

Science Fiction Series

No. 16

THE IMMORTALS OF MERCURY

By Clark Ashton Smith



Published By

STELLAR PUBLISHING CORPORATION

96-98 PARK PLACE

NEW YORK

The Immortals of Mercury

By

Clark Ashton Smith

CLIFF HOWARD'S first sensation, as he came back to consciousness, was one of well-nigh insufferable heat. It seemed to beat upon him from all sides—a furnace-like blast that lay upon his face, limbs and body with the heaviness of molten metal. Then, before he had opened his eyes, he became aware of a . . . light that smote upon his lids, turning them to flame-red curtains. His eyeballs ached from the intense radiation; every nerve of his being withered from that out-pouring sea of incalcescence; and there was a dull throbbing in his scalp that might have been either headache induced by the heat, or the pain of a recent blow.

He recalled, very dimly, that there had been an expedition—somewhere—in which he had taken part; but his efforts to remember the details were momentarily distracted by new and inexplicable sensations. He felt now, that he was moving swiftly, borne on something that pitched and bounded against a high wind that seared his face like the breath of hell.

He opened his eyes, and was almost blinded. He found himself staring at a weird white heaven where blown columns of steam went floating by like spectral genii. Just below the rim of his vision there was something vast and incandescent toward which, instinctively, he feared to turn. Suddenly he knew what it was, and began to realize his situation.

He recalled the ramble he had taken alone, amid the weird and scrubby jungles of the twilight zone of Mercury—that narrow belt, warm and vaporous, lying beneath the broiling deserts—on which an enormous sun glared perpetually—and the heaped and mountainous glaciers of the planet's nightward side.

He had not gone far from the rocketship—a mile at most, toward the sulphurous, fuming afterglow of the sun, now wholly hidden by the planet's libration. Johnson, the head of that first scientific expedition to Mercury, had warned him against these solitary excursions; but Howard, a professional botanist, had been eager to hasten his investigations of the unknown world, in which they had now sojourned for a week of terrestrial time.

Contrary to expectation, they had found a low, thin, breathable atmosphere, fed by the melting of ice in the variable twilight belt—air that was drawn continually in high winds toward the sun—where the wearing of special equipment was necessary.

Howard had not anticipated any danger; for the shy, animal-like natives had shown no hostility and had fled from the earthmen whenever approached. The other life-forms, so far as had

been determined, were of low, insensitive types, often semi-vegetative, and easily avoided when poisonous or carnivorous. Even the huge, ugly, salamander-like reptiles that seemed to roam at will from the twilight zone to the scalding deserts beneath an eternal day, were seemingly quite inoffensive.

Howard had been examining a queer, unfamiliar growth resembling a large truffle, which he had found in an open space among the pale, poddy, wind-bowed shrubs. The growth, when he touched it, had displayed signs of sluggish animation and had started to conceal itself, burrowing into the boggy soil. He was prodding the thing with the sponge-like branch of a dead shrub, and was wondering how to classify it when, looking up, he had found himself surrounded by the Mercutian savages. They had stolen upon him noiselessly from the semi-fungoid thickets; but he was not alarmed at first, thinking merely that they had begun to overcome their shyness and show their barbaric curiosity.

They were gnarled and dwarfish creatures, who walked partially erect at most times, but ran upon all fours when frightened. The earthmen had named them the Dlukus, because of the clucking sounds resembling this word that they often made. Their skins were heavily scaled, like those of reptiles and their small, protruding eyes appeared to be covered at all times with a sort of thin film.

Anything ghastlier or more repulsive than these beings could hardly have been found on the inner planets. But when they closed in upon Howard, walking with a forward crouch and clucking incessantly, he had taken their approach for a sort of overture and had neglected to draw his *tonanite* pistol. He saw that they were carrying rough pieces of some blackish mineral, and had surmised, from the way in which their webbed hands were held toward him, that they were bringing him a gift or peace-offering.

THEIR savage faces were inscrutable; and they had drawn very close before he was disillusioned as to their intent. Then, without warning, in a cool, orderly manner, they had begun to assail him with the fragments of the mineral they carried. He had fought them; but his resistance had been cut short by a violent blow from behind, which had sent him reeling into oblivion.

All this he remembered clearly enough; but there must have been an indefinite blank, following his lapse into insensibility. What, he wondered, had happened during this interim? and where was he going? Was he a captive among the Dlukus? The glaring light and scorching heat could mean only one thing—that he had been carried into the sunward lands of Mercury. That incandescent thing toward which he dared not look was the sun itself, looming in a vast arc above the horizon.

He tried to sit up, but succeeded merely in raising his head a little. He saw that there were leathery thongs about his chest, arms and legs, binding him tightly to some mobile surface that seemed to heave and pant beneath him. Slewng his head to one side, he found that this surface was horny, round and reticulated. It was like something he had seen.

Then, with a start of horror, he recognized it. He was bound, Mazeppa-like, to the back of one of those salamandrine monsters to which the earth-scientists had given the name of "heat-lizards." These creatures were large as crocodiles, but possessed longer legs than any terrestrial saurian. Their thick hides were apparently, to an amazing extent, non-conductors of heat, and served to insulate them against temperatures that would have parboiled any other known form of life.

Howard's consternation, as he realized his plight and his probable fate, was mingled with a passing surprise. He felt sure that the Dlukus had bound him to the monster's back, and wondered that beings so low in the evolutionary scale would have intelligence enough to know the use of thongs. Their act showed a certain power of calculation, as well as a devilish cruelty. It was obvious that they had abandoned him deliberately to an awful doom.

However, he had little time for reflection. The heat-lizard with an indescribable darting and running motion went swiftly onward into the dreadful hell of writhing steam and heated rock. The great ball of intolerable whiteness seemed to rise higher and to pour its beams upon him like the flood of an opened furnace. The horny mail of the monster was like a hot gridiron beneath him, scorching through his clothes; and his wrists and neck and ankles were seared by the tough leather cords as he struggled madly and uselessly against them.

Turning his head from side to side, he saw dimly the horned rocks that leaned toward him through curtains of hellish mist. His head swam deliriously and the very blood seemed to simmer in his veins. He lapsed at intervals into deadly faintness: a black shroud seemed to fall upon him, but his vague senses were still oppressed by the overpowering, searing radiation.

Rescue!

THE heat-lizards was following a tortuous stream that ran in hissing rapids, among twisted crags and chasm-riven scarps. Rising in sheets and columns, the steam of the angry water was blown at intervals toward the earthman, scalding his bare face.

Howard's brain reeled and his blood seemed to rush in a fiery torrent through his veins. He fought for breath—and the breath seared his lungs. The vapors eddied about him in deepening swirls and he heard a muffled roaring the cause of which he could not determine. He became aware that the heat-lizard

had paused, and moving his head a little he saw that it was standing on the rocky verge of a great gulf into which the waters fell to an unknown depth, through clouds of steam.

Then, from the burning mist, hooded forms of white and shining devils appeared to rise up and seize him, as if to receive him into their unknown hell. He saw their strange, unhuman faces; he felt the touch of their fingers, with a queer and preternatural coolness, on his seared flesh—then all was darkness

Howard awoke under circumstances that were novel and inexplicable. Instantly, with great clearness he remembered all that had happened prior to his final lapse, but could find no clue to his present situation.

He was lying on his back in a green radiance—a soft and soothing light that reminded him of the verdant grass and emerald sea-water of the far-off Earth. The light was all about him, it seemed to flow above and below him, laving his body with cool ripples that left a sense of supreme well-being.

He saw that he was quite naked; and he had the feeling of immense buoyancy, as if he had been rendered weightless. Wondering, he saw that his skin was entirely free from burns and realized that he felt no pain, no ill effects of any kind, such as would have seemed inevitable after his dread ordeal in the Mercurian desert.

For a while he did not associate the green luminosity with any idea of spatial limitation for he seemed to be floating in a vast abyss. Then, suddenly, he perceived his error. Putting out his hands he touched on either side, the wall of a narrow vault and saw that its roof was only a few feet above him. The floor lay at an equal distance beneath and he himself, without visible support, was reclining in mid-air. The green light, streaming mysteriously from all the sides of the vault, had given him the illusion of unbounded space.

Abruptly, at his feet, the end of the vault seemed to disappear in a white glow like pure sunlight. Long, sinuous, six-fingered hands reached out from the glow, grasped him about the ankles and drew him gently from the green-lit space in which he floated. Weight seemed to return to him as his limbs and body entered the dazzling whiteness and a moment later he found himself standing erect in a large chamber lined with pale, shimmering metal. Beside him a strange, unearthly being was closing the panel-like door through which he had been drawn from the emerald-lit vault; and beyond there were two others of the same type, one of whom was holding Howard's garments in his arms.

With growing astonishment Howard gazed at them. They were about the height of a tall man, and their physical conforma-

tion had a vague resemblance to that of mankind . . . but was characterized by such god-like beauty and grace of contour as has rarely been found even in the most perfect of antique marbles.

NOSTRILS, ears, lips, hands and other features and members, were chiselled with exquisite delicacy; and the skin of these beings, none of whom wore any sort of raiment, was white and translucent and seemed to glow from an internal radiance. In place of hair, the full, intellectual heads were crowned with a mass of heavy, flesh-like filaments, hued with changing iridescence and tossing and curling with a weird, restless life, like the serpent locks of Medusa. Their feet were like those of men, except for long horny spurs on their heels.

The three strange beings returned the earthman's gaze with eyes that expressed little but gleamed bright and cold as far-off stars. Then, to complete Howard's amazement, the being who had just closed the door of the vault began to address him in high, flute-like tones, that baffled his ears at first, but after a little became recognizable as flawless English.

"We trust," said the being, "that you have recovered wholly from your late experience. It was fortunate that we were watching you through our televisions when you were seized by the savages and were bound to the back of the *groko*—that creature known to you as the 'heat-lizard.' These beasts are often tamed by the savages, who, being ignorant of the use of artificial heat, make a strange use of the *grokos'* proclivities for ranging the terrible sunward deserts. Captives caught from rival tribes—and sometimes even their own kin—are tied to the monsters, who carry them through oven-like temperatures till the victims are thoroughly roasted—or, as you would say—done to a turn. Then the *grokos* return to their masters—who proceed to feast on cooked meat.

"Luckily we were able to rescue you in time; for the *groko*, in its wanderings, approached one of our cavern-exits in the great desert. Your body was covered with enormous burns when we found you, and you would assuredly have died from the effects, if we had not exposed you to the healing ray in the green vault. This ray, like many others, is unknown to your scientists and it has, among other things, the peculiar power of nullifying gravity. Hence your sensation of weightlessness under its influence."

"Where am I? and who are you?" cried Howard.

"You are in the interior of Mercury," said the being. "I am Agvur, a savant, and a high noble of the ruling race of this world." He went on in a tone of half-disdainful explanation, as if lecturing to a child: "We call ourselves the Oumnis; and we

are an old people, wise and erudite in all the secrets of nature. To protect ourselves from the intense radiations of the sun, which of course are more powerful on Mercury than on the further planets, we dwell in caverns lined with a metallic substance of a composition known only to us. This substance, even in thin sheets, excludes all the harmful rays, some of which can pierce all other forms of matter to any depth. When we emerge to the outer world, we wear suits of this metal, the name of which in our language is *mouffa*.

“Being thus insulated at all times we are practically immortal as well as exempt from disease; for all death and decay in the course of nature, are caused by certain solar rays whose frequency is beyond the detection of your instruments. The metal does not exclude the radiations that are beneficial and necessary to life; and by means of an apparatus similar in its principle to radio, our underworld is illumined with transmitted sunlight.”

Howard wanted to ask a hundred questions; for the very existence of such intelligent, highly evolved beings as the Oumnis on Mercury had been unsuspected by earth-scientists. Above all he was curious regarding the mastery of human language displayed by Agvur. His question, as if divined by a sort of telepathy, was forestalled by the Mercurian.

“We are possessed of many delicate instruments,” said Agvur, “which enable us to see and hear—and even to pick up other sense-impressions—at immense distances. We have long studied the nearer planets, Venus, Earth and Mars, and have often amused ourselves by listening to human conversations. Our brain-development, which is vastly superior to yours, has made it a simple matter for us to learn your speech; and of course the science, history and sociology of your world is an open book to us. We watched the approach of your ether-ship through space; and all the movements of your party since landing have been observed by us.”

“How far am I from the rocket ship?” asked Howard. “I trust you can help me to get back.”

“You are now a full mile beneath the surface of Mercury,” said Agvur.

“As to rejoining your comrades,—well, I fear that it will not be practicable. You must be our guest—perhaps indefinitely.” There was a kind of brusqueness in his tone as he concluded: “We do not want our existence known to terrestrial explorers. From what we have seen of your world, and your dealings with the peoples of Mars and Venus, whose territories you have begun to arrogate, we think it would be unwise to expose ourselves to human curiosity and rapacity. We are few in number, and we prefer to remain in peace—undisturbed.”

CHAPTER II

A New Danger

BEFORE Howard could frame any sort of protest, there came a singular interruption. Loud and imperious, with clarion-like notes, a voice rang out in the empty air between Agvur and the earthman. Howard was ungovernably startled; and the three Mercutians all seemed to stiffen with rapt attention. The voice went on for nearly a minute, speaking rapidly, in accents of arrogant command. Howard could make nothing of the words, whose very phonetic elements were strange and unfamiliar. But a chill ran through him at something that he sensed in the formidable voice—a something that told of relentless, implacable power.

“Our temporal ruler and chief scientist, Ounavodo,” said Agvur, “has just spoken from his hall in the lower levels. After hours of deliberation, he has reached a decision regarding your fate. In a sense, I regret the decision, which seems a trifle harsh to me; but the mandates of the Shol, as we call our ancient ruler, are to be obeyed without question. I must ask you to follow me; and I shall explain as we go along. The order must be executed without delay.”

In perplexity not unmingled with consternation, Howard was led by Agvur to a sort of inclined hall or tunnel, on which the chamber opened. The tunnel was seemingly interminable, and was lit by brilliant and apparently sourceless light—the transmitted sun-rays of which the Mercutian had spoken. Like the chamber, it was lined with a pale metallic substance.

An odd machine, shaped like a small open boat, and mounted on little wheels or castors, stood before the door, on the easy, monotonous grade. Agvur stationed himself in its hollow prow, motioning Howard to follow. When the other Oumnis had placed themselves behind Howard, Agvur pulled a lever, and the machine began to glide rapidly, in perfect silence, down the interminable hall.

“This tunnel,” said Agvur, “runs upward to the exit near your vessel; and it leads down to the heart of our underworld realms. If the worst happens—as I fear it may—you will see only the ante-chambers of our labyrinth of caverns, in which we have dwelt, immune to disease and old age, for so many centuries. I am sorry, for I have hoped to take you to my own laboratories, in the nether levels. There you might have served me . . . in certain biological tests.

“Ounavodo,” he went on, in calm explanatory tones, “has ordered the fusing and casting of a certain quantity of the *mouffa*-alloy, to be used in the making of new garments. This alloy, invented aeons ago by our metallurgists, is a compound

of no less than six elements, and is made in two grades, one for the lining of our caverns, and the other exclusively for raiment.

“Both, for their perfection, require a seventh ingredient—a small admixture of living, protoplasmic matter, added to the molten metal in the furnace. Only thus—for a reason that is still mysterious to our savants—can the *mouffa* acquire its full power of insulation against the deadly solar rays.

“The *mouffa*, used in comparatively heavy sheets for cavern lining, needs only the substance of inferior life-forms, such as the *groskos*. But the higher grade of *mouffa*, employed in light, flexible sheets for suiting, requires the protoplasm of superior life.

“Regretfully, at long intervals, we have been compelled to sacrifice one of our own scanty number in the making of new metal to replace that which has become outworn. Whenever possible, we select those who in some manner have offended against our laws; but such infringements are rare, and commonly the victim has been chosen by a sort of divination.

“After studying you closely in his televisic mirror, Ounavodo has decided that you are sufficiently high in the evolutionary scale to provide the protoplasmic element in the next lot of *mouffa*. At least, he thinks that the test is worth trying, in the interests of science.

“However, in order that you should not feel that you are being discriminated against or treated unjustly, you will merely take your chance of being chosen from among many others. The method of selection will be revealed to you in due time.”

WHILE Agvur was speaking, the vehicle had sped swiftly down the long incline, passing several other barge-shaped cars driven by the white, naked Immortals, whose serpentine locks flowed behind them on the air. Occasionally there were openings in the tunnel wall, leading no doubt to side-caverns; and after a mile or two, they came to a triple branching, where caverns ran upward at reverse angles from the main passage. Horrified and shaken as he was by Agvur's disclosure, Howard took careful note of the route they were following.

He made no reply to the Mercutian. He felt his helplessness in the hands of an alien, extra-human race, equipped, it would seem, with scientific knowledge and power to which humanity had not yet attained. Thinking with desperate quickness, he decided that it would be better to pretend resignation to the will of his captors. His hand stole instinctively to the pocket in which he had carried the little tonanite pistol with its twelve charges of deadly heat-producing explosive; and he was dismayed, though hardly surprised, to find that the weapon was gone.

He became aware that the incline had ended in a large level cavern with numerous side-openings, where multitudes of Oumnis were passing in and out. Here they left the boat-like vehicle; and Howard was led by Agvur through one of the side-exits, into another vast chamber, where perhaps fifty of the white people were standing in silent, semi-circular rows.

These beings were all fronting toward the opposite wall; but many of them turned to watch the earth-man with expressions of enigmatical curiosity or disdain, as Agvur drew him forward to the first of the waiting ranks and motioned him to take his place at the end.

Now, for the first time, Howard saw the singular object which the Oumnis were facing. Apparently it was some sort of rootless plant-growth, with a swollen, yellowish bole or body, like that of a barrel-cactus. From this body, tall as a man, leafless branches, of vivid green, fringed with white spikes, trailed in limp sinuous masses on the cavern floor.

Agvur spoke in a piercing whisper:

"The plant is called the Roccalim, and we employ it to choose, from a given quota, the person who shall be cast into the furnace of molten mouffa. You will perceive that, including yourself, there are fifty candidates for this honor—all of whom, for one reason or another, in varying degrees, have incurred the displeasure of Ounavodo, or have given rise to doubt regarding their social usefulness. One by one, you are to walk about the Roccalim in a complete circle, approaching well within reach of the sensitive, mobile branches; and the plant will indicate the destined victim by touching him with the tips of these branches."

Howard felt, as Agvur spoke, the chill of a sinister menace; but in the weirdness of the ceremony that followed, he almost lost his apprehension of personal peril.

One by one, from the further end of the row in which he was standing, the silent Oumnis went forward and circled the strange plant, walking slowly within a few feet of the inert branches of poisonous green that resembled sleepy, half-coiled serpents. The Roccalim preserved a torpid stillness, without the least sign of animation, as Oumni after Oumni finished his perilous circuit and retired to the further side of the room, there to stand and watch the perambulations of the others.

About twenty of the white Immortals had undergone this ordeal, when Howard's turn came. Resolutely, with a sense of unreality and grotesquery rather than of actual danger, he stepped forward and began his circuit of the living plant. The Oumnis looked on like alabaster statues; and all was utterly still and silent, except for a muffled, mysterious throbbing, as of under-world machinery at a distance.

Howard moved on in an arc, watching the green branches with a growing tenseness. He had gone half the required dis-

tance, when he felt, rather than saw, a flash of swift, intense, light that appeared to stab downward from the cavern roof and strike the lumpish yellow bole of the Roccalim. The light faded in the merest fraction of time, leaving Howard in doubt as to whether he had really seen it.

Condemned!

THEN, as he went on, he perceived with startled horror that the trailing tentacular boughs had begun to twitch and quiver, and were lifting slowly from the floor and waving toward him. On, on they came, rising and straightening, like a mass of ropy kelp that flows in an ocean-stream. They reached him, they slithered with reptilian ease about his body, and touched his face with their venomous-looking tips, clammy and inquisitive.

Howard drew back, wrenching himself away from the waving mass, and found Agvur at his elbow. The face of the Mercurian was touched with an unearthly gloating; and his iridescent locks floated upward, quivering with weird restlessness, like the Roccalim branches.

At that moment, it came to Howard that his fate had been predetermined from the beginning; that the swift, evanescent flash of light, proceeding from an unknown source, had perhaps served in some manner to irritate the living plant and provoke the action of its tentacular limbs.

He saw that a number of new Mercurians, equipped with long, glittering tubes like blow-pipes, had entered the cavern and were surrounding him. The companions of his late ordeal had begun to disperse in various directions.

"I am sorry," said Agvur, "that the choice should have fallen upon you. But your death will be swift—and the time is near at hand. The fusing must be completed, and the metal must be poured off and cast in thin, malleable sheets before the next term of darkness and slumber, which will occur in little more than an hour. During this term—three hours out of every thirty-six—the transmitted sunlight is excluded from all our chambers and passages; and most of our machinery, which derives its power from light, is rendered inactive."

In mingled horror and despair, Howard was taken through an opposite entrance of the Roccalim's cavern and along a sort of hall which appeared to run parallel with the one in which the incline had ended. Agvur walked at his side; and the Oumni guards were grouped before and behind him. He surmised that the glittering, hollow tubes they carried were weapons of some novel type.

As they went on, the mysterious throbbing noise drew steadily nearer. Howard saw that the far end of the corridor was

illumined with a fiery red light. The air was touched with queer metallic odors; and the temperature, which had been one of unobtrusive warmth, seemed to increase slightly.

At one side, through an open door in the passage wall, as they neared the source of the red light, Howard saw a large room the further end of which was filled with lofty banks of shining cylinder-shaped mechanisms. In front of these mechanisms, a solitary Mercutian stood watching an immense, pivot-mounted ball which appeared to be filled nearly to the top with liquid blackness, leaving a crescent of bright crystal above. Near the ball, there was a sort of inclined switchboard, from which arose many rods and levers, made of some transparent material.

"The lighting apparatus of all our caverns is controlled from that room," said Agvur, with a sort of casual boastfulness. "When the ball has turned entirely black, the sunlight will be turned off for the three-hour period, which gives us all the sleep and rest we require."

A moment more, and the party reached the end of the passage. Howard stood blinking and breathless with wonder when he saw the source of the dazzling red light.

He was on the threshold of a cavern so enormous that its roof was lost in luminosity and gave the effect of a natural sky. Titanic machines of multiform types, some squat and ungainly, and others like prodigious bulbs or huge inverted funnels, crowded the cavern-floor; and in the center, towering above the rest, was a double, terrace-like platform of sable stone, thirty feet in height, with many pipes of dark metal that ramified from its two tiers to the floor, like the legs of some colossal spider. From the middle of the summit, the ruddy light arose in a great pillar. Gleaming strangely against the fiery glow, the forms of Oumnis moved like midges.

JUST within the entrance of the Cyclopean room, there stood a sort of rack, from which hung a dozen suits of the *mouffa*-metal. Their construction was very simple, and they closed and opened at the breast, with odd dove-tailings. The head was a loose, roomy hood; and the metal had somehow been rendered transparent in a crescent-like strip across the eyes.

The suits were donned by Agvur and the guards; and Howard noticed that they were extremely light and flexible. He himself, at the same time, was ordered to disrobe.

"The *mouffa* mixture, during the process of fusing, gives off some dangerous radiations," said Agvur. "These will hardly matter in your case; and the suits of finished metal will protect my companions and me against them, even as against the deadly solar rays."

Howard had now removed all his clothes, which he left lying near the rack. Still pretending his resignation, but thinking desperately all the while and observing closely the details of his situation, he was led along the crowded floor, amid the sinister throbbing and muttering of the strange engines. Steep, winding stairs gave access to the terraced mass of dark stone. The earthman saw, as he went upward, that the lower tier was fitted with broad, shallow moulds, in which doubtless the metal would run off from the furnace to cool in sheets.

Howard felt an almost overpowering heat when he stood on upper platform; and the red glare blinded him. The furnace itself, he now saw, was a circular crater, fifteen feet across, in the black stone. It was filled nearly to the rim with the molten metal, which eddied with a slow maelstrom-like movement, agitated by some unknown means, and glowing unbearably.

On the broad space about the furnace, a dozen Oumnis, all sheathed in the glittering *mouffa*, were standing. One of them was turning a small, complicated-looking wheel, mounted obliquely on a miniature pillar as if he were regulating the temperature of the furnace, wherein the metal glowed more brightly and eddied with new swiftness in its black crater.

Apart from this wheel, and several rods that protruded from long, notched grooves in the stone, there was no visible machinery on the platform. The stone itself was seemingly all one block, except for a slab ten feet long and two feet wide, which ran to the crater's verge. Howard was directed to stand on this slab, at the end opposite to the furnace.

"In another minute," said Agvur, "the slab will begin to move, will tilt, and precipitate you into the molten *mouffa*. If you wish, we can administer to you a powerful narcotic, so that your death will be wholly free of fear or pain."

Overcome by an unreal horror, Howard nodded his head in mechanical assent, snatching hopelessly at the momentary reprieve. Perhaps... even yet... there might be a chance; though he could have laughed at himself for the impossible notion.

Peering again toward the awful furnace, he was startled to see an inexplicable thing. Foot by foot, from the solid stone of the crater's further lip, there rose the figure of a Mercurian, till it stood with haughty features, very tall and pale and wholly naked, upon the platform. Then, as Howard gasped with incredulous awe, the figure seemed to step in a stately manner from the verge and hang suspended in air above the glowing cauldron.

"It is the Shol, Ounavodo," said Agvur in reverent tones. "Though he is now many miles away in the nether caverns, he has projected his televisual image to attend the ceremony."

CHAPTER III

Escape!

ONE of the Mercutian guards had come forward, bearing in his hands a heavy shallow bowl of some bronze-like substance, filled with a hueless liquid. This he proffered to the earthman.

Giving a quick, unobtrusive glance about him, Howard accepted the bowl and raised it to his lips. The narcotic was odorless as well as colorless, and had the consistency of a thick, sluggish oil.

"Be quick," admonished Agvur. "The slab responds to a timing mechanism; and already it starts to move."

Howard saw that the slab was gliding slowly, bearing him as on a great protruding tongue toward the furnace. It began to tilt a little beneath his feet.

Tensing all his muscles, he leapt from the slab and hurled the heavy bowl in the face of Agvur, who stood close by. The Mercutian staggered, and before he could regain his balance Howard sprang upon him, and lifting him bodily, flung him across the rising, sliding slab, which bore Agvur along in its accelerated movement. Stunned by the fall, and unable to recover himself, he rolled from the tilting stone into the white-hot maelstrom and disappeared with a splash.

For a moment the assembled Oumnis stood like metal statues; and the televisual image of the Shol, standing inscrutable and watchful above the furnace, had not stirred. Leaping at the foremost guards, Howard flung them aside as they started to lift their tubular weapons. He gained the platform's railless verge, but saw that several Oumnis had run to intercept him before he could reach the stairs. It was a twelve-foot drop to the second platform, and he feared to leap with bare feet. The strange curving pipes which ran from the upper platform to the main cavern-floor, offered his only possible means of escape.

These pipes were of darkish metal, perfectly smooth and jointless, and were about ten inches thick. Straddling the nearest one, where it entered the black stone just below the verge, Howard began to slide as quickly as he could toward the floor.

His captors had followed him to the platform-edge; and facing them as he slid, the earthman saw two of the Immortals aim their weapons at him. From the hollow tubes, there issued glowing balls of yellow fire which came flying toward Howard. One of them fell short, striking the side of the great pipe, and causing it to melt like so much solder. He saw the dripping of the molten metal as he ducked to avoid the second ball.

Others of the Oumnis were levelling their weapons; and a rain of the terrible fire-globes fell about Howard as he slid along the pipe's lower portion, where it curved sharply toward

the floor. One of the balls brushed his right arm and left an agonizing burn.

He reached the floor, and saw that a dozen Immortals were descending the platform-stairs in great bounds. The main cavern, fortunately, was deserted.

Threading his way among the looming mechanisms, and interposing their bulks as much as possible between himself and his pursuers, Howard made for the entrance through which he had been conducted to the furnace by Agvur. There are other exits from the immense cavern; but these would have led him deeper into the unknown labyrinth. He had no clearly formulated plan, and his ultimate escape was more than problematical; but his instincts bade him to go on as long as he could before being recaptured.

Then, startlingly, as he rounded one of the machines, he found himself confronted by the televisual phantom of the Shol, standing in an attitude of menace, and waving him back with imperious gestures. He felt the awful burning gaze of eyes that were hypnotic with age-old wisdom and immemorial power; and he seemed to hurl himself against an unseen barrier, as he sprang at the formidable image. He felt a slight electric shock that jarred his entire body; but apparently the phantom was capable of little more than visual manifestation. It seemed to melt away; and then it was hovering above and a little before him, pointing out his line of flight to the pursuing Oumnis.

PASSING a huge squat cylinder, he came to the rack on which the suits of *mouffa* had hung. Two of them still remained. Disregarding his own garments, which lay in a heap nearby, he snatched one of the metal suits from its place and rolled the thin, marvelously flexible stuff into a bundle as he continued his flight; and thus disguised, might hope to prolong his freedom—or even to find his way from this tremendous underworld.

There was a broad open space between the rack and the cavern-exit, Howard's pursuers emerged from the medley of towering mechanisms before he could reach the doorway, and he was forced to dodge another fusillade of the fire-balls, which splattered in white-hot fury all around him. Before him, the menacing phantom of the Shol still hovered.

Now he had gained the corridor beyond the exit. He meant to retrace the route by which he had come with Agvur, if possible. But as he neared the door through which he had seen the watcher of the darkening globe, and the light-controlling mechanisms, he perceived that a number of Mercutians, armed with fire-tubes, were coming to intercept his flight in the corridor.

Looking back, he saw that his former guards were closing upon him. In a few moments he would be surrounded and trapped. With no conscious idea, other than the impulse to flee, he

darted through the open door of the cavern of light-machines.

The solitary watcher still stood beside the massive ball, with his back toward the earthman. The crystal crescent on the dark globe had narrowed to a thin horn, like the bow of a dying moon.

A mad, audacious inspiration came to Howard, as he recalled what Agvur had told him about the control of the lighting-system. Quickly and silently he stole toward the watcher of the ball.

Again the vengeful image of the Shol stood before him, as if to drive him back; and as he neared the unsuspecting watcher, it rose in air and poised above the ball, warning the Oumni with a loud, harsh cry. The watcher turned, snatching up a heavy metal rod that lay on the floor, and leaped to meet Howard, raising his weapon for a ferocious blow.

Before the rod could descend, the earthman's fist had caught the Mercutian full in the face, driving him back against the slanting dial of regulative levers beside the pivot-mounted ball. There was a shivering crash as he fell among the curving crystalline rods; and at the same instant, utter, overwhelming darkness rushed upon the room and blotted out the banks of gleaming mechanisms, the fallen Oumni, and the phantom of the Shol.

Standing uncertain and bewildered, the earthman heard a low moaning from the injured Mercutian, and a loud wail of consternation from the corridor without, where the two groups of his pursuers had found themselves overtaken by darkness. The wailing ceased abruptly; and except for the moaning near at hand, which still went on, there was absolute silence. Howard realized that he no longer heard the mutter of the strange engines in the furnace-room. Doubtless their operation had in some manner been connected with the lighting system, and had ceased with darkness.

Howard still retained the suit of *mouffa*. Groping about, he found the metal rod that had dropped from the hand of the watcher. It would make a highly serviceable weapon. Grasping it firmly, he started in what he surmised to be the direction of the door. He went slowly and cautiously, knowing that his pursuers would have gathered to await him, or might even be creeping toward him.

Into the Unknown

LISTENING intently, he heard a faint metallic rustle. Some of the Oumnis, clothed in *mouffa*, were coming to seek him in the darkness. His own bare feet were soundless; and stepping to one side, he heard the rustling pass. With redoubled caution, he stole on toward the door, stretching one hand before him.

Suddenly his fingers touched a smooth surface, which he knew to be the wall. He had missed the door in his groping. Listening again, he seemed to hear a faint sound on the left as if he were being followed; and moving in the opposite direction, along the wall, he encountered empty space and saw a dim glimmer of seemingly sourceless light.

His eyes were growing accustomed to the darkness, and he made out a mass of dubious shadows against the glimmering. He had found the door, which was lined with waiting Oumnis.

Lifting his bar, he rushed upon the shadows, striking blow after blow, and stumbling over the bodies that fell before his onslaught. There were shrill cries about him, and he broke from chill, *mouffa*-sheathed fingers that sought to clutch him in the gloom. Then, somehow, he had broken through and was in the corridor.

The glimmering, he saw, came from the cavern of machines, where the hidden furnace still burned. Into the dying glow that lit the entrance there came hurrying figures, each of which appeared to have an enormous Cyclopean eye of icy green. Howard realized that more Mercutians, bearing artificial lights, were coming to join the pursuit.

Keeping close to the corridor wall, he ran as fast as he dared in the solid blackness, toward the cavern of the Roccalim. He heard a stealthy metallic rustling, as the foremost Oumnis followed; and glancing back saw them dimly outlined against the remote glow. They came on in a cautious, lagging manner, as if they were waiting for the new contingent with the green lights. After a little, he saw that the two parties had united and were following him steadily.

Fingering the wall at intervals as he ran, Howard reached the entrance of the large chamber in whose center stood the Roccalim. The lights were gaining upon him rapidly. Calculating in his mind, as well as he could, the direction of the opposite doorway on the main tunnel that led to the incline, he started toward it. As he went on he veered a little—thinking to avoid the monstrous plant-growth. It was like plunging into a blind abyss; and he seemed to wander for an immense distance, feeling sure that he would reach the opposite wall at any moment. Suddenly he tripped and landed on a hairy growth.

Still clutching the *mouffa* garments and the metal bar he groped across a tangle of branches, pricking his feet painfully at every step. Suddenly he plunged through to the floor, and found that he was standing in an open space where the heavy creepers, descending from the bole, had parted on either side. Crouching down, as the lights approached him, he found a low, hollow place into which he could crawl beneath the branches, close to the cactus-like stem.

The creepers were thick enough to conceal him from casual scrutiny. Lying there, with their prickly weight upon him, he saw through narrow rifts between them the passing of the green lights toward the outer cavern. Apparently none of the Mercutians had thought of pausing to examine the mass of Roccalim branches.

Emerging from his fantastic hiding-place, after all the Oumnis had gone past, Howard followed them boldly. He saw the vanishing of their icy lamps as they entered the outside tunnel. Moving again in utter darkness, he found the exit. There he recovered the running pencils of light, cast by the hurrying lamps as their bearers went toward the incline.

GOING on, with the lights moving steadily before him, he started up the interminable incline which led—perhaps—to freedom. The tunnel was deserted, except for the hunters and their human quarry; and it seemed as if the multitude of Oumnis seen by Howard on his arrival with Agvur had all retired with the falling of darkness. Perhaps they had taken it for the normal three-hour term of night and repose.

The light-bearers appeared to disregard all the side-passages that ran from the main tunnel. It occurred to Howard that they were hastening toward the surface exits, with the idea of cutting off his possible escape. Afterwards they would hunt him down at leisure.

The incline ran straight ahead; and there was little danger of losing sight of the lights. Howard paused an instant to slip on the suit of *mouffa*, hoping that it might serve to deceive or baffle his hunters later on. The raiment was easily donned, and fitted him quite loosely; but the unfamiliar intricate method of fastening eluded his untaught fingers. He could not remember quite how it had been done; so he went on with the strange garment open at the breast. The queer elongated heels, made to accommodate the spurs of the Oumnis, flapped behind him.

He kept as much as possible the same relative distance between himself and the Oumnis. Glancing back, after a while, he was horrified to see, far down, the tiny green eyes of another group of lights following him.

It was a long, interminably tedious climb—mile after mile of that monotonous tunnel whose gloom was relieved only by the sinister points of green light. The Mercutians went on at a tireless pace, unhuman and implacable; and only by ceaseless exertion, half walking, half running, could the earthman maintain his position midway between the companies of lamps.

He panted heavily, and a faintness came upon him at times, in which the lights seemed to blur. A great weariness clogged his limbs and his brain. How long it was since he had eaten, he could not know. He was not aware of hunger or thirst; but he

seemed to fight an ever-growing weakness. The corridor became a black eternity, haunted by the green eyes of cosmic demons.

At last, through the crushing numbness of his fatigue, there dawned the realization that he was gaining a little on the group of lights ahead. Possibly their bearers had paused in doubt or debate. Then, suddenly, he saw that the lights were spreading out, were diverging and vanishing on either hand, till only four of them remained.

Dimly puzzled, he went on and came to that triple division of the tunnel which he remembered passing with Agvur. He saw now that the party of Oumnis had divided into three contingents, following all the branches of the tunnel. Doubtless each tunnel led to a separate exit.

Recalling what Agvur had said, he kept to the middle passage. This, if Agvur had spoken truly, would lead to an exit in the twilight zone, not far from the rocket ship. The other tunnels would lead he knew not where—perhaps to the terrible deserts of heat and the piled, chaotic glaciers of the nightward hemisphere. The one he was following, with luck, would enable him to rejoin his comrades.

A sort of second wind came to Howard now—as if hope had revived his swooning faculties. More clearly than before, he became conscious of the utter silence and profound mystery of this underworld empire, of which he had seen—was to see—so little. His hope quickened when he looked back and saw that the lights behind him had diminished in number, as if the second party had likewise separated to follow all three of the tunnels.

CHAPTER IV

Endless Hours

MILE after mile through that monotone of gloom. Then, with a start of bewilderment, the earthman realized that the four lights in front had all disappeared. Looking back, he saw that the lamps which followed him had similarly vanished. About, before and behind there was nothing but a solid, tomb-like wall of darkness.

Howard felt a strange disconcertment, together with the leaden, crushing return of his weariness. He went on with doubtful, slackening steps, following the right-hand wall with cautious fingers. After a while he turned a sharp corner; but he did not recover the lost lights. There was a drafty dankness in the air, an odor of stone and mineral, such as he had not met heretofore in the *mouffa*-lined caverns. He began to wonder if he had somehow gone astray: there might have been other branchings of the tunnel, which he had missed in his groping. In a blind surge of alarm he started to run, and crashed headlong against the angular wall of another turn in the passage.

Half-stunned, he picked himself up. He hardly knew, henceforth, whether he was maintaining the original course of his flight or was doubling on his own steps. For aught that he could tell, he might be lost beyond all redirection in a cross-labyrinth of caverns. He stumbled and staggered along, colliding many times with the tunnel-sides, which seemed to have closed in upon him and to have grown rough with flinty projections.

The draft in his face grew stronger; it was damp, suggesting the proximity of water. Presently the blindfold darkness before him melted into a chill, bluish, glimmering, which revealed the wrinkled walls and boulder-flanged roof of the natural cavern he was following.

He came out in a huge, chamber-like cave of marble-pallid stone with twisted columnar supports. The glimmering, he saw, was a kind of phosphorescence emitted by certain vegetable growths, probably of a thallophytic nature, which rose in thick clusters from the floor, attaining the height of a tall man. They were flabby and fulsome-looking, with abortive branches, and pendulous, purple fruit-shaped nodes along their puffy, blue-white stems. The phosphorescence, which issued equally from all portions of these plants, served to light the gloom for some distance along, and brought out dimly the columnar character of the cavern's further walls.

Howard saw, as he passed among them, that the plants were rootless. It seemed that they would topple at a touch; but happening to tumble against one of the clumps, he found that it supported his weight with firm resilience.

In the middle of the cave, behind a lofty fringing of these luminous fungi, he discovered a pool of water, fed by a thin trickle that descended through the gloom from a high vault that the feeble phosphorescence could not illumine. Impelled by a sudden, furious thirst, he slid back the *mouffa*-hood and drank recklessly, though the fluid was sharp and bitter with strange minerals. Then, with the ravenous hunger of one who has not eaten for days, he began to eye the pear-shaped nodes of the tall thallophytes. He broke one of them from its parent stem, tore off the glimmering rind, and found that it was filled with a mealy pulp. A savory, peppery odor tempted him to taste the pulp. It was not unpleasant, and forgetting all caution (possibly he had become a little mad from the extra-human ordeals he had experienced) he devoured the stuff in hasty mouthfuls.

The node must have contained a narcotic principle; for almost immediately he was overpowered by an insuperable drowsiness. He fell back and lay where he had fallen, in a deep stupor, without dreams, for a length of time, which so far as he could know, might have been the interim of death between two lives.

He awoke with violent nausea, a racking headache, and a feeling of hopeless, irredeemable confusion.

He drank again from the bitter pool, and then began to hunt with cloudy senses and feeble, uncertain steps for an exit other than the tunnel by which he had entered. His mind was dull and heavily drugged, as if from the "hangover" of the unknown narcotic. He could formulate no definite plan of action but was led on only by an animal-like instinct of flight.

HE discovered a second opening, low, and fanged with broken-off pillar formations in the opposite wall of the cavern. It was steeped in Stygian darkness; and before entering it, he tore a lumpy branch from one of the phosphorescent fungi, to serve him in lieu of other light.

He entered long, tediously winding tunnels that went down into Cimmerian depths, or climbed at precipitously steep angles. There were straight cubby-holes, dripping with unknown liquids, through which he crawled like a lizard on his belly; and Dantesque gulfs that he skirted on slippery, perilous, broken ledges; hearing far below him the sullen sigh or the weirdly booming roar of sub-Mercutian waters.

He met none of the Oumnis in this inexhaustible world of night and silence. But after he had rounded the great gulf, and had started to re-ascend through smaller caverns he began to encounter, at intervals, certain blind, white, repulsive creatures the size of an overgrown rat, but without even the rudiments of tail or legs. In his demoralized condition of mind and body, he felt a primitive fear of these things, rather than the mere repugnance which their aspect would normally have aroused. However, they were non-aggressive, and shrank sluggishly away from him. Once, he trod inadvertently on one of the creatures and leapt away, howling with fright, when it squirmed nauseously beneath his heel. Finding he had crushed its head, he took courage and began to belabor the flopping abnormality with the metal rod which he still carried. He mashed it into an oozy pulp—a pulp that still quivered with life; and then, overcome by bestial, atavistic hunger, and forgetting all the painfully acquired prejudices of civilized man, he knelt down and devoured the pulp with shameless greed. Afterwards, replete, he stretched himself out and slept for many hours.

The Frigid World

HE had lost all notion of the passing of time or its measurement. He clambered endlessly along Tartarean cavern-slopes and along the brink of lightless rivers, pools and chasms, killing when he was hungry, sleeping when his weariness became too urgent. Perhaps he went on for days; perhaps for many weeks, in a blind, instinctive search for light and outer air.

For awhile he seemed to be passing through a zone of unnatural warmth, due, no doubt, to the presence of hidden vol-

canic activity. There were hot geysers, and gulfs from which sultry vapors rose, filling the air with queer, metallic-smelling gases that seemed to burn corrosively in his nostrils and lungs.

The shock of his experiences completed his mental demoralization and drove him even further into primitive brutehood. At times, his brain was almost a blank; and he knew nothing, remembered nothing but the blind horror of those infra-planetary caverns and the dumb instinct that still impelled him to seek escape.

Several times, as he continued his way through the thickets of fungi, he was forced to flee or hide from monsters of bizarre, almost incredible types. Then he entered a region of steep acclivities that took him ever upward. The air became chill and the caverns were seemingly void of vegetable or animal life.

Before entering this realm, he had supplied himself with another fragment of luminiferous fungus to light his way. He was groping through a mountain-like wilderness of chasms and riven scarps and dolomites when, at some distance above, he saw with inexpressible fright a glimmering as of two cold green eyes that moved among the crags. He had virtually forgotten the Oumnis and their lamps; but something—intuition, memory—warned him of direr peril than any he had hitherto met in the darkness.

He dropped his luminous torch and concealed himself behind one of the dolomitic formations. From his hiding-place he saw the passing of two of the Immortals, clad in silvery *mouffa*, who descended the scarp and vanished in the craggy gulfs below. Whether or not they were hunting for him, he could not know; but when they had gone from sight he resumed his climb, hurrying at breakneck speed and feeling that he must get as far away as possible from the bearers of those icy green lights.

The dolomites dwindled in size, and the steep chamber narrowed like the neck of a bottle and closed in upon him presently from all sides, till it was only a narrow, winding passage. The floor of the passage became fairly level. Anon, as he followed it, he was startled and blinded by a glare of light directly ahead—a light that was brilliant as pure sunshine. He cowered and stepped back, shielding his eyes with his hands till they became somewhat tempered to the glare. Then, stealthily, with a mingling of confused fears and dim, unworded hopes, he crept toward the light and came out in an endless metal hall, apparently deserted but filled as far as eye could see with the apparently sourceless brilliance.

THE mouth of the rough natural passage from which he had emerged was fitted with a sort of valve, which had been left open, doubtless by the two Immortals he had seen among the nether crags. The boat-shaped vehicle they had used was stand-

ing in the hall. This vehicle, and the hall itself, were familiar to him, and he began to recollect, in a partial way, the ordeals he had undergone among the Oumnis before his flight into outer darkness.

The hall was slightly inclined; and he seemed to remember that the upward grade would presumably lead to a lost world of freedom. Apprehensively and furtively, he began to follow it, loping like an animal.

After he had gone for perhaps a mile, the floor became perfectly level, but the hall itself started to turn in a sort of arc. He was unable to see very far ahead. Then, so abruptly that he could not check his headlong flight, he came in view of three Oumnis, clothed in metal, who were all standing with their backs to him. A boat-vehicle was near at hand. One of the Immortals was tugging at a huge, capstan-like bar that protruded from the wall of the passage; and as if in response to the bar, a sort of gleaming metal valve was descending slowly from the roof. Inch by inch, it came down like a mighty curtain; and soon it would close the entire passage and render impossible the earth-man's egress.

Somehow, it did not occur to Howard that the tunnel beyond the valve might lead to other realms than the outer air for which he longed so desperately. As if by a miracle, something of his former courage and resourcefulness had returned to him; and he did not turn and flee incontinently at sight of the Immortals, as he would have done a short time before. He felt that now or never was his opportunity to escape from the sub-Mercutian levels.

Leaping forward on the unsuspecting Oumnis, all of whom were intent on the closing of the valve, he struck at the foremost with his metal bar. The Mercutian toppled and went down with a clattering of *mouffa* on the floor. The one who was operating the lever continued his task, and Howard had no time to strike him down, for the remaining Immortal, with tigerish agility, had sprung back and was levelling the deadly fire-tube which he carried.

Howard saw that the great valve was still descending—was barely two feet above the cavern floor. He made a flying dive for the opening, sprawling on all fours and then crawling prone on his stomach beneath the terrible curtain of metal.

Struggling to rise, he found himself impeded and held back. He was in utter darkness now; but getting to his knees and groping about, he determined the cause of his retardation. The fallen valve had caught the loose elongated heel of the *mouffa* on his right foot. He had all the sensations of a trapped animal as he sought to wrench himself free. The tough *mouffa* held, weighed down by the enormous valve; and it seemed that there was no escape.

Then, amid his desperation, he somehow remembered that the *mouffa*-armor was open at the breast. Awkwardly and painfully, he managed to crawl forth from it, leaving it there like a discarded lizard-skin.

Getting to his feet, he raced on in the darkness. He was without light, for he had dropped the phosphorescent bough in his dive beneath the closing valve. The cavern was rough and flinty to his naked feet; and he felt an icy wind, bleak as the breath of glaciers, that blew upon him as he went. The floor sloped upward, and in places it was broken into stairlike formations against which he stumbled and fell, bruising himself.

The passage steepened and the air took on a terrible frigid-ity. There was no sign of pursuit from the Oumnis; but fearing they would raise the valve and follow him, the earthman hastened on. He was puzzled by the growing Arctic cold, the reason for which seemed to elude him. His naked limbs and torso were studded with goose-flesh; and he began to shiver as with a violent ague, in spite of the high speed at which he ran and climbed.

He saw a dim, circular patch of light far above him, and gasping in the icy air, which appeared to grow more rarefied, he rushed toward it. He seemed to climb hundreds, thousands of those black, glaciated steps before he neared the light. He came out beneath a sable heaven crowded with chill, pulseless, gleaming stars, in a sort of valley-bottom among drear unending scarps and pinnacles that were still and silent as a frozen dream of death.

He fought agonizingly for breath in the tenuous infra-zero air; and his body stiffened with a permeating rigor as he stood and peered in numb bewilderment at the icy, mountainous chaos of the landscape in which he had emerged.

The flowing blood had congealed upon his brow and cheeks. With glazing eyes, he saw, in a nearby cliff, the continuation of the cavern-steps. Hewn for some unimaginable purpose by the Immortals, they ran upward in the ice toward the higher summits.

It was not the familiar twilight zone of Mercury in which he had come forth—it was the bleak, nightward side, eternally averted from the sun, and blasted with the frightful cold of cosmic space. He felt the pinnacles and chasms close him in, relentless and rigid, like some hyperborean hell. Then the realization of his plight became something very remote and recessive—a dim thought that floated above his ebbing consciousness. He fell forward on the snow with limbs already stiff and unbending; and the mercy of his final numbness grew complete.

— THE END —