every object. They swarmed and tumbled wave on wave across rooftops and over the streets. They seemed cursed with an uncanny faculty of finding the women. City Hospital was a wall of black, hairy terror holding back death for no one knew how many more hours.

Several times during the day, Nolon had seen long lines of coffins roll by the truckload away from the alley entrance of the hospital.

Toward midnight, exhausted and discouraged with the little his men were accomplishing, he leaned on his shovel and motioned for Slim Jarvis. The whole vast area of sky above New York was a layer of white, pulsating webs. Slim kicked and swore as he made his way through the ever increasing waves of killers.

"Pretty hopeless job," Nolon said. "Slim! Can't we do better than this? Shoveling up these spiders won't help. We've got to get to the bottom of the problem. Kill them at the source. This way the job is impossible."

Jarvis wiped his face with a sweep of his arm. His face was streaked and bitter.

"Scientists are all right," he said. "But they have to work slowly. To make sure what they are doing. Bob, I think this job was made for us. We can dive into it headfirst and think about it later."

They retreated to a fairly clear spot inside an office door and sat down.

"That's what I've been thinking for the past ten hours," Nolon admitted. "Look, Slim, this was planned. These spiders couldn't have drifted into the gravity pull, at least not so many of them, without some assistance. If we can find out where they came from, then we can put pressure on the source and get somewhere."

"Suppose someone in outer space is dumping them out to weaken earth for an attack?" Slim searched his pockets, found a cigarette and puffed at it eagerly.

Nolon groaned.

"That's just it. We haven't the slightest idea of where to start looking. Yet, allowing this thing to go on is nothing but slow suicide."

He accepted a puff of Slim's cigarette, inhaled deeply and exhaled a faint blue smoke ring. Then he sat up as though shocked into a new line of thought. With an oath Nolon was on his feet.

"*That spider shadow we saw!*" he said excitedly. "Why didn't I think..."

"What's burning you?" Slim was at his side. He followed as Nolon turned and started hurriedly toward the hospital. "What about that shadow?"

THEY reached the hospital doors and Nolon rang the alarm bell impatiently. As they waited, he turned.

"The shadow of the spider that we made on the space dock," he answered. "If we had hit that spider coming in for a landing it would have been crushed. It must have been *under* the lens of the spotlight."

Slow realization dawned on Slim's face. Somewhere inside footsteps approached hurriedly. The doors opened and Nolon spoke to the lantern-jawed nurse who waited just inside.

"Please get Doctor Franklin at once. Tell him Bob Nolon wants to speak to him. That it's important."

She nodded and turned away. The safety doors closed again with a bang.

Slim Jarvis looked as though he had seen a large and unfriendly ghost.

"I had that spotlight all torn down last week, when we were on the U30 job," he almost whispered.

"Then," Nolon said slowly, "we must have picked up that single killer on Venus."

"There ain't a spider *on* that muck-bank," Slim protested. "Nothing but water and gumbo."

"Did you ever hear of the Spider Men?" Nolon shot out. "On the opposite side of Venus there is a rank growth of swamp and jungle. The Spider Men are a direct-line growth from their smaller brethren. They haven't the brains, imagination, or strength to fight a battle. They are a helpless and brow-beaten people."

"Then why worry," Jarvis asked. "Could a gang of animals like that do us any harm?"

Doctor Franklin's footsteps echoed in a far corridor.

"Let's assume that someone who *did* have brains were to lead this race. *Suppose that they decided they deserved a better world to live in. A world where man had already provided every comfort.*"

"Then," Slim agreed, "They'd probably use something that was powerful enough to overcome us, and pick up the bones later."

"What's this?" Doctor Franklin's dignified figure forced itself quickly through the door. "Hello, Bob, what can I...?"

Nolon took the doctor's hand quickly, his eyes were bright now, and eager for the quest.

"We've hit on something that may be a hot lead," he explained. "We're going back to Venus."

Franklin's face mirrored his disappointment.

"But!" he stammered, "under the circumstances, don't you think your place is here?"

Slim Jarvis intervened.

"Don't get us wrong, Doc," he begged. "We're not backing out. Bob thinks these spiders may come from Venus. He believes the Spider Men may be at the bottom of this thing."

In spite of himself, Franklin chuckled.

"Those hollow headed animals?" he protested. "What makes you think they'd have the brains...?"

Nolon interrupted. He told Franklin quickly the same thing he had just finished telling Slim Jarvis.

"So you see," he added, "it seems important enough to merit a try. If we fail, there is very little lost."

Franklin nodded.

"I'm afraid you're right, son," he answered. "Go ahead, and God bless you."

Nolon said, "There's one more thing."

"Yes?"

"Don't let Sylvia know until we've left Earth. I can't take a chance, and I hate to say goodbye. It would be hard, the way things are."

WHEN the U4 took the air, its rocket chambers had been cleaned and reloaded for a long trip. It shot up swiftly through the clinging cloud of webs that had now drifted over the city for as far as the eye could reach.

"Slim!" Nolon's voice was hard again. "Set your course for the site of the U30. When we get in close, follow the curve of the planet and keep just off surface. Watch for likely landing spots in the jungle land and have the crew stay alert for any sign of life. Call me the moment anything strange is sighted."

Slim nodded a little sleepily.

"Right! Get forty winks and I'll knock off for a few minutes later on. We can take care of things until the trouble starts."

Nolon took one look back through the sights, at a tiny Earth drifting lazily below them. He opened the control room door, went out and pushed it closed behind him. Opposite the galley door he hesitated. Loo Wung was carrying on a heated argument with someone inside the tiny kitchen. Nolon went forward on tiptoe and looked around the edge of the door.

Sylvia Franklin was standing just inside, her back turned to him, arms akimbo. She threatened the Martian cook with a huge soup ladle.

"And if you tell a soul..." Her voice drifted away as she twisted around, following Loo Wung's gaze.

"Don't let me bother you two," Nolon said.

"Bob, oh! My goodness!"

"Your goodness has nothing to do with this," Nolon answered. "You are supposed to be on Earth. This is no place for a girl, even if I do love her and she's worth her weight in gold."

Sylvia's eyes flashed defiantly.

"I don't care if I am a stowaway," she said. "I'm just as safe here as I was at City Hospital."

"There are opinions to the contrary," he said. "But skip it. We can't turn back now."

Her pretty face clouded.

"Oh! Bob, I didn't mean to hurt you. It was—well—I just couldn't let you go away alone. Dad acted funny and I threatened him until he confessed the whole thing."

She came close to him, her eyes pleading warmly.

"Would it help if I were to show you how I can be made safe. How I can go right among those spiders and not be harmed."

He nodded, putting one arm around her waist.

"That's the object of the whole trip. To make you all safe."

She kissed him, fully on the lips. Nolon's arms went around the girl, crushing her to him. Behind them, Loo Wung tittered in amusement.

"Boss man have arms like space octopus!" Then the Martian cook made a mad dash for the galley pantry, escaping by a hair the heavy frying pan that Nolon sent crashing after him.

"Come with me," Sylvia urged. "I'll show you something."

They went toward the store room and she made him wait in the silent hall until she emerged. She was safely encased in one of the light plia-metal diving suits Nolon used for tough air-diving jobs. Within its shining, grotesque folds she looked like some strange under-air creature from the stranger planets.

Sylvia's voice came muffled through the communication slit.

"I saw this suit when I was on your ship last year. There isn't a spider in the world that can bite me now. Am I a welcome passenger?"

Nolon put his arms around her and gave the heavy suit a bear hug.

"It's a little tough on my love making," he admitted. "I guess you've got all the answers, so be a good girl and I won't pitch you overboard."

HOURS later Nolon was watching the muddy side of Venus as it came up slowly on the map-glass.

"We're about a thousand miles out from the U30. Right?"

"Right!" confirmed Jarvis

"Good," Nolon said. "Change course and start to circle the planet. Have all lookouts posted and let me know the minute anything suspicious is sighted."

Under Nolon's direction the U4 sank down swiftly and started to cruise over the muddy, bubbling crust of the planet. Hours passed. The ship's atmosphere grew hot and the fans and air cooler units were turned on.

The night closed in thick and heavy. The U4 went forward at half speed, keeping just above the fog that arose from below. Nolon allowed them to burn no lights.

"Ship dead ahead—cut your speed!"

The sharp outcry echoed over the ship's speaker system from the forward watch. Nolon jumped, slammed the quarter-speed levers down with a bang. He whipped around.

"Sylvia, get into that space suit and stick with Slim Jarvis. Slim, you supervise the controls personally. I'm going forward. Keep your ears glued to that speaker. Post more watches so we won't find ourselves in a trap."

The control room seethed quietly with the new activity. Nolon slammed the door and dashed the length of the ship's nose. He twisted up the forward hatch and dropped into the transparent bubble of glassine beside the watch.

The man pointed ahead through the darkness. His face was set in that odd way that indicated grim success after a long day of failure.

"I take it to be an earth freighter. The type the city used to have for garbage. There's a low, underslung section that tips out for the disposal of junk. We've been on her tail for several minutes. At first I wasn't sure."

Nolon tapped his shoulder.

"Good work. Now, get back and have forty winks. You've done a good job. I'll take over."

"Thanks, Captain!" The man went up and out of the bubble slowly. Nolon was already on the phone. "Slim!"

"Aye, sir," Jarvis was cold, businesslike once more.

"Speed up slightly. Have you spotted her on the map glass yet?"

"She's right in line," Slim admitted. "Can't see her well enough to gauge the distance yet. What do you make of it, Bob."

"It's an earth ship. Type was junked twenty years ago. Built for dumping garbage."

"Or spiders?"

"That's What I'm thinking," Nolon admitted.

The ship ahead burned a single red light. It picked up speed now, and suddenly disappeared from sight. The light blinked out.

"Full speed!" Nolon shouted. "All rockets open wide for twenty miles."

The U4 jerked ahead with one jet of flame.

"Cut!" Nolon shouted.

THE ship went silent and drifted just above the spot where the strange freighter had disappeared. Below, faintly visible against the dark ground, four tiny green lights blinked in a large square. As he watched, they went out abruptly.

"Did you see that?" Slim shouted. "Looks like a landing field below."

"Right," Nolon made a quick decision. "Sink down slowly. Stay at the edge of the jungle and away from where those signals were burning. At the first alarm, come back out like a hornet."

"How about the girl," Jarvis asked a little grimly.

Nolon's face was wet.

"She's fairly safe in the space suit," he answered. "She'll have to take the same chances we do."

The phone went dead. The U4 started to sink down slowly into what seemed a blank of tangled, blackened jungle.

Hurrying back toward the control room, Nolon heard the hurried voices of the crew as they went about their jobs within the ship. He personally supervised the opening of the main hatch and saw that a fire-gun was laid out for each crew member.

The U4 touched the ground softly, bounced a few feet and settled into lush grass. The jungle had been cleared away from an area of perhaps a mile. Nothing was visible except the faint glow of the wet meadow. Through the darkness of the ship, Nolon rounded up his men.

"I'm going outside to look around," he said as they gathered on the deck. "You men all are armed. Stay here and Jarvis will be in command. He knows my signal."

"What about that freighter that landed?" Sylvia Franklin came through the hatch, clothed in the cumbersome space suit. "This may be a trap."

Nolon nodded.

"I'm afraid of just that. That's why I don't want us to leave the U4 until we are sure. Slim, you know the whippoorwill whistle. If you hear it, you can all come after me, but silently. Otherwise, wait until I return."

"I'll be there with my little hatchet."

Nolon let his feet hang loose over the edge of the rounded ship, pushed away from its side and jumped. He hit the soft ground with a bounce and his knees jerked up painfully. Ahead a few yards one of the landing lights stood dark and high against the dark grass land. He worked toward it slowly.

Behind him, against the side of the ship there was the sudden rough, grating sound of a boarding axe. He froze upright, knowing the meaning of the sound. Footsteps, stealthy and smooth sounded on all sides. He started to dash back toward the U4 and tripped over something in the high, rank grass. Nolon pitched forward flat on his face, a shout of warning jerked from his lips. Something hit his back like a ton of bricks and at the same time the field went white with powerful light.

NOLON twisted and turned, trying to fight his way from under the spider men who held him pinioned to the grass. A high-pitched scream of horror cut the night. Dully he could see what took place on the high deck of the U4. They were dragging Sylvia Franklin over the rail. His men had been overcome by force of numbers.

Cursing loudly, he managed to turn over on his back, stared up at the three hairy, spider-like monsters who held him. Their limbs were thin. The entire body was covered with thick, black hair. The face was a pair of fuzzy beaked claws that opened and closed spasmodically.⁽¹⁾

Nolon tried to force himself upright under their combined weight and felt himself slowly pushed down again, his shoulders against the grass. Something came down hard and solid against his skull and bright lights whirled crazily inside his head. Like a man going under ether, the hubbub of sound grew far away and metallic, like the noise of a worn-out record. His body went limp under his captors.

The low, smoking tunnel through which the spider men dragged Nolon seemed like something from a cave-man's nightmare. The spot on his head felt as though a truck had hit him. He opened his eyes again and stared around. He was hanging head down, hands and feet bound to a long pole. The pole was slung over the shoulders of four spider men who were careless of the human cargo they carried. With difficulty, he managed to lift his aching head to the level of his body. The tunnel widened into an open, sandy cave and he was dropped rudely. A commanding voice came from ahead of him, behind the blaze of wall torches.

Nolon felt the hairy, fumbling hands ripping away his bonds. He tried to stand up and fell back weakly into the dirt. Rough arms jerked him upright. He lifted his head and shook the hair away from his face. He drew his arms away from the men who held him and stood still, staring with wonder about the cave.

It was a rough-walled circle of about thirty feet in width. Into the walls were thrust heavy torches that sent out a brilliant flow of flame. Smoke from the fire covered the roof and everything in sight with a heavy coating of soot. Spider Men sat in a huge circle about him. At the far end of the cave, sitting on a raised chair made of logs and spun rope was the leader. The man was short

and greasy with fat. The hair that stood stiffly away from his body was dirty and a faded gray.

His head was squat and his beaks were oiled with a recent meal. Yet, the man on the rough throne had eyes that were not dull and listless like the others. They sparkled like tiny dynamos of energy as he addressed Nolon.

"You are wondering many things," the voice snapped out sharp and eagerly. "Ask your questions. I will answer."

He sat back, leaning against the logs that held his rounded back upright. Two great torches burned on either side of his throne.

NOLON took a step forward and the place came alive with threatening sounds. The leader muttered quick, unintelligible threats and the spider men were silent.

Nolon reached for a cigarette. He started to light a match, but the leader raised his arm and shouted sharply.

"Stop!" His eyes were glittering-dangerous. "My people fear fire. I have only recently gained their trust, that they live with torches for light. If you were to light that match I might not be able to save you from their anger."

Nolon let the unlighted match fall from his fingers. "Sort of a keeper of the light, are you?"

The men around him didn't understand his words, but they detected at once that his voice was tinged with something they did not like. The leader was forced to raise his arm again. The spider man stood up and came toward Nolon. He walked on all fours. He stood upright before Nolon's startled face.

"Your men and the girl are our prisoners." His hairy jaws were close to Nolon's face. "You will all die before the sun shall rise again."

Nolon felt the cigarette, still unlighted between his lips, go suddenly dry and tasteless. He spat it from his mouth.

"If that's the plan," he asked sourly, "why the midnight stage show?"

The leader seemed for a moment about to strike him down. The jaws worked furiously. Then the man got control of himself and his words were low and earnest.

"Because you are the first man I have met to whom I can tell my story and be appreciated. Every person who has been to your civilized world is proud to be able to talk to others of his accomplishments. My own are so many, and I have little chance to be appreciated."

The conceit of this creature was as wonderful as it was disgusting, Nolon thought. Perhaps if he could stall for a while...? It was, strangely enough, beginning to make sense. Here were a mud-drenched, jungle-trained race without imagination who had no wish to better themselves. Yet, this creature was leading them to Earth. Forcing himself, through them, into power over all men. He shuddered at the idea of these hairy, claw-faced creatures swarming over Earth cities.

The spider man was talking swiftly, as though eager to brag of his accomplishments.

"My name is Larus. You are a brilliant young man." His jaws worked up and down automatically. "We lured you into our land because we knew you could cause us trouble."

"That freighter?" Nolon asked. "It is the same type you have used to dump your death cargoes on Earth?"

Larus chuckled. His eyes were like brittle steel.

"We have a thousand such ships, all salvaged from your junk yards. They are ideal cargo carriers. With them we are ready to escape this hell hole of our ancestors."

NOLON was aware of a mounting tension in the cave. Spider men arose, and a widening circle appeared around the throne. Far away down the tunnel from whence he had come there was a scratching, dragging sound as though something heavy was being drawn through the sand.

"I imagine you realize that our campaign is progressing well?" Larus said.

Nolon nodded. The spider leader returned to his throne and sat down cross-legged. He started to speak swiftly, like liquid pouring from a tight-lipped bottle.

"My people have lived in blackness for centuries. No one feared them because they lacked imagination. You cannot insert imagination into an empty brain. I, through clever disguise, went among your people. I found that they were prepared for any war of armaments. They have one weak spot. Your medical men, as usual, are behind in seeing a way to fight unexpected uprisings of disease. Since time began you have been unable to stop the Black Plagues that have come down on you. They have run their course and left you weak and frightened. *This time you will have no chance to build up what you lose. There will be no way to build. Your women will all be dead.*"

His voice droned on like slow, sinister music. The spider men were nervous. They began to mill about the cave, watching the entrance of the tunnel. The heavy, scraping sounds were close. The cave became unbearably hot. Nolon dried his sweating face on his shirt sleeve and listened to Larus as he droned on.

"We have been dumping freighter-loads of our little *pets* on your cities. In a few hours we will attack, seize your weakest points and get weapons to carry on a complete war. Your men will not have the strength or heart to fight back."

Nolon jerked around toward the tunnel, his muscles taut. His back was suddenly pinioned to the wall. A high-pitched gibber of voices stuttered through the cave. Larus was on his feet, head held high, as the approaching spider men came into the room.

Five of them went toward the throne, dragging a huge glass case over the rocky ground. The case was made up of two sections. It looked like a strange fish bowl with an inner and outer container.

Through the haze of shimmering heat Nolon's heart froze and his blood started to pound maddenly. Completely nude, her body slouched on the floor of the inner case, was Sylvia Franklin. Her hair was shining strangely under the light of the torches, and it dropped in long, even lines, almost hiding the upper part of her body. Her eyes, as they caught his, were horror stricken.

Then Nolon realized the reason for the spider men's excitement. The outer case, with only thin glass to keep it away from the girl, was full of crawling, flowing spiders. Only a small, tightly closed trap door kept the insects from swarming in over her bare flesh.

SWEAT poured down Nolon's face.

His fists clamped into balls of hate, but his arms hung at his side like the dead weight of lead.

One move and they would fight him to death against the rough walls of the cave.

Then he knew the spider men had started a low-pitched chant of victory. The sound grew and swelled until the cave was a fury of sound. Others were entering. Slim Jarvis came first, and his crew followed and lined themselves around the wall. There were two spider men with each of Nolon's crew. Larus arose and the cave became silent again. The leader's voice was calm, but his beaks worked up and down in pleasure.

"I can realize the beauty of an Earth woman," he said. "But to my people she is but a sacrifice to the Spider God."

Nolon's answer was bitter.

"You could have no God," he said evenly. "He could not allow you to punish women and children as you have done."

Larus chuckled, and it was like the rough grating of glass against the cave floor.

"*We have a God*," Larus screamed. "May his body rest on the coals of the sun. *We have a God*; the Spider God who is greater than us all—may his hair singe from the heat of the fire."

Nolon saw now, for the first time, the real fear of the spider people. He saw their hatred for fire and their fear of a Spider God, whom they despised mightily.

His eyes caught Slim's. The thin one stood beneath one of the heavy torches that had been thrust into the wall.

"I gather," Nolon said icily, "that this God of yours is a pretty dangerous character. That if he returned, you'd have some worrying to do."

Larus chuckled.

"It is not easy to kill superstition. This Spider God is nothing but an old legend. He is real to my people, but to me, only a dream of long past centuries. He can harm no one now."

"You have little to fear," Nolon said bitterly, "After all, Larus, the woman killer is a brave man."

The words had their desired effect. The spider leader crouched forward, his eyes blazing.

"Enough of your insults," he growled. "You have seen the clever device we have arranged for the sacrifice of your woman. Her appearance has put ice into your veins. My people demand her death to the Spider God, and I am only too willing to be rid of her so easily. When all women on Earth have died as she will die, we will take your knowledge and let your men die, to be reproduced no more."

THE room was dense with smoke and the sickening smell of spider bodies. Sylvia Franklin sensed that something was about to happen. Her face turned pale and her eyes were for Nolon alone.

Slim Jarvis was following her gaze. Nolon looked directly at him and started to whistle in a low tone. It was the signal of the whippoorwill. Larus shot a look of suspicion at Nolon and then ignored him. Slim was standing tense and still against the wall, waiting for some sign. Nolon's crew knew something was in the air. They waited.

"*For people who fear fire,*" Nolon said in a harsh voice, "the idea of successfully conquering Earth sounds a little far-fetched."

Slim's eyes darted upward at the flame over his head, and a slow grin cornered his mouth. The men of Nolon's crew understood that his words had been meant for them.

"Let the sacrifice proceed." Larus waved an arm at the waiting spider men and one of them approached the glass case eagerly. Larus spoke in the language of his people, seemingly reciting some sort of prayer to their God. The chant spread through the crowd quickly. The spider man by the case stood ready. Sylvia Franklin's body went stiff and frightened. She crouched away from the trap door, her smooth, bronze back where it would catch the first spiders as they dropped on her helpless form.

A skinny, hairless arm searched eagerly for the release of the trap door. Nolon jerked away with all his weight and almost fell as he dashed toward Larus.

At the same time he shouted at the top of his voice,
"*We'll fight fire with fire.*"

Slim Jarvis whipped an arm upward and snatched the big torch over his head. His arm shot straight out and the fire-ball sang loudly as it shot across the cave. The spider man at the sacrifice case went hurtling backward, the torch in his chest. A high-pitched scream of fear and pain cut from his beak-like mouth. There was the stench of burning hair as his body burst into flame.

THE cave was a madhouse. Nolon's men grasped torches in both hands and waded in. With Sylvia safe for the moment, Nolon crouched before Larus, waiting for him to move. For that one instant the spider leader was silent, eyes wide with what had happened. Then, swiftly as a crawling snake, he slipped from the chair. His body went low and he caught Nolon around the neck, his scrawny fingers closing about the Earthman's throat. Nolon fell backward, tripped over a rock and they rolled over and over in the mass of burning spider men that already carpeted the floor.

Nolon came up on top, and his muscular arms pushed Larus down until the finger hold was broken. Nolon tried to avoid the two great claw lips that were seeking a hold on his body. He lifted one fist and sent it flying into the ugly black face. It came away red with blood. He sent it crashing down again, but Larus twisted quickly, avoiding the full blow. With a terrific push the spider leader sent him flying to one side, and Nolon felt the jaws close tightly on his bare shoulder.

Blood spurting from the Earthman's arm and it hung helpless at his side. With superhuman effort he tore himself away, pivoted and sent a handful of knuckles tearing into the spider man's midsection. As the man Larus crumpled forward, Nolon caught him full on the jaws with a twisting upper-cut. Larus went flying back, his neck hanging on one side. He died before he hit the floor and thick, dark blood oozed from his opened jaws.

Nolon swung around, found another spider man bearing down upon him with upraised club.

"Bob!" It was Slim's shout.

Nolon turned and caught a fire torch as it came through the air from the slim one's hand. He poked it full into the spider man's chest. The room was beginning to clear.

The army of Larus, spider leader, was gone. Realizing their leader was dead, they fled down the tunnel shaft as though the devil himself were in pursuit.

Nolon shouted.

"Quick, Jarvis, down the tunnel. Make sure they don't get a chance to attack again. I'm getting Sylvia out."

The crew needed no orders. They were already out of sight, torches waving above their heads.

"Make it snappy, Bob." Slim's face was streaked with soot. "I'll hold the tunnel open for you. The girl's pretty well under."

Nolon was already at the side of the case. It was built with a single glass on the bottom. There was a door there where the girl had been forced into the thing. Air holes were covered as long as it remained on the ground.

Swiftly but carefully he turned the case over on its side and watched with relief as she pressed her face to the air hole. He snatched up a cudgel of a burned-out torch and motioned her away from the glass. Bringing the club down gently, he cracked the glass and drew a section of it away. The stench of burning flesh within the chamber was unbearable. He took her in his arms and went swiftly down the tunnel.

HALFWAY toward the entrance, Nolon hesitated. His face lighted as Slim and the crew members came back toward him and the girl.

"Did they escape?" he called.

Slim's face was a mask of concern.

"Those we killed in the cave were only a small part of the group," he confessed. "Right now there are a thousand freighters full of fighting spider men, headed for Earth. Bob, we couldn't stop them without an entire attacking force."

"What about Earth's army?"

"Every able-bodied man is in that spider fight up to his neck. It would take a two-day warning to turn those clean-up squads back into their rightful places with the fighting forces. These devils will land without warning."

Nolon's face clouded with thought. Sylvia Franklin had recovered. He put her down gently, gave her his shirt to put about her slim body.

"Wait for me in the ship," he ordered. "Have the U4 ready for the fastest trip it has ever taken. I've got to pay a last visit to our friend Larus."

Before the girl could protest, he was running hurriedly back toward the shambles in the cave. At the spider case he stopped, picked up a club and sent it crashing into the section that held the killers. Quickly he steeled himself and drew out a handful of the hairy, crawling spiders. He opened his cigarette case and pushed several of them into it. He snapped the lid and slipped it into his pocket.

With one last look at the crushed body of Larus, spider leader who tried to kill Earth's women, he turned with a shudder of hate and made his way to the U4.

THE freighter U4 swept away from Venus with all rocket tubes open wide. Nolon's mind worked coolly now, yet the plan there was so fantastic that even he doubted the sanity of it. They were within ten thousand miles of Earth before he took command of the control room.

"I *still* can't understand why they didn't steal the U4, when they took the other ships." Sylvia felt much better now. She took no chances, however, and had donned the space suit as soon as she came aboard.

"Simple," Slim said. "The chief made the U4 safe from any piracy. There isn't a man alive that knows how she really runs. All I know is that you pull a lever here and there. Nolon knows what happens at the other end of those levers, and it's just as well."

Nolon smiled.

"You talk like I was a mystery man," he said. "So I'm going to try and justify it. Cut your motors and drift. I'm going topside."

A murmur of protest swept through the cabin.

Slim's jaw dropped.

"We can't waste much time with those murdering sons of spider webs so close to Earth."

Nolon was already at the main hatch.

"And if we *don't* waste enough time to make my idea work, it can do absolutely no good to pursue them. What chance would the U4 have against a thousand ships?"

The ship drifted. Men waited with bated breath as Nolon went topside, a shining cigarette case in his hand. His face was glowing with the expression of a man who hopes and prays that he has done the right thing, when he reentered the cabin in five minutes. The group turned eagerly as he came in.

"All hatches closed!" he ordered curtly.

"Aye, sir!"

Nolon turned toward the members of the crew within the control cabin. His face was set and hard.

"You men have been with me for years," he said slowly. "There is only one way I know to stop this invasion. If we landed in New York you'd all fight like hell, and you'd lose the battle."

"You win," Slim Jarvis admitted. "We're sticking with you. What do we do?"

"Good," Nolon answered. "Set your course straight for Earth. Pick up the invading fleet, but don't get close to them. Stay away and tail them in to within five thousand miles. Then I'll take over."

Slim looked puzzled.

"Don't we get a chance to fight?"

Nolon bent forward, looking the thin one straight in the eye.

"You'll have the biggest fight you've ever tackled." His eyes were deep with the certainty that he was doing right. "The U4 is going to rout a fleet of a thousand ships."

FOR the next eight hours, the U4 plunged straight on its course. The men were fearing for Nolon's sanity, but they obeyed without question. The gravity gauge indicated they must be close to five thousand miles from the Earth. Darkness was close and black around the glistening ship, but with the aid of the night glass Slim Jarvis picked up the invading spider fleet. The rush of sound against the speeding deck of the U4 seemed to whisper of trouble ahead. Slim turned from the plot map finally, and wiped his face with a tired arm.

"Take over, Bob. They're on the range now. Coming in over Europe in the shape of a large circle."

Nolon nodded.

"That's what I figured," he admitted. "The population is heaviest in that area. More harm has been done. They'll take the area that comprised all the ancient countries of Germany, Italy, England and the small fry. With the weapons they capture, an invasion of the Americas will follow *if we can't stop them before they get started*."

"I wouldn't have wished this mess even on the old Hitlers and Mussos," Slim said dryly. "Your plan better be good."

Nolon took a hurried look through the night glass.

"We haven't time to waste," he said. "Jarvis, keep the U4 drifting on an even keel. Keep our nose on the spider fleet. Men, stand by for a fast dive if it's necessary. This might look like the end of the world until you get used to it."

His lips were a tight line of hope as he sprang to the control board. He jerked down the huge lever that controlled the super-light on topside. He prayed that the light would have enough power to do the trick.

"Good God," Slim Jarvis stuttered. "Look at Earth."

Sylvia Franklin shrank to Nolon's side, her eyes wide with fright.

"Bob—what...?"

Nolon's hand was steady. He drew the light lever down as far as it would go. The ship's power plant set up a terrific din. Dynamos hummed and stuttered powerfully and the lights within the cabin dimmed and went out.

Spread out across the green and brown of Earth, a huge black spider stretched its hairy legs and moved a few inches. A whisper of fright went through the cabin. Slim Jarvis, still holding the U4 on its course, let a grin slit his dry lips.

"I'll be damned," he said, and stared as though hypnotized at the beast that strode across the world's surface.

THE image was clear now. It covered countries as though they were nothing but outlines on a map-like circle of green and brown paper. Its great

legs twisted and crawled back and forth slowly. It was like some terrible symbolic spirit of old Germany.

It wasn't the spider that Nolon watched with eager eyes. *The ships of the spider men were turning back.*

To those hairy, beak-faced men in the ships below them, this giant spider was the Spider God, whose return they dreaded worse than death itself. The great circular fleet of spider freighters broke wildly, gyrating and twisting away from their goal. The invading fleet had been routed completely. It organized itself to a degree and swept away from Earth wildly, seeking any place to be rid of the great God who had returned to haunt their first invasion of Earth.

A sigh escaped Bob Nolon's lips.

"The Spider God has returned," he said. "The image of a spider the size of my finger tip. A search light to throw its shadow against Earth and we've put the fear of *our* God into a million bloody savages."

No sound disturbed the cabin. The light went out slowly and the spider faded. The regular breathing of the girl at his side told Bob Nolon that he had proven himself worthy of her love.

"All motors on. Dive straight in and set a course for Long Island." He put an arm around her shoulder. "I don't think we'll have further trouble."



⁽¹⁾ The Spider Men of Venus demand no great amount of explanation. Their existence of course is well known. Only one thing prevented their being destroyed long before Nolon saw them. The race of Spider Men were of a low mental and physical order. Unlike man, their evolution was retarded. This section of Venus was at first a steaming jungle with spiders as its only inhabitant. Gradually, through natural evolution, they changed. Their bodies took partially the form of men. However, they never developed mentally. Their life was simple and they lived on the lower members of their own race. They knew no better life and therefore did not wish for better than they had.

Professor J.R. Higgerbothon of the New London Laboratories describes the spider man as follows: "He is a low type mentally, usually ranging about five feet tall. His body is not unlike the ape, with arms that reach the ground. However, unlike the ape, his limbs are slim and covered with a stiff hairy stuff. He has no face as we understand it. In place of a mouth, the spider man had developed two claw-like jaws that move continually when he is excited. A saliva-like stuff drools from his mouth and hardens into the same material that usually is found in spider webs."—Ed.